Hong Kong Screenscapes

From the New Wave to the Digital Frontier

Edited by
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Introduction

When Crystal Kwok’s *The Mistress* was first released in 1999, I was immediately taken with its uniqueness in the context of Hong Kong cinema. Not only did it differ significantly from the usual male action and martial arts films, but it seemed to me to have a good deal to say about the social/cultural environment of Hong Kong that had not previously been dealt with on the screen. Equally important, it spoke to the female experience and resonated with many issues being discussed in the United States or being treated in novels, articles, and art works. At the time, it seemed to come out of nowhere.

Because of the film’s anomaly, it was released as a Category III film. This designation was imposed on certain films beginning in 1989 that the film industry deemed to be for “adults only.” This included representations of sex and violence, although in the main, many of these films portrayed more female nudity than sex and could be analogized to “soft porn” in the West.

Category III films are a major part of the Hong Kong film industry, although they are seldom reviewed or written about by critics. In 1998, the year before Kwok released *The Mistress*, 450 films out of a total production of 963 (47 percent) fell into this category.¹ In addition to the expected sex and violence, the films tend to feature murder and mutilation, large breasts and lesbianism, gender-bending, rule-breaking and hybridity.² These films also feature sadistic women bent on revenge. Little of this applies to *The Mistress*, a film that replaces male fantasy and the male gaze with female desire and a female subject position. However, it was not surprising that when it was shown commercially, the few members in the audience were all male, probably misled by the title and the Category III rating.
What I would like to do in this article is to situate *The Mistress* within the context of feminist filmmaking. When the Second Wave Feminism was developing in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially in the United States, there was a good deal of writing and debate over whether or not we could identify a feminine aesthetic in works produced by women — painting, sculpture, film, and the other arts. For the purpose of clarification, I define “feminine” as any work that consciously or unconsciously deals with the lives of women or reflects the female experience. Such works could, of course, also be produced by men. This is in contrast to a feminist works that possesses a political dimension.

Writers such as Lucy Lippard and Linda Nochlin wrote essays about feminine imagery: circles and flowers, moons and water, undulating and organic forms relating to vulvas and vaginas, symbiotic fluids and birth. Suddenly we looked at works by Georgia O'Keeffe and Imogen Cunningham and even Eve Hesse in new ways. Some of the European feminists carried these ideas further, women like Silvia Bovenschen and Luce Irigaray. And out of these debates women like Judy Chicago produced massive works like *The Dinner Party* (1974–79) which used these images to create a new history of women and a political agenda. Others like Carolee Schneemann used these images in ways more closely tied to the history of avant-garde, experimental filmmaking.

This is not to say that there were no female directors in Hong Kong before Kwok or that they totally ignored female sexuality. Two distinguished women who preceded Kwok are Ann Hui, whose long career makes her one of the most productive female filmmakers throughout Asia, and Clara Law. However, Hui's early career was devoted to action films and her later works are predominately melodramas. Law, on the other hand, directed two films that were explicitly sensual, if not explicitly sexual. The first, *The Reincarnation of Golden Lotus* (1989), depicts two young women from two different eras, each the erotic object of desire of men's fantasies. A later work, *Temptation of a Monk* (1993) features beautiful seductresses. Neither of the films, however, is presented through the point of view of the desiring female.

*The Mistress* incorporates many of the images utilized by the early feminist artists of the 1970s and 80s mentioned above. It also has associations with many female-directed independent films of the same period that featured female perspectives and subjectivities and/or validated female friendship and sisterhood, works such as *Hester Street* (1975), *Girlfriends* (1978), and *Rambling Rose* (1991). And although much of this was done in the United States several decades earlier, *The Mistress* was totally new and fresh in the context of Hong Kong.

But there were other aspects of *The Mistress* that differed from the US feminist features of the 1970s and 1980s and from the independent Hong
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Kong cinema of the 1990s. There was raw sexuality and edginess that was definitely absent from the love stories and melodramas that the Hong Kong industry tended to produce. And it is these aspects that relate The Mistress to the more contemporary international phenomenon wherein women writers, artists, and filmmakers are exploring their sexual identity and delving into the darker, transgressive aspects of female sexuality. And let me be clear here, although some of these images may seem familiar from various forms of pornography, the motivating impulses are radically different if for no other reason than they have been created by women for other women, not men. This impulse has recently become a global phenomenon as more and more women explore female sexuality.

In literature, writers like Judith Rossner and Mary Gaitskill came out with stories filled with sexual exploits. Rossner's Looking for Mr. Goodbar is a novel about a school teacher who seeks out dangerous liaisons that seemed shocking at the time, while Gaitskill's Bad Behavior demonstrates that anything a male can do, a female can do as well. More recently there are the novels of Susanna Moore, most particularly In the Cut (which is street talk referring to entering a woman's vagina), that chronicles a woman's search for sexual excitement on the wild side. In the Cut was subsequently filmed by the New Zealand director Jane Campion. All of these works focus on the dark, seamy side of sexuality. None are considered feminist works and none offer social critiques.

In the art world there are the photographs and installations by Sarah Lucas in England, who, like Cindy Sherman in the United States, uses female and sexual imagery to comment on the role of women in a patriarchal society that both uses and abuses them. And in France, like the United States, several sensational novels have appeared. Most notable are the recent memoirs of novelist Annie Ernaux and the art magazine editor Catherine Millet, which chronicle their real life sexual exploits. Not surprisingly, both books were huge successes. But most prominent for my purposes are the works of the French film director Catherine Breillet, whose films, like those of Kwok, have been labeled “pornography.” In one of Breillet's works, Romance (1999), she chronicles the experiences of a school teacher, bored with her job and her live-in boyfriend, who drifts into increasingly kinky and dangerous liaisons. The film depicts nameless meetings, sodomy, bondage, and other forms of humiliation. Like many of the other heroines in recent sexually explicit French cinema, the heroine is not simply searching for experience and pleasure, but she is searching for boundaries and her identity as a woman.

While The Mistress lacks the scenes of violence that typify many of the French works (and Category III films as well), and only indulges in graphic sexuality in the fantasy sequences, the attraction of the heroine (another teacher)
to a wanton womanizer whom she knows will ultimately humiliate and abuse her, connects Kwok's work to a tendency in contemporary women's cinema. Clearly she did not go as far as the Americans and the Europeans, but in the context of Hong Kong culture, Kwok took a major step.

Kwok's background leading up to the making of The Mistress offers some explanation of how this came about. Kwok was born in San Francisco in 1966, moved to Hong Kong when she was three and was educated in both places. While working on a degree at the University of California, she came to Hong Kong, where winning a beauty pageant led to several small acting roles in two Jackie Chan vehicles: Dragons Forever and Police Story 2 (both 1988). This was followed by appearances in Tsui Hark's The Master (1992). By the early 1990s she was angling for something bigger and served as assistant director on Sylvia Chang's Mary from Beijing (1992). In 1994 she made a documentary on Jackie Chan for French TV Channel Canal+. Her relationship with Chan paid off later when she needed to raise money for her low-budget production, The Mistress. Along the way, she also managed to earn an M.A. from the University of Hong Kong.

Moving back and forth between San Francisco and Hong Kong, Kwok was keenly aware of cultural differences. Most specifically, she was conscious of the ways in which sexuality and sexual issues were repressed in Hong Kong society; nobody spoke about sex. To address this issue, she began a cable television talk show in 1997. The initial objective was to discuss popular topics of all kinds, but gradually the sexual topics began to dominate the show. Many of the topics discussed on the air were still taboo in Hong Kong. After a dialoguing with her co-hostess, the program was opened up to callers. Among the topics covered were: masturbation, dating older men, women on top, and prostitution vs. mistresses. Many of the images and fantasies that found their way into The Mistress, like the sushi girl, who, according to Kwok, came from images that she gathered through chatting with male friends or stories from her talk show. "Some, of course, were my own."

In this manner The Mistress served to challenge modes of Hong Kong filmmaking and intervene in the way sexuality and gender were normally depicted in Hong Kong cinema, especially at end of the millennium.

The Narrative Text

The Mistress tells the story of Alex, an intelligent, young Asian American woman, recently returned to Hong Kong after studying at the University of California in Berkeley (not unlike Kwok herself). Alex is full of feminist ideas that she learned
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umerican woman, of California in that she learned in the United States and considers herself a modern, independent woman. She lives with her boyfriend, Eric. Their relationship is fraught with certain tensions, mostly around the fact that Eric is not working.

To generate some income, Alex takes a job tutoring Michelle, a young Mainlander, who is the mistress of a wealthy Hong Kong businessman named Henry. Alex is both fascinated and critical of their relationship. During the hours the two women spend together, Alex observes how Michelle, who demonstrates an obvious obsession with money, manages to obtain substantial amounts of cash by pleasing Henry’s every whim. Alex also begins to fantasize about the couple’s sex life and to imagine herself in Michelle’s place. Although she has little regard for Henry, she is also attracted to him sexually, which begins to adversely affect her sexual relationship with Eric.

Gradually Alex and Henry are drawn into their own liaison and Michelle, sensing the competition, leaves for China. At first Alex thrives in her new role as mistress, but gradually Henry becomes less and less available. Alex, who has fallen in love with him, lapses into despair. Eventually on the verge of suicide, she meets up with Michelle again who pulls her out of her depression. The film ends with a musical reprieve in which the two women, plus Henry’s wife, perform in an upbeat peon to sisterhood.

The film treats several themes relating to women’s lives, invoked from a female perspective. Through the use of extensive fantasy sequences, we are offered an insight into Alex’s subjectivity and desire. Many of these are constructed around voyeuristic episodes. Although they clearly relate to sexual desire and the possibilities of the female gaze, Kwok also attempts to explore the larger terrain of female identity. To achieve this goal she focuses on a large range of symbolic objects and various particles of women’s clothing. And woven throughout the work is a subtext that promotes feminist politics and odes to sisterhood.

The first fantasy occurs when Alex is listening to a conversation among her male friends who talk about eating sushi off the naked body of a woman laid out on a dining room table. Alex visualizes the event, inter-cut with shots of the famous Hokusai woodblock print, “The Dream of the Fisherman’s Wife,” one of the world’s most sensual pictures. The print features a Japanese woman, head back, eyes closed, as a giant octopus crawls across her body, its mouth about to reach her vagina. The image speaks to female sexual pleasure. It is hard to read exactly what Alex is feeling, but she responds to her friends by calling them perverts and accusing all men for their obsession with sex. The scene usurps a sexist image (eating from the abdomen of a naked woman) that objectifies the female body and shifts the imagery to one that calls forth
Figure 16.1 Many of the fantasies in *The Mistress*, such as men eating *sushi* off a nude female body, came from male friends or callers to Kwok's talk show. But Kwok complicates the image by introducing the possibility of female pleasure. *The Mistress*. Dir. Crystal Kwok, 1999.

a woman's pleasure. The next fantasy is a voyeuristic image of Michelle bathed in red with her legs splayed open on a bed. Again, Alex decides, "All men are dogs." Later she sees a repeat of this scene, but this time with Henry on the bed undulating above Michelle.

As Michelle and Alex bond through English lessons, pedicures, and shopping, Alex increasingly ponders issues of women's role in male/female relationships and her identity as a sexual being. As the two women try on bras, Alex imagines herself behind Michelle, feeling her breasts. Michelle tells Alex that men like lace; it excites them. But clearly it also excites Alex.
Alex’s fantasy of touching Michelle’s breasts is significant here. One of the clichés of Category III films is the obligatory lesbian scene or scenes. Lesbianism is a staple of all pornography and has been documented as one of the most common male fantasies. In the Category III films of Hong Kong, the lesbian women are often over-ripe avenging or misogynist martial arts experts, who titillate and punish male characters and no doubt male viewers. But here, although Michelle talks about exciting men, there are no males in the scene to excite. Rather the scene serves to elicit Alex’s fantasy and to put her in touch with her own sexual feelings. Most importantly, the film activates the female gaze, the counterpart to the male gaze so influentially written about by Laura Mulvey in her essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” although it should be noted that Mulvey denied the possibility of a female gaze in her analysis.

Later in the apartment, as Alex watches Henry sink a golf ball into a woman’s black boot, Alex fantasizes herself on a grassy knoll, replete with black boots and fishnet stockings, as yellow balls roll into her crotch. In a later scene, Alex watches Michelle and Henry from behind an open door as they impersonate a maid and a boss with S&M overtones. As she takes off her blouse to create a ménage à trois, we discover it’s all imaginary.

The fantasies now seem to come fast and furiously. On a minibus, Alex daydreams of emerging from an outdoor lake. The water imagery, as well as a woman running through a forest in slow motion as the breezes softly blow her long silk dress, occur throughout the film.

One of the longest fantasy scenes in the film occurs when the women are playing mahjong. A slightly fat man in a white undershirt crawls under the table. As they kick him with their heels, he fondles their legs and takes off one of the women’s stockings that he puts on his head. When he leaves he gives one of the women money, another kinky riff on the theme of sexual turn-ons. Later in the film, while making love to Eric, she fantasizes about both Henry and the fat man. Again, the representation of a woman’s sexual point of view is rare in Hong Kong film. The scene also serves as a critique of male power and the ways in which men use women as mere objects of their sexual desire.

Towards the end of the film, when Alex is installed in Henry’s glass prison, she sees Henry on the street as he kisses his attractive English wife. Alex attacks her and the two end up in a catfight. This immediately is revealed as another fantasy. Likewise, as Alex becomes progressively demoralized, she attempts suicide by cutting herself with a razor in the bathtub. The water drips blood, but again, this turns out to be merely in her imagination.

At the film’s end, Alex is seen running down the street crying. The running is inter-cut with the dream images of a running woman. When she finally
collapses, Michelle arrives and holds her, urging her to "wake up." This wake up call is not simply a question of the need to leave a dream world for the world of reality, but rather the fantasies and dreams have served a purpose, allowing Alex to get in touch with her deeper subconscious and to work through issues of personal and female identity.

**Feminism and Sisterhood**

*The Mistress* functions as a feminist fable (although Kwok does not consider herself a feminist) that promotes sisterhood over various forms of male/female relationships. Perhaps this is why, despite the erotic imagery, most of the male viewers in the theater the evening I attended the film struck me as rather disgruntled. Alex's initial reaction to the relationship between Michelle and Henry, as stated earlier, is disgust for both parties. She sees Henry as a man who buys sexual favors and who treats Michelle in an infantilizing, humiliating manner. She views Michelle as a willing victim, a vulgar, empty-headed Mainlander, who allows herself to be debased in order to live in a luxurious glass penthouse overlooking the Hong Kong skyline and to buy high-priced consumer goods. The materialist PRC mistress has actually become a cliche in many mainstream Hong Kong works. One of the most entertaining scenes in the film is an early montage sequence of designer stores such as Gucci, Prada, and Christian Dior. While it serves as parody and social critique, it also contradictorily captures the "joy of shopping." The first English lessons between Alex and Michelle consist of learning the brand names of designer clothes. Alex wonders how much money Henry actually gives to Michelle, or put in another way, "What is the worth of a woman's body?" She calculates age times bra size (36 x 30) plus two 0's?

However, as they spend more time together, Alex gains increasing respect for Michelle. She learns that Michelle has become sophisticated and has mastered the stock market. She also learns that Michelle has no intention of staying in Hong Kong, but is only there to make enough money to return home. Home for Michelle is Hangzhou and her family. In fact, as the film evolves, Michelle has deeper traditional family values than Alex. Later we also discover that Michelle has a strong sense of self and reality; she sees Henry for exactly who he is and never falls in love with him. For Michelle, being a mistress is just another job, one that requires self-discipline, talent, and brains. Only Alex, the erstwhile feminist, succumbs to old-fashioned romantic views and deludes herself that she and Henry can create a genuine loving relationship. She needs Michelle at the end to disabuse her of this fantasy and wake the "sleeping princess," who has been living in a glass box rather than a glass coffin like Snow
White. Midway through the film, the two women go to an “S&M” party at a local disco. When the two go off to the ladies’ room, Kwok cuts to an overhead shot in the women’s stall as they urinate. The implied intimacy speaks for itself.

As time passes, Alex’s relationship with Eric begins to change. Experimenting with a new identity, she demands that Eric pay for the sex. He acquiesces in the spirit of game-playing. Alex wears the lace lingerie that Michelle has purchased for her. She stands in front of the mirror, pondering an alternative identity as a mistress or perhaps pondering the ways in which so many women prostitute themselves in their relationships with their lovers and husbands. One recalls the opening lines of Zhang Yimou’s Raise the Red Lantern (1991) in which Songlian, a young, university student, agrees to marry an older, wealthy businessman and become his fourth wife (read concubine). For as she says, “In the end, all women are concubines.”

When Alex begins seeing Henry, Michelle senses it immediately. She reads Alex the story of The Mother and the Moon in which the daughter moon keeps changing. Michelle insinuates that Alex has now become the daughter moon. Perceptive as ever, she accuses Alex of “fucking” Henry. Finally, she leaves a note on the mirror for Henry and departs. This is later contrasted with Alex’s departure in which her emotional distress motivates her to trash Henry’s entire apartment, an act motivated as much by helplessness as by anger.

The second half of the film provides a series of vignettes in which we observe Alex in Michelle’s place. In all ways, Alex proves inferior. Lacking Michelle’s experience, aplomb, and good nature, Alex can neither totally satisfy Henry nor act as a charming hostess at his business dinners. She becomes nagging and moody. At first seduced by Henry as a figure of wealth and power, increasingly Alex becomes emotionally as well as financially dependent on him, a far cry from the independent woman we met at the film’s outset. And her unrealistic expectations turn her into a desperate, self-loathing creature.

A further comment should be noted about the dinner scenes with Henry, his business associates and their female companions (both mistresses and high-paid prostitutes). Kwok has commented that this was in part the inspiration for the film. She became interested in the ways in which Hong Kong men of a certain class used women as commodities and as a means to display their wealth, much like older generations of Chinese men had several wives and many children for the same purpose. She also felt it was another reflection of the city’s sexual repression whereby men split women into the proverbial mother/wife dichotomy. As long as sex was considered dirty, then it was not surprising to find it relegated to activities outside marriage. Kwok was also struck by the fact that in Hong Kong, unlike the States, businessmen dinners with paid women were pretty much the norm.
Female relationships do not re-emerge again until film’s end. Once Michelle has forced Alex to come to her senses, she returns to Henry’s flat. She recalls the romantic days of their happiness, but this time in washed out colors. On the video there is a scene from *Midsummer’s Night’s Dream*, recalling the theme of Shakespeare’s play — “love is blind” and a mere illusion. This image blurs into the shots that opened the film, shots of the forest, water and nature, the female sphere.

However, the final ending of the film provides a shift in tone and offers us a self-reflexive, cheery musical number. The three female protagonists (Alex, Michelle and Henry’s wife), dressed in candy-colored outfits and wigs, sing and dance for our edification. The lyrics offer a soppy love song:

> If there wasn’t you  
> What would I do?  
> My heart is shattered; my mind is tattered  
> Since my insides are turned  
> I might as well die.

As an epilogue, these words sung by a female chorus ring hollow and convey a sense of parody for all those who would hold to such romantic sentiments. Read “against the grain,” we are offered a cautionary tale for women who might fall prey to “the big bad wolf.” In place of female competitiveness portrayed in so many Hollywood films or the plight of women in a film like *Raise the Red Lantern* in which the various wives compete for the favor of the mostly unseen master and end up crazy or dead, we are offered an alternative reality where women support one another in sisterhood.

**Visual Imagery and Symbolism**

Kwok’s *The Mistress* is suffused with imagery such as water, flowers, forest, and nature. Throughout Eastern and Western culture these images have stood for the feminine principle of birth, rebirth, the body, the spirit and nature, in opposition to the man-made world. In the film these images introduce the narrative and serve as the closure. They both represent the enunciation of Kwok, the director, and the fantasies of Alex, the protagonist. They serve as both a personal and a collective unconscious that speaks to the healthy relationship of women to their bodies and the rest of nature. They also speak to freedom.

These themes are set in opposition to the expression of power relationships in the film and the function of money as the measure of all things. Henry tells
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Figure 16.2 The glamor of a flat in the sky soon leads to the reality of loneliness, while visually, the glass barrier that separates female dependence from male power is symbolized by the Hong Kong skyline below. The Mistress. Dir. Crystal Kwok, 1999.

Alex early on that everything has a value. We learn the cost of clothing and designer brands and the expense of a flat in the sky. The film also demonstrates the ways in which human beings have a monetary value, especially women who sell themselves to men of power. We see money changing hands several times in the film as payment for sexual favors — between Henry and Michelle, between the fat man and the mahjong players, between Alex and Eric, and finally
between Alex and Henry. In all cases except the mahjong game, men pay and
women perform. Like many other feminist works, The Mistress deconstructs the
importance of money in male/female relationships.

One of the most memorable images in the film is when Alex and a male
friend are walking through the food market. First we see a fish that recalls the
fantasy of the men consuming sushi off the abdomen of a nude woman. Then
we see a bird in a cage, a fairly familiar image of entrapment. Finally as Alex
holds forth on “the double standard” and assures her friend she is only playing
a game with Henry, she has a momentary hallucination of a man carrying a pig
on his back morphing into a man carrying of nude woman on his back with her
buttocks waving in the air. Clearly the woman’s body is just “a piece of meat.”
And as Alex’s companion says, unlike women, men can separate their “head
from their heart. After all, their sex organs are on the outside.”

In addition to the nature images discussed above, The Mistress utilizes
a plethora of mirror and reflective surfaces. In Western art, mirrors have
functioned as ways to indicate female vanity and as a symbol for split
personalities or alter-egos. They also represent the truth hidden behind a false
façade. I think all aspects of the mirror imagery are at work in the film.

According to the art historian and cultural critic John Berger, “Men look
at women. Women watch themselves being looked at.” Both Michelle and
Alex are constantly checking themselves in mirrors. This is hardly an unusual
gesture. Both women are not only concerned with how they look, but especially
concerned about being attractive to Henry. It is telling that when Michelle
finally leaves Henry, she tapes her note of good-bye to the mirror and when Alex
finally leaves Henry, she smashes the mirror.

Mirrors also serve as the means by which Alex tries on new identities.
This occurs first in the dressing room as she and Michelle adorn sexy lingerie.
Later, she repeats this as she looks at herself in the mirror at home. She tries
on several outfits in front of a looking glass before she decides how to dress for
an evening out with Henry. At each instance, she recognizes that her clothing
signals who she is and how she wants to be perceived. But the mirror scenes
also chronicle her changing sense of identity, especially with regard to her
relationships with men.

Conclusion

I have indicated that Kwok’s work is part of a larger global trend arising in
differing cultures as women writers and visual artists begin to explore their own
sexuality and female desire, especially the darker side of these feelings.
The Mistress differs from the French works in significant ways as Kwok has opted to end her film on a familiar feminist note. Alex makes her mistake and learns from the sisterly support of Michelle that certain sexual liaisons are bound to produce unhappiness. The film ends on an upbeat note that reinforces sisterhood. Yet beneath these cheery scenes there still lurk darker aspects of sexual desire that await further exploration.