

# The Spatial Production of Films

## Illustrated by the Case of Hong Kong Kowloon Walled City

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**Abstract**—Due to the unique political background, complex construction, the living conditions of the chaos, the Hong Kong Kowloon Walled city has become the focus of public concern, especially providing a rich source for artists. It is not only a space entity, but also a cultural symbol, a kind of representational space. This article applies the theory of Space to discuss the relationship of the different spaces which is illustrated by the case of the Kowloon Walled city in movies. It shows the cultural symbolic meaning behind so that a glimpse can be put into the social production of spatial operation mode.

**Keywords**—Kowloon Walled city; spaces in movie; theory of space; cultural symbol

### I. INTRODUCTION

The movie *The Looming Storm* won awards at the 30th Tokyo International Film Festival; the chief actress Yanzi in it had a luxury dream which was to open a hair salon in Hong Kong. She was one of the most people in mainland China who had beautiful imagination to Hong Kong in the 1990s and before, thanks to the international metropolis images presented in the movie as the symbol partly. The truth is that there are not only dazzling skyscrapers and shopping malls beside Victoria harbor but the grimy urban fringe in Hong Kong. *Chasing the Dragon* directed by Jing Wong reappears the lost Kowloon Walled city in Hong Kong, where is completely incompatible with modernization.

The predecessor of Kowloon Walled city is one of the salt fields of the Song dynasty. After the First Opium War, Hong Kong Island was ceded to Britain, and the situation is critical. "On August 8, 1846, Cao Ying, the governor of Guangdong and Guangxi provinces proposed for the construction of the Kowloon Walled city 'to defend' (Liu, 1994)." It was demolished by the Japan army and rebuilt in the 1940s. For some historical reasons, the Walled city gradually became a place where was out of control by the three governments (China, UK and Hong Kong). It was once the most densely populated place in the world. "The estimated 33,000 residents who were living on the 2.7 hectare patch in 1987 lived reasonably normal lives (Dawson 2015)." Because it's beyond the laws, there had been so many social issues like prostitution, gambling and drugs that the public security was terrible and the living conditions were difficult. As a unique space, it was once famous in the world and became the inspiration for many works of art. In order to successfully be transferred in 1997, the Walled City

was knocked down by the Hong Kong government in 1993 and the Kowloon Walled City Park had been built there.

### II. THE PRODUCTION OF SYMBOL SPACE IN FILMS

One of the best frames in the movie *Chasing the Dragon* is the pursuit in the Walled City. Inspector Lei Luo meant nothing threatened to this place, and the airplane that seemed to be easily touched was also like its environment before. Most Hong Kong movies on the background of Kowloon Walled City are themed by crime and gangsters showing the chaotic and violent colonial life, such as *Brothers from the Walled City* in 1982, *Long Arm of the Law Part 1* in 1984, *To Be Number One* in 1991, *Crime Story* in 1993, *The H.K. Triad* in 1999, etc. Most of these movies were shot on former location of the Walled City. Among them, *To Be Number One* won the best film of the 11th Hong Kong Film Awards.

In recent years, many related spaces in some influential films are based on the Walled City. In *Kung Fu Hustle*, for example, it's a "pig cage village", the criminals' hiding place in *Pacific Rim*, the background of the city in *Ghost in the Shell* which is adapted by the Japanese comic. This is one of the reasons which make Hong Kong become a Cyberpunk city. Most of these are science fiction movies and the related models to the Walled City are special film spaces created by digital technology. These spaces usually symbolize evilness, darkness and some gloomy survival environment for human.

As a kind of medium, the film itself has the recorded character. Human's cognitive model assumes that what they see is true in subconscious mind, so the presentation of the film usually gives audience a sense of authenticity. "The image space in a large number of Hong Kong films which are projected and viewed, reflecting a perception schema about the city in the audience's mind (Liu, 2004)." Victoria Harbor, Bank of China Tower and some other sites have been landmarks of Hong Kong. They exist as a physical space, then a functional space, and the cultural symbols. Bustling urban images in lots of Hong Kong mainstream films to a certain extent mask the basic space reality. Public rental housing, low-rent housing and rural wilderness are abandoned by film makers of Hong Kong. "The cinematograph reigns in the city, reigns over the earth... More than the preaching of wise men, the cinematograph has demonstrated to everyone what reality is (Mennel, 2008, p. 1)."

The Hong Kong Walled City is in the same situation. It makes the Hong Kong films has distinct characteristics in text narration through the history of being one of the British colonies. During the Great Cultural Revolution in the PRC, the government organized such events as "the Hong Kong Festival, pop parties, fashion shows, the Miss Hong Kong Pageant and so on, to design a modern, Westernized image for the people of Hong Kong, in order to make the residents of the colony identify less with its mother country (Mennel 2008, p.88)." Political constraints and irresistible Westernization make the urban residents' spiritual demand and cultural identity be in a state of ripped, which is reflected in the movies. Hong Kong hero movies and other action movies embody the contradictions of modern, urban, industrial society and the diasporic projection into the past. Hong Kong action films have used martial arts and the history of China to create a mythical past of a lost homeland. These movies create cold city aesthetics with the violence of gun and traces of the martial arts tradition (Mennel 2008, pp.89-94). Although the Kowloon Walled City isn't the representative of Hong Kong, its dark maze space meets the demand of the city film industry. With the technical support and the rendering of the film spots, the spatial creation of Kowloon Walled City has become a kind of cultural productivity; meanwhile this space contains the residents' broken dreams and their desire for the doomsday hero.

The photo collection *The City of Darkness* published by Girard and Lambo actually reproduced the residents, life, production and spatial structure of the Kowloon Walled City (Girard & Lambot 1993). The authors once said that several visits to the city and the interviews were successful. Although it was cramped and dark there, the residents lived a normal life. The killing and blood in movies have nothing to do with here. In the documentary *Disappeared Memory: the Kowloon Walled City of Hong Kong Slums*, Li Haoran, a building heritage protection scholar, considering that the Kowloon Walled City is not a slum since it is a fully functioning community, what's more, the people inside are full of hope. It can be seen that the Kowloon Walled City in the image is adulterated with misreading and imagination. With the disappearance of the solid part of the Kowloon Walled City, the cultural symbolic meaning of this building has been fixed in the images.

### III. UNIQUE PHYSICAL SPATIAL SYSTEM

As can be seen from the photographic works, the former Kowloon walled city is like an alien colony, which is not compatible with the modern buildings nearby. It is bulky, enclosed and highly built. The dark black wall is reminiscent of the wet and thick mildew deposited on it. *City of Darkness* had shot the dentist, sausage shop owner, housewives, missionaries and other residents in the town; it also recorded the survival efforts of the roughscuff and their spontaneous living tradition and system (Girard & Lambot 1993).

The space is interactive with human instead of being isolated. Wiel Arez (2002), a famous architect across the world, once appraised that the Kowloon Walled City was very interesting because of its diversity of space and the complexity of its functional organization. The Kowloon

Walled City is a complete space organ that covers all the basic units which could meet the need of survival. It is not only a residential building, but also a factory where produces food and all kinds of daily necessities. There existed pharmacies and clinics, as well as churches and schools, which could meet the dual needs of survival and spirit. At first, the Walled City was only used for fortifications, but the existence of human made its structure more complicated. Although collapsed several times, it grew like a malignant tumor cell regularly and unscrupulously. Every small space included the human's activity, which was like a cell neuron. The height was restricted by the flight routes of the Kai Tak Airport of Hong Kong. No one could imagine what it would develop into without this restriction. The expansion was due to the non-governing public security environment, and its normal operation lied in the common maintenance of the residents. There was only one water pump. Residents had established arrangement for water use (Girard & Lambot 1993, pp. 36-54). The church is covered by a wire mesh on the top which could prevent the garbage from the upper house to tarnish the Holy Land. Because it was extremely easy to cause a fire, residents of the walled city complied with the safety regulations very strictly, and a detailed plan of escape was drawn up.

Similar to the Hong'en Temple in Beijing, it is hard to be classified to any one of the categories in traditional architecture which has been always changing and fine-tuning (Zhu & Xie 2016). The space is fluidity because of human's invasion and touch. When talking about *Chungking Express*, Kar-Wai Wong emphasized that Chungking Mansion was a confluence of all kinds of cultures. This crowded, complex and highly active space is a good metaphor of the city itself (Bao et al. 2001).

The history of space is superimposed. The capital operates in the space, behind which there are the activities of people in social relations. Due to the inequality of power and the expansion of geography, the change of space form happened. The Kowloon Walled City Incident occurred in 1948 was the relation tension between the police and the residents caused by land acquisition on the surface (Sun 2014), which was the scramble for space by different groups in fact. For urban residents, this space was not only a place of residence but a kind of productive force, even a kind of discourses. David Harvey, a humanist geographer, reiterated the importance of "spontaneous self-diversification" put forward by Jane Jacobs. He discussed the "five faces of oppression", which were exploitation, exclusion, incompetence, cultural imperialism and violence (Harvey 2006). The space mode of the Kowloon Walled City is a kind of "spontaneous self-diversification". As the concept of "creative destruction" came up with Harvey, due to the operation of capital and the need of power, the landscape is established. When new demand appears, the original social space will be destroyed or removed completely so as to maximize the benefits of accumulation (Harvey 2009).

### IV. THE RELATIONSHIP AND PRODUCTION OF SPACE

When it comes to the Kowloon walled city, people generally regard it as a place rather than a space. A place or

location is not variable but limited and stationary, and the space is flowing and infinite however. Before the 20th century, the discussion of geography and space would not include society and human activities, and space was understood as a homogeneous, container-like existence. As time changed, many geography and spatial researches cannot solve the problems fundamentally. The perspective of understanding the objective space has changed slowly. The humanities dimension has been brought into the geographical research, and the research of literature, art and many other fields have also undergone the spatial turn. As a visual art, films provide rich and intuitive cases.

Lefebvre (1991) named the social space as the abstract space, and his analysis and criticism are mainly divided into three aspects, spatial practice, representations of space and representational spaces. Space practice is the perceived dimension that is constructed by material construction, which embodies the production and reproduction of social components in social production relations. Representations of space is a conceptualized and conceived dimension, it's a space that represents the interests and existence of the rulers, such as urban planning and transformation. The spatial representation could be objectified through the influence of practice. The representational spaces means the immediate experience of the spatial truth of the critique space imagery, which is often a complex symbol system associated with art. The only product of this space is the work of symbolism. The concept of the representational spaces is in common with the concept of simulation and surrealism by Baudrillard (1994), "The city is no longer a political-industrial place as it in 19th Century, but a place of 'symbol', media, and 'code'".

The space entities of Kowloon Walled City affected the imagination space, which was reflected in the space of the movie performance. The movie space constantly refreshed our cognitive and imagination space. In many science fiction movies, the space symbols of the Kowloon Walled city have been surreal. Barbara Mennel (2008, p.88) believes that many Hong Kong directors' "self-awareness of the city and its representation was reflected in literary texts and films that employed double or multiple perspectives in their narratives to examine Hong Kong's urban space." This makes symbolic images more diverse and uncertain. In movies, the expressive space of the town reflects the social relations, including the expression and resistance of daily life, the deep thinking of future and survival, its symbol and symbolic system are constantly changing at the same time. As the object of urban planning, its existence always stays in the virtual movement of the spatial representation. It will become the object of the next space practice at any time because of the new demand of space transformation. The three different spaces of the Kowloon Walled City embody Lefebvre's space theory, which is essentially the entire process of the space production.

"If the experience of space and time is to encode and reproduce all kinds of social relations, then the change of the way of expressing the former will certainly lead to some change of the latter (Harvey 2013)." At present, not only in the movie industry, but in many aspects of social cultures have been influenced by the symbol of the Kowloon Walled

City. Without the restriction image of real space constraints, the symbol system of the walled city is more abundant as a kind of mode that represents the imagination and nostalgia for the unique space after the demolition. A Hong Kong Kung Fu comic, *Kowloon Walled City*, has many fans, and it derived a board role-playing game, with the same name. By January 11th in 2018, its attention-degree on Baidu Post Bar on line is as high as 1585, with a total post number of 67211. Parts of the scenes in the network game are based on the Kowloon Walled City such as *Call of Duty: Black Ops*, *Guild Wars* and *Shenmue II* which are very popular. The Japanese has been admired for the Kowloon Walled City Culture particularly. In Kawasaki of Kanagawa County, there has been built a Kowloon City amusement park, which is similar to the haunted house with Cantonese dubbing. The corridor of this park is covered with small ads, and there is high sense of horror. The Japanese anime *Psycho-Pass* also has a gathering area for the poor similar to the Kowloon Walled City. The representational works of space constantly deepen the symbolic meaning of the Kowloon Walled City in the social reality, and it continues to produce new meanings and misunderstandings.

## V. CONCLUSION

Many people have a distinct attitude on the survival of the Kowloon Walled City. City planners believe that the disappearance of this city is a necessary way to create a modern city and improve the life of the residents, which makes most of art lovers sadly sigh. As a matter of fact Lefebvre(2003) put, "space produces social relations and it is also produced by the social relations", spatial traces have been engraved in the history, no matter as a spatial entity or a cultural symbol, its appearance, change, growth or disappearance is a part of the historical context. The dialectical movement of the social relationship and space is in the eternal dynamic and relative balance, and the spatial meaning of the Kowloon Walled City is still extending and increasing.

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