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Conclusion

The Postmodern Spectacle of Race and Romance in *Year of the Dragon*

In his seminal essay on contemporary culture, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society," Fredric Jameson lists *Chinatown* (Roman Polanski, 1974) as an example of the "nostalgia film" or *la mode retro* (retrospective styling). Like other postmodern instances of pastiche, its uncritical evocation of classical Hollywood films of the 1930s and 1940s points to

> a world in which stylistic innovation is no longer possible, all that is left is to imitate dead styles, to speak through the masks and with the voices of the styles in the imaginary museum. But this means that contemporary or postmodernist art is going to be about art itself in a new kind of way; even more, it means that one of its essential messages will involve the necessary failure of art and the aesthetic, the failure of the new, the imprisonment in the past.[1]

Unlike earlier aesthetic styles, which could hope to deal, at least symbolically, with actual social and cultural contradictions, postmodernism relieves art of this ideological function. Postmodern art acts as spectacle—outside the discursive functions of narrative. Beyond the realist notion that film can accurately depict the material world as well as the modernist conception of art as intervention, postmodernism accepts the image as a fabrication, as part of a commodity culture where no depth exists beyond the surface of the marketplace.

Thus, *Chinatown* does not even pretend to try to evoke an actual place, but, rather, it conjures up an image, an imaginary construct of past representations from other mass-mediated sources. In fact, bits

and pieces of anachronistic representations of Chinatown figure prominently in many postmodern films.[2] Removed from their original historical contexts and drained of meaning, "yellow peril" clichés coexist with antiracist discourses, anachronistic opium peddlers interact with urban reformers. Chinatown functions as pure style with neon dragons, pop songs, lion dances, and displays of martial artistry, forming a part of postmodern popular iconography.

Interracial sexuality becomes an element of this stylistic mélange, a contrast in color, rather than either a liberal call for reform or a conservative demand for exclusionism. Indeed, any given film may voice a number of political positions, leveling these discourses, too, by draining them of any potentially meaningful (i.e., socially critical or offensive) substance. Portions of Hollywood plot formulas involving interracial romances between Asian and Caucasian characters resurface and recombine into different patterns that evoke earlier rape, seduction, captivity, salvation, sacrifice, or assimilation patterns.

Just as earlier Hollywood films used the interracial romance to explore issues of identity—crises in the social construction of race, class, ethnicity, and gender—postmodern narratives use these romantic plots as a shorthand for the mercurial nature of identity. Indeed, a tacit acceptance of the illusory nature of identity itself is one of the principal markers of postmodernism as a style. Jameson sees this psychic borderlessness as part of an acknowledged "schizophrenic" loss of "self" occasioned by the contemporary acceptance of the death of the Cartesian subject. Although it may be tempting to look at postmodern identity as a celebration of cultural plurality, multiethnicity, liberation from traditional gender roles, and freedom to cross various social boundaries at will, there is a price to be paid for the death of even the illusion of the individual subject. As Jameson observes,

> The schizophrenic . . . is not only "no one" in the sense of having no personal identity; he or she also does nothing, since to have a project means to be able to commit oneself to a certain continuity over time. The schizophrenic is thus given over to an undifferentiated vision of the world in the present, a by no means pleasant experience.[3]

Like pastiche, this postmodern sense of schizophrenia robs the film of its sense of history and, consequently, its critical ability to allude to the possibility of change. In the Chinatown of postmodern Hollywood, this loss of identity enables the viewer to accept the most outrageous stereotype and the most complex characterization on the same level, as equally valid and equally superficial. Political change and social action become part of the spectacle; critical thinking dies with the notion of the centered subject.

As pure style and as spectacle, Chinatown fulfills a commercial hunger for a domesticated otherness that can represent both the fulfillment of the American myth of the melting pot and play with the dangers of the exotic. *Year of the Dragon* (Michael Cimino, 1985) represents simply one example of this postmodern use of Chinatown as spectacle in contemporary Hollywood cinema.

Spectacle and Identity in *Year of the Dragon*

Like many postmodern films, *Year of the Dragon* tells a very simple story basic to Hollywood cinema, evoking a sense of recognition or nostalgia for older generic forms.[4] An uncorrupted lawman, Stanley White (Mickey Rourke), is assigned to clean up a corrupt town—in this case, Chinatown. His principal adversary is a young gangster on the way up, Joey Tai (John Lone).

As in many action-adventure narratives, the hero and the villain are quite similar. In this case, both men find themselves on the outside. They are set apart from their colleagues, their families, their communities. Stanley rails against a police force that refuses to do anything about corruption in Chinatown, and Joey Tai shakes up his sluggish criminal organization by using youth gangs to move in on Italian and Southeast Asian drug trafficking. Both are identified as flamboyant, violent, impatient with the "older generation," rebellious, and desirous of making good in mainstream American society. In addition, both are ethnic: Stanley White has changed his Polish surname to whitewash his ethnicity, while Tai exploits his Chinese ethnicity to rise within the underworld.

As in most narratives of this type, the main plot line revolves around the hero's attempt to prove himself different from the villain, in other words, justified in his violence and supportive of the white, Anglo-Saxon mainstream. He sees himself as having the moral right to eradicate the villain, since someone foreign represents a threat to the racial and ethnic status quo. Much of the ideological tension of this sort of plot revolves around who can and cannot be assimilated into American society. The hero must prove his ability to melt into the mainstream by drawing a line between himself and the villain, thereby coming to grips with his own ethnicity. *Year of the Dragon* begins with a fundamental ideological contradiction revolving around ethnicity and American identity. Melting into America is acceptable only if a white, male, Anglo-Saxon definition of identity is taken as the ideal. White meets this definition; Tai does not.

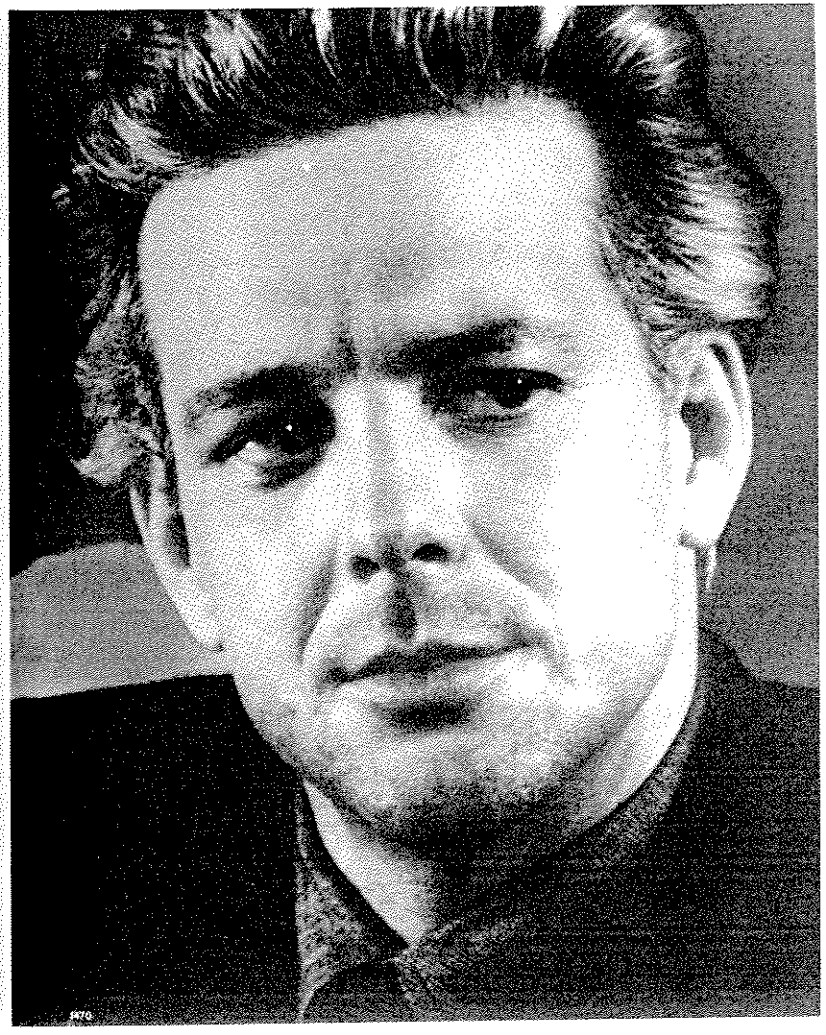

Figure 26. In Year of the Dragon *(1985), Stanley White (Mickey Rourke) embodies ethnic, racial, and sexual identity crises. His name conjures up questions of ethnic and racial identity, while his foppish attention to dress (indicated by his careful coiffure and stylish suit and tie) signal the possibility of a sexual identity crisis. Still courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger.*

In addition, similar ethnic and racial tensions are played out in a romance between the hero and a Chinese American woman. Although married, White finds himself attracted to a young Chinese newswoman, Tracy Tzu (Ariane). Their romance parallels both White's unrelenting push to rid Chinatown of gang influence and Tai's bid to become undisputed boss of the underworld. The romance also toys with similar tensions in what can and cannot constitute American identity. Through her involvement with White, Tzu renounces her Chinese ethnicity and subordinates herself to White's championing of mainstream ideals.

Year of the Dragon takes up issues related to race, gender, class, and ethnicity and then eases any contradictions these may raise by eradicating the villain and allowing romance to triumph. However, this similarity to other Hollywood films does not necessarily mean that *Year of the Dragon* can be looked at as simply another interracial romance played out within the genre of the *policier*, like *The Crimson Kimono*, for example. Rather, a certain irony pervades the film. Unlike the irony characteristic of modernist works, however, this irony has no critical bite. Rather, the distance the film places between its characters and its viewers (e.g., the antihero as the protagonist and the allure of the villain) simply functions as part of the style, vaguely conjuring up earlier images of heroic white knights and diabolical Fu Manchus not as parody, but as pastiche. The viewer may take these figures seriously or view the film as "campy" and enjoy it as pure style.

The film's exploitation of spectacle helps to mark it as postmodern. *Year of the Dragon* begins with a moment of spectacle, with images of Chinese New Year being celebrated in the streets of Chinatown. This sets a pattern that operates throughout the course of the film, which is punctuated with displays of violence, sexuality, ritual, or sheer exoticism, which have little, if any, narrative importance.

The film begins with a high-angle shot of a ceremonial lion head and pulls back to show the lion dancing, along with firecrackers and drums, which characterize Chinese New Year celebrations. At first, emphasis is placed on the exotic aspect of Chinatown, on the allure and charm of its foreign rituals. Quickly, however, the dancing turns into a riot as rival lions begin to fight, and the young men under them toss their costumes aside and begin to brawl. Although this gang rivalry and the lion brawl are never explained clearly, the next scene, depicting the bloody execution of the Chinese gangster, Jackie Wong, clarifies the link between the exotic and the dangerous. Later, during Wong's elaborate funeral, the Chinese youth gangs strike again and kill a Caucasian shopkeeper who refuses to pay protection money. A pattern surfaces. Each moment of spectacle—whether it is a festival, funeral, banquet, or bedroom scene—has a threatening edge. Underneath a picturesque veneer, Chinatown hides its violence and corruption.

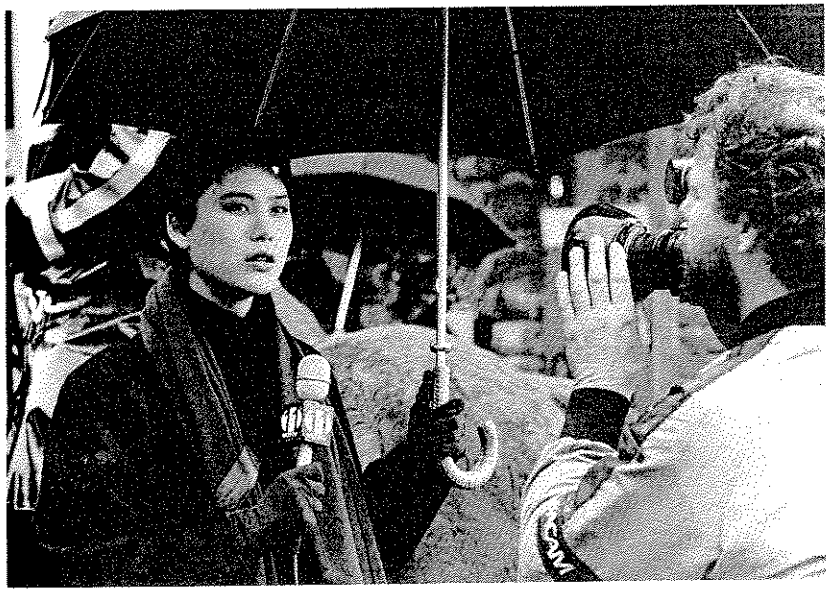

Figure 27. Tracy Tzu (Ariane), as a television newscaster, both creates and functions as a spectacle for public surveillance. Still from Year of the Dragon *courtesy of the Museum of Modern Art/Film Stills Archive.*

Spectacle tends to be contradictory. It both attracts and repulses, encouraging viewer identification while keeping that involvement at a distance. Moments of spectacle that feature ethnic and racial differences can define and reinforce the boundaries between ethnic and racial groups to keep the dominant culture's own power intact. However, these moments also often include violent eruptions that challenge the dominant culture's ability to define those differences and boundaries. Violence bursts forth against the racial and ethnic status quo, and the viewer may identify with this antiestablishment aspect of the spectacle as well as with its ostensible condemnation.

In *Year of the Dragon*, the importance of spectacle is also emphasized by making Tracy Tzu, the protagonist's love interest, a news reporter (a reference to Connie Chung and the Asian women who have appeared as newscasters since her national debut). Both a creator of spectacle and an object on display herself, Tzu provides the perfect rationalization of the film's voyeuristic treatment of Chinatown. Stanley White quickly convinces a reluctant Tzu to expose Chinatown as decadent, corrupt, and threatening, after a gangland attack occurs in

Figure 28. Surrounded by the kitsch opulence of a Chinatown restaurant, Stanley and Tracy are on display for the viewer. Still from Year of the Dragon *courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger.*

the restaurant in which they are meeting for dinner. By using a Chinese character as the point of identification for the contemplation of the spectacle, the film does the same thing the fictitious White does in the narrative. That is, the film hides its own racism by using a non-white character to focus attention on the racial and ethnic other as a threat to the status quo.

Beyond this function, however, Tracy Tzu also operates as a specular object in her own right. When she enters the large, lavishly decorated Chinatown establishment to dine with Stanley White, for example, the camera dollies to follow her as she almost regally ascends a flight of stairs to join her dinner companion. Thin and elegantly dressed, her body always carefully framed and followed by the camera, Tzu provides the white male viewer with an image of racial, ethnic, and gender difference that may both titillate and disturb.

Like all moments of spectacle in *Year of the Dragon*, this moment leads to violence. During an assault on this restaurant, Tracy Tzu's elegance and composure crumble as bullets fly, fish tanks burst, and White saves the hysterical Tzu from harm. In fact, all displays of Tzu's body in *Year of the Dragon* are coupled with moments of violence. For

Figure 29. Gangland violence legitimizes White's desire to bring a white patriarchal sense of order to Chinatown by saving Tzu from her own people and the supposedly menacing excesses of Asian culture. Still from Year of the Dragon *courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger.*

example, during their love scenes together, White slaps and verbally assaults Tzu. In another scene, the camera follows the elegantly dressed Tzu into her apartment where a group of thugs lie in wait to rape her.

In *Year of the Dragon*, the spectacle subsumes all manner of racial, ethnic, and gender differences. If Chinatown is exotic, then so too is Stanley White's working-class Polish neighborhood. Filled with Eastern European church domes, Catholic icons and rituals, it can also be looked at as exotic from the standpoint of the mainstream Anglo-American viewer. Similarly, the film depicts Little Italy as a definitely Caucasian community also overrun by organized crime and having a similarly alien flavor.

As in many postmodern Hollywood films, the central hero no longer represents an ethnic, racial, class, gender, ethical, moral, or psychological point of identification for the viewer. In films like *The World of Suzie Wong, Japanese War Bride*, or *Sayonara*, the narratives, despite their ideological gaps and complications, always seem to put forward the promise that any identity crisis the hero might suffer would ultimately be solved. However, *Year of the Dragon* makes its antiheroic protagonist so suspect in terms of ethnicity, class, sexuality, and morality that it precludes any adequate resolution through narrative closure. Thus, there appears to be a "schizophrenic" breakdown in boundaries between mainstream "self" and ethnic, class, or sexual "other."

For example, White's ethnic self-identity is shown in crisis, since he anglicizes his Polish name and tries to move away from his ethnic roots. This ethnic identity crisis, too, is associated with his class standing, since the film makes it clear that White links his upward mobility with a move away from his working-class community. Moreover, this crisis of ethnic identity is linked to a similar crisis of sexual identity. The film presents White as having marital problems with his wife, Connie (Caroline Cava), because he is unable to impregnate her (for whatever reason—impotence, sterility, simple lack of interest in sex). Thus, Stanley's identity is in doubt both because of his ethnicity and because of his masculinity. The fact that White is a Vietnam veteran further questions his identity as a potent hero able to perform this task, since this marks him as a "loser," an "outsider," as a potentially explosive, frustrated soldier without a real war.

Many of these identity issues play themselves out within moments of spectacle in which characters' physical presences take on particular significance. Thus, Stanley White's identity crises are made concrete in terms of spectacular displays in which Stanley confronts his racial and ethnic and sexual foils—Joey Tai and Tracy Tzu. In fact, Stanley encounters both Tracy Tzu and Joey Tai for the first time at the funeral

of Jackie Wong, Tai's father-in-law. The film depicts both characters in remarkably similar ways. If Tzu's body is displayed as spectacle, then Tai also functions as an object of sexual contemplation. Both are elegantly dressed in tailored suits and long coats; both are lean and lithe, similarly shaped; both have similar facial features and move in a highly dramatic way that betrays John Lone's Chinese opera training and Ariane's background in modeling. Certainly, these visual parallels, coupled with the narrative's insistence that both be conquered by the hero, place a further strain on White's identity as a heterosexual male. Moreover, Tzu's career as a newswoman and single life-style and Tai's nearly absent family and close association with other men (e.g., his black bodyguard) tie the threat of racial and ethnic difference to the threat of homosexuality, loss of male power and privilege, and the weakening of gender boundaries.

In the case of Joey Tai, *Year of the Dragon* merges the myth of the Asian man as a sexual threat with the image of the eunuch. Presented as effeminate in the film, Tai does not safely drop out of sight as

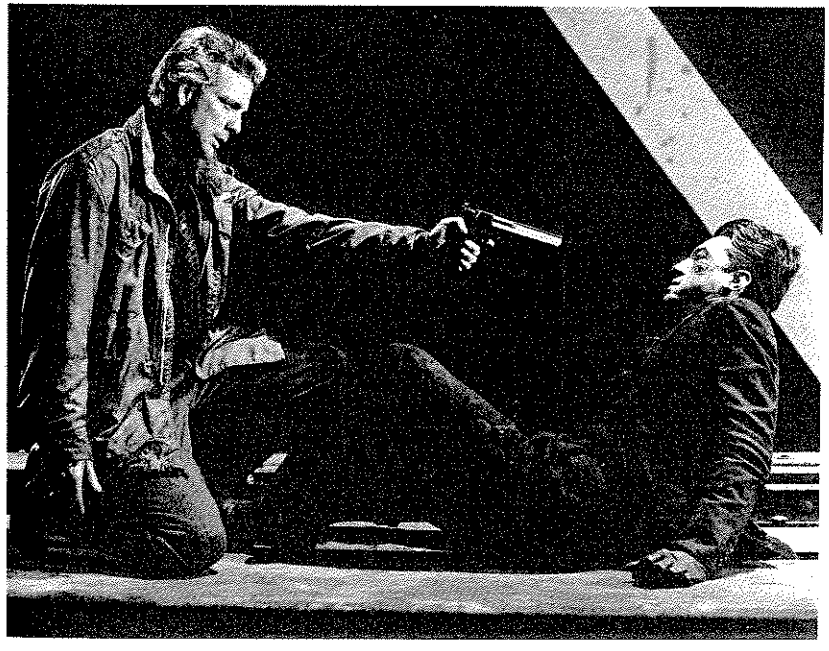

Figure 30. Year of the Dragon*'s showdown between White and Joey Tai (John Lone) in which Tai submits masochistically to White's offer of an "honorable" death. Still from* Year of the Dragon *courtesy of Jerry Ohlinger.*

a passive buddy figure (the role fulfilled by Herbert Kuang [Dennis Dun] in the film), but instead becomes more of a threat to Stanley's identity by bringing into play a homosexual subtext.

In the climactic scene in which the beaten Tai lies at White's feet on a railway trestle and Stanley opts to give Tai a pistol to commit suicide rather than face trial, an extensive Freudian analysis is certainly unnecessary to understand the scene as sexually charged. Not only does White give Tai the phallic means to his own end but Tai accepts this end, masochistically submits to it and to White's domination. His suicide is the ultimate confirmation of his subordinate, feminized position, and Stanley's role in it allows him to symbolically do away with the threat Tai represents to the hero's identity as white, male, and decidedly heterosexual.

Interestingly, this moment of violent spectacle also opens the film up to alternative, ironic, camp readings. It is a pastiche of the Western gunfight. White and Tai play the classic roles of villain and hero. However, in addition to the possible homosexual undertones mentioned above, the gunfight can be looked at as juggling other possible readings, too. Thus, the attractive villain ironically dies at the hands of the suspect White. The villain accepts his end and dies with "grace" and a certain panache. Although punished violently for his hubris, Tai, like the American gangster heroes before him, must also be respected for his ability to climb so far, for the assertion of his individualism despite the pressures to keep it contained. Tai represents the ambivalence at the root of the gangster mythos; he is both condemned and applauded for being a good capitalist.

In fact, class seems to be the last significant way in which issues of identity are complicated in the film. If *Year of the Dragon* can be looked at as an ironic postmodern entertainment, part of what it incorporates is a standard Hollywood working-class fantasy that allows the viewer the satisfaction of seeing bourgeois characters controlled by a working-class cop. Tai falls because he has risen above his station in his desire to fulfill the American Dream illegally through drug running. He represents capitalism out of control, and his death may have a particular appeal to the working-class viewer suspicious of the power that wealth brings.

Similarly, part of Stanley's desire to dominate Tracy comes from a voiced class antagonism. At one point, for example, Stanley remarks, "I hated you before I even met you. I hated you on TV. I hated you in Vietnam . . . Most of all, I hate rich kids." Thus, Stanley may want to dominate Tracy because she challenges gender roles (through her profession), or because of her race and ethnicity (the challenge her exotic allure poses to heterosexual identity and the nuclear family), or because of her class standing (not only is she successful at her profession but she also comes from a wealthy family). Charges of racism or sexism can fall by the wayside as the viewer focuses on the character's class standing and roots for the "rich kid" to get her comeuppance.

In fact, the homosexual subtext that puts Stanley's identity in doubt in his relationship with Joey Tai also operates in a similar way in Stanley's relationship with Tracy. In this case, Tracy poses a threat to Stanley not only because she represents the nonwhite seductress whose exotic allure draws the white male away from hearth and home but because she also embodies a threat to gender boundaries by her independence, active pursuit of a career, and boyish short hair and slender physique. Throughout *Year of the Dragon*, plot events and the actions of the hero himself both serve to tighten the gender boundaries Tracy at first seems to loosen. Not only does Stanley take away Tracy's independence by moving in and telling her how to run her career but he also verbally abuses her and strikes her. Moreover, plot events like the attack on the Chinatown restaurant and the assault in her apartment force Tracy to depend more and more on Stanley's protection. By taking away her independence, the film domesticates Tracy, places her under male control, forces her to side with Stanley against the Chinese community. Although she objects to this throughout the film, by the end she happily accepts Stanley's embrace.

In fact, through this romance, *Year of the Dragon* promises a narrative resolution reminiscent of Hollywood classicism. Both as a woman and as an Asian, Tracy has submitted to Stanley's authority, and, through their romance, the film legitimizes Stanley's right to dominate her as a woman and as a Chinese American. The consummation of their romance erases doubts about Stanley's potency and identity. He has affirmed white, male, American dominance over nonwhite, feminized, foreign threats. White transforms Tzu from the seductive "Dragon Lady" into the passive, loyal, and subservient "China Doll." The shift from one to the other marks White's personal conquest and assimilation of the foreign into the domestic mainstream, thereby assuring his own identity, his own right also to be a part of that American melting pot.

However, this romance, like White's relationship with Tai, has its contradictory aspects. If Stanley has legitimized white male power over a nonwhite woman, he has also fulfilled the working-class fantasy of possessing wealth magically through romance and dominating it through sexuality. Thus, desire for class equality obscures the film's otherwise too obvious racism and sexism. Moreover, the film's concluding romantic embrace can be read symbolically as a liberal call for racial understanding and harmony. Stanley's romance with Tracy can

be looked at as the way the character comes to grips with and overcomes his own racism by falling in love. In this case, the myth of romantic love can be seen as not only the cure-all for crises of male identity but also an antidote for the film's rather open racism. According to this reading, the containment of Tracy's possible sexual threat through heterosexual romance can be seen as a function of her gender rather than her race or ethnicity, so the film can use sexism to mask its racism if this interpretation is pursued. In fact, as this line of reasoning indicates, *Year of the Dragon* operates as a mélange of competing discourses vying for authority.

Many of these conflicting discourses come together in scenes featuring Stanley White's Chinese "buddy," Herbert Kuang. Kuang acts as a eunuch figure, nonthreatening, sexless, totally under the domination of the hero who is both boss and "best friend." Taken straight from the police academy to assure his anonymity for his undercover work in Chinatown, Kuang, at first, appears as an innocent dupe who can barely drive a car, speaks the accented English of a recent immigrant, and is concerned only about making enough money to send home to China. If Joey Tai and Tracy Tzu, in their own ways, pose a threat to the hero because of their ethnic exoticism, Kuang simply functions, by agreeing to work with White, as the "good" Asian legitimizing White's mission to clean up Chinatown. Also, in terms of class, Kuang functions as a "good" working-class Chinese. Like other working-class Chinese who dot the film to provide atmosphere, Kuang is seen as a victim of capitalism out of control in his own community. Once again, class relations are used to hide what otherwise could only be read as racism in the film. Only the rich are villainous among the Chinese; the Chinese workers may be ignorant, passive, and impotent, but the film can cling to its liberalism by showing them as decidedly not villainous.

Kuang, however, only reluctantly accepts this buddy role. Although Tracy taunts Stanley with his racism as part of their sexual gaming, Kuang accuses White of racism in earnest. At one point he challenges the way Stanley treats him by saying, "You make us all die for you. I'm not going to kill myself for you, Captain White. No more 'Chinaman Joe.' Those days are over." Still, even after Kuang complains that he cannot die for White because his family counts on him for income, he does precisely that, and his death becomes another rationalization of White's right to control Chinatown.

In yet another moment of spectacle, which has an excessive, almost operatic, quality, Kuang is riddled with bullets as he tries to run to Stanley with information on Tai's drug trafficking. Eventually, Kuang dies, bleeding grotesquely in White's arms; his last words give Stanley the location of Tai's next drug shipment. Clearly, this moment

places Kuang's earlier speech in a new light. No longer the unwitting dupe, Kuang here willingly gives his life for Stanley's cause, choosing this white American mission over the well-being of his Chinese family. He has become "Chinaman Joe" again, placing his life and his loyalty firmly within Stanley's camp.

Prefiguring Tai's suicide, Kuang's death functions in a similar way as spectacle. In fact, these moments of violence featuring Asians dying in the arms or at the feet of the white hero stand outside the narrative as images of ethnic and racial relations that seem to go beyond the parameters of the film itself. Outside the implied history that the temporal dimension of narrative must assure at some level, spectacle reifies images and places them beyond history. It also mythologizes social relations. Ironically, however, it makes concrete the racial and gender hierarchies that may have been hidden in other parts of the film. Although still vibrating with the contradictions that the film raises and then abandons, spectacle assures that these moments of violent domination of the ethnic other are somehow justified, correct, proper, and even inevitable. Functioning as spectacle, race, ethnicity, and gender exist as ahistorical, set, preordained, and unchangeable. Spectacle provides those exaggerated moments in which the social boundaries are most clearly demarcated. Within postmodern culture, spectacle assures that the film commodity will not attempt to threaten the social order with any critical significance. It levels discourse, incorporating all voices within a visual image that signifies nothing.

However, in these moments of spectacular display, the viewer may refuse to identify with the hero in the bedroom or in a brawl. Then, that viewer may realize that she or he has not been drawn into the ideological workings of the film, and the possibility of resistance can begin to surface.[5]

Beyond the Text: Confronting the Image

In addition to its use of spectacle, fractured identities, and exploitation of contending social discourses to present a contradictory mixture of both liberal and conservative interpretative possibilities, a disclaimer has been affixed to *Year of the Dragon* to complicate its discourse even further:

> This film does not intend to demean or to ignore the many positive features of Asian-Americans and specifically Chinese-American communities. Any similarity between the depiction in this film and any associations, organizations, individuals or Chinatowns that exist in real life is accidental.[6]

This disclaimer further removes the film from any engagement with an actual social or political environment. If the film exploits Chinatown commercially as an image, as spectacle, it denies any association that image may have with actual ethnic communities or racial groups. The film pleads its own case as a commodity begging to be consumed. It makes no attempt to ask to be understood as discourse, looked at as a representation, or taken as a possible intervention within the ideological realm.

MGM-UA added this disclaimer because of protests from a coalition of Asian American associations and media groups that picketed theaters and organized other types of protests against the film.[7] Despite a postmodern absorption of liberal, radical, and conservative positions within its textual operation, the existence of *Year of the Dragon* still could provoke public protest and debate.

In her 1987 video documentary, *Slaying the Dragon*, Deborah Gee analyzes the media's use of Connie Chung, clearly the principal, figurative inspiration for the look and style of the Tzu character in *Year of the Dragon*. For many in the Asian American community, this figure of the successful female newscaster has come to embody a new bent on racist representations of Asian Americans as the "model minority." To allay any guilt the dominant culture may feel toward its appalling treatment of nonwhites, the media celebrates the achievements of Asian Americans as exemplars of how to be successful in white America despite racism. Not only does this mask the continuing problems faced by Asian Americans in terms of immigration, employment, housing, education, and other areas in which discrimination is still strikingly apparent, but the myth of the "model minority" also potentially weakens Asian Americans politically by separating them from other minority groups with similar concerns. Moreover, by making the representative of the "model minority" female, a continuing specular fascination with Asian women can be coupled with the promotion of this image as both an advance for gender as well as racial liberalization. *Slaying the Dragon*'s deconstruction of this image and its historical and cultural context stands as a corrective to *Year of the Dragon*'s exploitation of Chinatown as spectacle.

In fact, beyond Hollywood's continuing exploitation of Asia and the Asian American community, there exists a fertile Asian American filmmaking presence that has consistently turned a critical eye on the dominant media's representation of racial and ethnic others. Many of these films have taken up the theme of interracial sexual relations from a specifically Asian American point of view (*Mississippi Triangle*[8] [Chris Choy, Worth Long, and Alan Seigel, 1983], *Family Gathering* [Lise Yasui and Ann Tegnell, 1988], *West Is West* [David Rathod, 1988], *Juxta* [Hiroko Yamazaki, 1989], *Two Lies* [Pam Tom, 1989], and *Sally's Beauty Spot* [Helen Lee, 1990], to name just a few recent examples). They include documentaries, experimental shorts, and fiction features, and all attempt to use the cinema to explore aspects of interracial relations seldom broached by Hollywood. Some focus specifically on Asian American women, others treat Asian and African American romances, while some others deal with parent-child issues seldom addressed by Hollywood.

It should come as little surprise that Asian American filmmakers, many of whom are women, have been drawn to interracial romance and sexuality as subject matter for their work. By adopting the Hollywood narrative as a taken-for-granted part of the dominant culture's figuration of Asia and the Asian American community, these filmmakers have been able to use these accepted images as part of their own critique of the media. As I hope this book has demonstrated, Hollywood narratives broach the issues of racism, sexism, ethnic assimilation, national identity, and economic inequality in ways that make the ideological contradictions with which they deal often quite difficult to contain. Since many of these Hollywood films address women specifically, a recognition of gender and the role sexuality plays within race relations also makes these narratives attractive springboards for the critical work attempted by many Asian American filmmakers.[9]

Summation: Grand Narratives, Tall Tales, and Romantic Stories

In *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, Jean-Francois Lyotard develops an epistemological theory based on the legitimation of knowledge through reference to what he calls "grand narratives." He defines the "modern" as

> any science that legitimates itself with reference to a metadiscourse . . . making an explicit appeal to some grand narrative, such as the dialectics of Spirit, the hermeneutics of meaning, the emancipation of the rational or working subject, or the creation of wealth.[10]

The "postmodern," then, can be defined as

> incredulity toward metanarratives. . . . The narrative function is losing its functors, its great hero, its great dangers, its great voyages, its great goal.[11]

Year of the Dragon represents one of these instances of narrative crisis. While ostensibly presenting itself as "progressive" in its treatment of

racial relations and gender politics, the death of the villain and the union of the couple at the conclusion no longer can rid the film of either its racist or sexist underpinnings. Even though the film attempts to be a narrative about the emancipation of Chinatown and the spiritual cleansing of its hero's psyche, the tale it tells pales next to its extravagant use of spectacle and the extratextual critique of its obvious exploitation of hackneyed stereotypes.

This book has been an exploration of the relationship between narratives and ideas. The contradictions within these narratives have pointed to gaps in the foundations of many of those popularly accepted ideas about race, gender, sexuality, ethnicity, and American identity. While all the plot formulae dealt with here do not have the weight or the "grandeur" of Lyotard's metanarratives, they are part of the ideological fabric that makes up the "modern" narratives of emancipation and progress he does discuss. Whether liberal or conservative in nature, they are now, in a postmodern age, part of a crisis in understanding. While Lyotard, in this pragmatic and skeptical era, may cast a suspicious eye on the protests against films like *Year of the Dragon*, as he would on the film itself, the fact that Hollywood's little narratives about the emancipatory nature of heterosexual romance or the healing of social ills through intimate interpersonal understanding should ring hollow indicates that the ideological foundations of these tales may indeed be crumbling.

All the narratives discussed in this book have dealt with the same fundamental crisis of Anglo-American culture desperately trying to reconcile its credo of "liberty and justice for all" with its insistence on white, male, bourgeois domination of the public sphere. Although the films dealing with white knights may provide the clearest examples, all the films treated here are fundamentally narratives of salvation. They all attempt to "save" the Anglo-American, bourgeois, male establishment from any threats to its hegemony by saving the white woman from sexual contact with the racial other, rescuing the nonwhite woman from the excesses of her own culture, or spiritually saving the couple from a living death by allowing them to be symbolically assimilated into the American mainstream through their romance.

In *The Cheat*, Edith is literally saved from the "yellow peril" embodied by the villain. In *Broken Blossoms*, Lucy is physically saved by Cheng Huan while the narrative "saves" her purity with its deadly conclusion. Megan, in *The Bitter Tea of General Yen*, is saved from a loveless marriage by the warlord Yen, while his suicide, once again but with less certainty, saves her virtue. Similarly, in *Shanghai Express*, captivity saves Lily from licentious contact with men of presumably many races by sending her back into the protective arms of Doc.

In *Lady of the Tropics*, Manon "saves" herself spiritually by sacrificing herself physically for her husband's honor. Similarly, all the Madame Butterfly heroines, including the white Madame Butterflies in *My Geisha* and "An American Geisha," remain sympathetic because of their desire to sacrifice themselves for the sake of their lovers. Mark Elliott "saves" Han Suyin in *Love Is a Many-Splendored Thing* by allowing her to sacrifice her career for their affair. The transcendent nature of their romance saves the couples in *Sayonara*, *The Crimson Kimono*, *Japanese War Bride*, *Bridge to the Sun*, and *The World of Suzie Wong* from the spiritual vacuum of a life without bourgeois, heterosexual romance and marriage.

By following this master narrative that links personal salvation and romantic love with social emancipation and progress, all these films seem to tell one story about American identity as both superficially liberal and deeply conservative with respect to racial and ethnic differences. All place limits on both the progressive elements in their discourses that call for understanding as well as their racist aspects that insist on either absolute exclusionism or the subordination of the nonwhite partner to the Anglo-American.

These narratives of salvation, moreover, rely on heterosexual romance and traditional gender roles as their ideological anchor while they test the limits of permissible interracial intimacy. The "independent" woman "asks for trouble" and is punished by rape, abduction, or death and is saved by the love of the "right" man. The supposedly excessive nature of Asian sexuality, which is manifested by a predatory femininity and a brutal or effeminate masculinity, similarly can only be contained by intimate contact with a white love object. Racial difference becomes sexual excess, and romantic love acts as both personal salvation and social corrective.

Thus, all the narratives examined here function discursively in nearly identical ways. Only in *Year of the Dragon* does the metanarrative of social progress and individual salvation through romantic love begin to crumble within the film itself as spectacle, style, and surface drain it of significance. However, even this postmodern film refers to this metanarrative, and its continuing cultural resonance cannot be denied.

An attempt has been made here to seriously take these narratives involving race and sexuality, to look at them historically, and critique their ideology. However, questions remain: Does the postmodern crisis of narrative knowledge preclude the possibility of a different kind of narrative of emancipation? Is this critique of these Hollywood films as hopelessly anachronistic as the films themselves? Does the emptiness of *Year of the Dragon*'s spectacle have more significance than the fervent protests against its exploitation of the living community of China-

town, New York? However, abandoning all connections between the film and ideology may ultimately mean relinquishing any hope of social change through media work. This would make any criticism of the kind found in this study pointless.

I hope that this book points in new directions for future work rather than marking a critical cul-de-sac within postmodernism. While quite a bit of theoretical work on the representation of racial and ethnic differences in the mass media has appeared, most has grown out of the concerns of African Americans and the experiences of the African diaspora.[12] More thought needs to be devoted to the way in which "race" as a social category, implying a hierarchy of power, works across different ethnic and cultural boundaries. The different ways in which African Americans, Asian Americans, Native Americans, Hispanics, among others, are grouped together, separated, classified, labeled, and set against each other need to be better understood theoretically in order to dismantle the existing inequitable social order. Given that the media play a critical ideological role in all this, much more needs to be done to critique the ways in which "race" exists as a category in Hollywood as well as in other popular art forms.

Moreover, important theoretical work on race and gender by feminist scholars like bell hooks, Gayatri Spivak, Trinh T. Minh-ha needs to be absorbed into film studies more completely.[13] As Jane Gaines has pointed out in her essay, "White Privilege and Looking Relations: Race and Gender in Feminist Film Theory," the isolation of gender relations from the issues of race, ethnicity, and class blinds feminist film criticism to other forms of oppression:

> Since it has taken gender as its starting point in the analysis of oppression, feminist theory has helped to reinforce white middle-class values, and to the extent that it works to keep women from seeing other structures of oppression, it functions ideologically . . . .The dominant feminist paradigm actually encourages us *not to think* in terms of any oppression other than male dominance and female subordination.[14]

This book has attempted to provide one way of rethinking gender and race as it exists in Hollywood. Going a step beyond the identification of stereotypes, this look at the ideological configuration of popular narratives sheds some light on the complexities of these discourses. Much more still needs to be done on these films' reception among diverse audiences within the United States and abroad, their relationship to other types of narratives involving Asians and Asian Americans, and their relationship to other popular fictions involving interracial sexuality.

Beyond this, there exists outside Hollywood an entire world of film and television that deals with Asian and Asian American culture. These works need to be given careful attention and looked at in relation to Hollywood as an alternative voice providing a different perspective on this subject matter. Another volume could be devoted to Asian American, Asian, and other filmmakers who have depicted interracial sexual relations in dramatically different ways than found in the films analyzed here. Undoubtedly, the methods employed in this study would have to be rethought or discarded in order to properly understand these other films. This examination of Hollywood can only be a starting point, a critical look at a minuscule corner of the vast cultural fabric that includes the highly volatile issues of gender, race, sexuality, and American identity.