

Cities of fantasy: the construction of the desiring subject in urban China

By

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Diploma, Emily Carr College of Art and Design, 1985
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Supervisory Committee

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Abstract

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ABSTRACT

Raymond Williams argues that a community's cultural texts naturally draw upon its lived experience, and are thus a trustworthy expression of life within that community. This thesis explores the subject positions expressed in two contemporary texts—Wang Yuan's *Lipstick* (口红), and Ning Ying's *I Love Beijing* (夏日暖洋洋)—to understand how urban Chinese individuals experience and comprehend the transformations convulsing their cities. To facilitate this, my primary goal in this thesis is to build a theoretical framework that uses the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek to create the concept of the *fantasy construction of the desiring subject*. Using this concept, and drawing on two aspects of the cultural theories of Walter Benjamin—his heavily citational methodology and his theory of the *flâneur*—I examine the role of fantasy in the construction of contemporary urban Chinese individuals as desiring subjects.

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Introduction

The city is the realization of that ancient dream of humanity, the labyrinth.

—Walter Benjamin (*The Arcades Project* 429 [M6a, 4])

In the process of this transformation our most recent experiences were immediately becoming memories of the past. The city of Beijing, in which I had grown up, which was the homeland of my memories, was disappearing.... It seems as if we all have been abandoned by this city.

—Ning Ying (*A Dialog* n.p.)

...sometimes in order to understand something, you need to gain experience from elsewhere first.

—Wang Yuan (*How Translation Bridges Two Worlds* n.p.)

When reflecting on the widespread disruptions that have resulted from the ferocious pace of urbanization and redevelopment in contemporary China, many Beijing residents will ironically pronounce China as *Chai-na(r)* (拆那), suggesting that this is what, today, the country *should* be called. The literal translation is something close to “tear this down.” This feeling among China’s urban inhabitants that everything is being “torn down” is not surprising given that between 1983 and 2014, roughly 300 million Chinese have moved from the countryside to the cities. According to China’s own government, between 1990 and 2020, the percentage of the Chinese population

living in urban centers will more than double from 26% to 60%¹ (Tiezzi; Roberts). This represents one of the largest internal migrations in human history (Zhang 2012). To accommodate this unprecedented influx of urban dwellers, China's large cities have rapidly demolished older, less dense housing, replacing it with modern high-rise apartment buildings at a rate and scale unprecedented in human history. Speaking about Beijing in particular, filmmaker Ning Ying discusses the idea that the inhabitants of Beijing are experiencing an actual psychic trauma due to the speed at which their city is being reconfigured (torn down and rebuilt) around them. The memories of the city, she claims, are being erased before they can fully form. As a foreigner in China's Eastern megacities, I found myself spellbound by the surreal vistas of seemingly endless rows of construction cranes atop seemingly endless rows of apartment blocks: these views seemed, at times, almost beyond imagining. Put simply, if there is one central theme that underlies the contemporary Chinese urban experience in the Post-Mao era, it may well be the alienation resulting from what Ning Ying calls the "frantic erasure of collective memory" (Ning "Interview").

This rapid urbanization, along with the concomitant industrialization, continues to place incredible stress on the lives of China's urban residents, as rapidly shifting demands increasingly

¹ Accurate numbers for this massive migration are notoriously difficult, if not impossible, to determine. According to sources such as the World Bank, the number of migrant workers currently living in China's cities is between 270 - 300 million. (Tiezzi; Roberts). However, even relying on China's own statistics, the numbers fluctuate widely: For example, the Report on National Survey of Rural Migrant Workers 2011 (Zhang 2012) reports that as of 2011 there are an estimated 158 million migrants from China's rural areas living in the cities. However, China's own Xinhua news agency reports that between 1990 - 2020, China's urbanization rate will increase from 26% to 60%. This figure would suggest that closer to 300 million have currently migrated to urban centers. Further complicating this is that not all migration is from the rural areas to established cities such as Beijing; China continues to move rural villagers into newly constructed "instant" cities such as Ordos.

undermine the full range of traditional subjectivities. Given the dizzying rate of growth, along with the enormous change brought on by the globalization and “opening up” that has marked the past 35 years in China, it is not surprising that for many urban Chinese their own cities have become almost unrecognizable. Further, the myriad changes are not limited to the physical: Rapid change in economic, social, political and cultural expectations continue to subject contemporary urban Chinese life to enormous stress, and, crucially, has placed Chinese urban identity into great flux: What does it mean, in the 21st Century, to inhabit one of China’s great megacities?

My core motivation for undertaking this thesis is to better understand how urban Chinese life feels to those who live it: How do the individuals experiencing the unprecedented transformations convulsing the contemporary Chinese city make sense of their urban world? What subject positions—roles, behaviors, sets of expectations, and ethical positions—do they inhabit, and where do they find these subject positions in a cultural landscape undergoing such radical change? The attendant challenge to understanding the subjectivities of contemporary urban China is to identify how best someone from one culture can access the lived experience of another culture. More specifically, how can I, as someone born in Canada of European descent, access the contemporary culture of Beijing? My particular solution to this puzzle is rooted in Raymond Williams’ conception of a culture’s “*structure of feeling*”, especially as it is accessed through the use of cultural texts produced within a culture’s borderlands (48). I will take up a full explication of these themes later in this introduction. Before doing that, however, I want to outline the main goal of my work: The purpose of this thesis is to construct a theoretical framework, and an attendant methodology, with which to explore and analyze the structure of

feeling (including crucial subject positions) found within cultural texts produced by inhabitants of the cultural borderlands of contemporary Beijing. In other words, I will construct a set of tools and a methodology which ultimately can be used to productively examine cultural texts produced by those who inhabit the in-between—*not-quite* inside, *not-quite* outside—cultural spaces that exist at the fringes of the contemporary Chinese capital. These borderland texts afford an excellent opportunity to access the structure of feeling of a contemporary Chinese city. In order to focus on developing my theoretical tools and methodology, I will examine just two cultural texts: Wang Yuan’s 2011 short story *Lipstick* (口红), and Ning Ying’s 2000 film *I Love Beijing* (夏日暖洋洋). I will use these as case studies to demonstrate the effectiveness of the theoretical framework and methodology produced. Given the scale of this work, I will not undertake a systematic exploration of the full range of such cultural texts in this thesis: Such work will have to wait for a future endeavor.

Foundations: *Beijing’s Structure of Feeling & the Borderland Author*

As noted above, in this introduction I will establish a foundation on which to build a navigable pathway that might assist an outsider to cross into and move within (to experience, in however flawed a manner) another culture. A culture, however, is never easily accessible to those not born into and living within it. As Raymond Williams notes, “We can learn a great deal of the life of other places...but certain elements...will always be irrecoverable” (47). One of the fundamental problems of trying to access another culture is that, as Williams astutely observes, “We learn each element as a *precipitate*, but in the living experience of the time every element was in *solution*, an inseparable part of a complex whole” (emphasis mine) (47). The abstraction inherent

in our necessarily piecemeal encounter with the elements of another culture make it almost impossible to fully grasp the “sense of the ways in which the particular activities combine...into a way of thinking and living” (Williams 47). For Williams, this abstraction frustrates our attempts to access its lived experience.

Williams does, however, allow for the possibility of something more: as noted earlier, what he terms a culture’s structure of feeling. Deeply rooted in lived experiences of a place and time, a structure of feeling is not something possessed by individuals, but exists across and belongs to an entire community. No individual can possess it because the whole community depends on it for its identity. Likewise, a community’s structure of feeling cannot be taught, nor intentionally passed-down from generation to generation. As Williams notes, each “new generation will have its own structure of feeling, which will not appear to have come ‘from’ anywhere” (49). And yet, while each new generation responds organically to “the unique world it is inheriting”, Williams is clear that each generation’s response contains “many continuities” and reproduces “many aspects of the organization” which it inherits. In other words, for Williams, each generation constructs its own unique structure of feeling by reproducing, reconfiguring and reorganizing aspects of the very culture it inherits. In the end, though, each new generation “responds in its own ways to the unique world it is inheriting... feeling its whole life in certain ways differently, and shaping its creative response into a new structure of feeling” (49). Another important aspect of Williams’ concept is the belief that members of a community are, in large part, unaware of their own culture’s structure of feeling. Though deeply immersed in, and in fact defined by it, we are like fish in a tank, oblivious to the water we swim within. Crucially, a culture’s structure of feeling is key to its communication *within* its own community, and as such,

is key to its identity, and the subject identities that every culture generates for its members. Put simply, the structure of feeling of a given community is not found in the patterns or characteristics of its society, but rather, is found in the way in which the community expresses itself *to* itself. Williams explicates this aspect of a culture's structure of feeling by suggesting that "we are usually most aware of this when we notice the contrasts between generations, who never talk quite 'the same language', or when we read an account of our lives by someone from outside the community" (48). A community's structure of feeling is best understood as the subtle traces created by the uniqueness of communication acts within that community: They are noticed most, perhaps, when they are *misspoken*.

Following on Williams' claim that we are most aware of our own structure of feeling, "when we read an account of our lives by someone from outside the community", I believe that we can best become aware of another culture's structure of feeling by accessing the cultural texts produced within the liminal boundaries of that culture, what Gloria Anzaldúa refers to as *la frontera*—the *borderland*.² These borderlands and their inhabitants exist in myriad forms across the contemporary Chinese urban landscape: the migrant, the expatriate, or even the

² Anzaldúa's *Borderlands/La Frontera* presents a brilliant account of her identity as what she terms a "new mestiza". Anzaldúa writes about her experiences as a Chicano living on the borderlands between Texas and Mexico, while claiming for herself and her community an identity—Chicano—that is neither Anglo, nor Mexican, nor Latino. Her text contains great insights into the liminal state that such individuals occupy and should be of interest to anyone studying cross-cultural experience in any context, especially the intra and multi-cultural contexts coexistent within increasingly globalized and diffuse national identities. This text represents one of the most successful examples of someone reflecting on and capturing the liminal nature of a unique culture under constant threat of erasure (despite supposedly harmonious coexistence) from more dominant cultures surrounding it. As such, I would argue that this work resonates strongly with the many cultural contexts competing for space within official Chinese cultural hegemony.

geographically stable inhabitants overwhelmed by waves of change. Existing in-between multiple communities, they have become *not-quite* insiders, and *not-quite* outsiders—what Anzaldúa, referring to her own Chicana identity, calls the *new mestiza*. Such authors (for example, Wang and Ning) live within a patchwork structure of feeling constituted by a psychological, political and cultural state of detachment that bears a resemblance to Walter Benjamin's *flâneur*—a subject I'll return to in the second chapter of this thesis.

It may seem surprising, however, to argue that the best way to perceive a given structure of feeling might be to look to the representations made about that community by someone who exists within, but who is *not quite a member of* that community. Yet it is precisely this liminal state *at once both inside and outside* that makes these authors such adept witnesses. Their alienation can be seen as a type of contrast dye, subtly staining the surface of the cultural lived experience, exposing its topology to the keen observer. In such a context one can simultaneously observe, to borrow from Williams, both the precipitate *and* the solution. This is the seminal contradiction at the heart of the expatriate: The more our fluency in our native structure of feeling dissipates, the greater our ability to see it clearly.

Wang Yuan and Ning Ying: *Inhabiting Beijing's Borderlands*

As noted above, in this thesis I will examine two twenty-first century cultural texts set in Beijing: The first, Wang Yuan's 2011 short story *Lipstick*, is centered around the lives of three contemporary Beijing residents and their interactions over the course of an evening. The second, Ning Ying's 2000 film *I Love Beijing*, focuses on the life of a Beijing taxi driver as he navigates a Beijing that is rapidly changing around him. Both of these cultural texts explore the lives of ordinary Beijingers and the challenges they face in coming to terms with a radically altered

twenty-first century China, including the mostly-invisible process of subject identity formation. Both Wang Yuan and Ning Ying occupy positions within the cultural borderlands of Beijing—both have spent significant portions of their lives in foreign countries, living as expatriate Beijingers. Perhaps more importantly, by virtue of their professional and creative choices, each has placed herself at vantage points on the periphery of common Beijing life, points from which they have keenly observed Beijing’s rapid descent into the chaos of 21st century global capitalism. They both, however, locate their cultural texts clearly within the daily lives of their native city’s common people: Wang’s collection of short stories, titled *Beijing Women* (北京人³), and Ying’s seminal film trilogy, generally referred to as her Beijing trilogy⁴, both focus on the lives of those struggling to make sense of the changes that dominate contemporary Beijing. Each represents an excellent example of a cultural text whose observations of their respective structure of feeling is sharpened by their author’s existence in a culturally liminal state: Anzaldúa’s *la frontera*—the borderland.

According to her biography, Wang Yuan was born and raised in Beijing and graduated from the Department of Chinese Language and Literature, Peking University, in 1988. She has published four novels, one collection of short stories (which includes *Lipstick*), and one prose collection (Wang, *Telling Different Stories* n.p.). She first left Beijing in 1983 when she moved to the island of Hainan off the south coast of China. Returning to Beijing the next year, she spent periods of the next thirteen years living in the US and New Zealand, until in 2007 she

³ Interestingly, the Mandarin title is more accurately translated as “Beijing People”. The translator of the text added the gender modification to the title.

⁴ *For Fun* (找乐) (1993), *On the Beat* (民警故事) (1995), and *I Love Beijing* (夏日暖洋洋) (2000).

immigrated to Canada (Wang, “Re: Biography”). In her speech titled “How Translation Bridges Two Worlds”, Wang takes up the theme of needing to leave a place to truly understand it: Citing V. S. Naipaul’s Nobel lecture titled “Two Worlds”, she notes that Naipaul needed to leave his home and travel somewhere else to pursue his goal of understanding his identity. Clearly, for Wang, there is a clarity that comes from being outside one’s native culture and place: This experience of “elsewhere” allows for a deeper understanding of “home” (Wang, *How Translation Bridges* n.p.). Wang’s short story *Lipstick* was written before she had acquired, in her own words, “a sort of ‘expatriate’ status” (Wang, “Re: Biography” n.p.). At the time of its writing, however, she had done two things that clearly placed her on the borderlands of Beijing life: First, she graduated from Peking University and joined “the first group of Chinese ‘white collar professionals’ working at the glamorous China World Trade Center” (Kong ix). As Wang herself notes, “I acquired my perspective from my experience working [in] the first group of “white-collar” [workers]. . . . I think it often generate[d] difficulty and ambiguity” (“Re: Biography” n.p.). Second, she spent a year outside Beijing living in the culturally and physically distant island province of Hainan. The borderlands, then, are accessible by more than one route: While distance can certainly shift one out of the mainstream of one’s native culture, pursuing certain personal or professional choices can also remove one to the borderlands. Even the pace with which a culture undergoes rapid change can be sufficient to imbue inhabitants with a profound sense of alienation. What is crucial in considering Wang’s work, I believe, is that she approaches Beijing from a position that is at once both *not-quite* inside and *not-quite* outside.

Also born and raised in Beijing, Ning Ying was a member of the first class after the Cultural Revolution to reenter the Beijing Film Academy in 1978. Later she earned a national

scholarship to study editing and directing at the Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia in Rome.⁵ She returned to Beijing to work as assistant director on Bernardo Bertolucci's 1987 film *The Last Emperor*. Since then she has gone on to direct a number of films based in China, including, most famously, her so-called Beijing trilogy (Ning "bio-filmography" n.p.). Ning has written and spoken directly about the alienation she feels, both as someone who left Beijing, as well as someone whom the city itself seems to have left behind: As she poignantly remarks in the quote that opens this introduction, "It seems as if we all have been abandoned by the city" (Ning "A Dialog" n.p.). Clearly, for Ning, Beijing has become something unfamiliar, and yet is still a place with which she feels a strong resonance. Much of her work has focused specifically on this feeling of familiarity/estrangement which demarcates the psychic world of the borderland inhabitant, "I had to start looking for the unfamiliar, alternative sensations of this city... a way of expressing the feeling of unfamiliarity that this city has generated in me" (Ning "A Dialog" n.p.).

Both Wang Yuan and Ning Ying inhabit the psychological borderlands of Beijing's cultural landscape. Each can be seen as inhabiting spaces separated from mainstream Beijing life both by their time spent away, and by their experience of disconnection produced by the rapid pace of change in contemporary Beijing, as well as their own choices to pursue forms of expression that naturally tend to set the creator up as being an outside observer of their own culture. As Ning notes, "The transformation of the city's appearance, the administrative reforms, the rapid economic development, produced undeniably deep changes in people's psychology" (Ning "A Dialog" n.p.). Yet for each of them Beijing represents an important place within which to locate their cultural texts—texts which serve here as exemplars of borderland

⁵ The Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia is essentially Italy's national film school.

texts through which readers can more readily access the structure of feeling of contemporary Beijing.

Lacan, Žižek and Benjamin: *Subject Positions & The Usefulness of Theory*

As noted above, my core motivation in undertaking this scholarly project is to better understand how contemporary urban Chinese life feels to those who live it. My first challenge in that goal is to establish how best someone from a vastly different culture can access the lived experience of the various cultures and communities of contemporary Beijing. To do this I will use cultural texts produced from within the liminal borderlands of Beijing's culture precisely because I believe such "borderland" texts can make visible the culture's subtle contours. Put simply, these texts will aid me in accessing what Raymond Williams conceives of as a culture's structure of feeling. In the conceptual configuration I will use in this thesis, Williams' structure of feeling can be seen as inexorably intertwined with that culture's subject positions.⁶ A culture's structure of feeling can, in an important sense, be understood as the lived experience of individuals enacting the subject positions created by that culture. Conversely, we can view the various subject positions we occupy as the tangible manifestations of our living within our culture's structure of feeling. In other words, we instantiate our culture's structure of feeling by inhabiting its subject positions.

The concept of subject positions (or identities) is itself hugely complex, and exploring the various forms and implications of these social roles has occupied a good deal of theorizing in the

⁶ I will also use the terms subject position, subjectivities and subject identities interchangeably in this text. I use these terms to denote a constellation of concepts that can be difficult to succinctly define. Perhaps the best general definition is to say that these terms can be seen as contextual refinements on the broad category of identity.

past 150 years.⁷ Subject positions can be seen as psychological, social, behavioral and even economic descriptions that, in various configurations, can afford, suggest or even force individuals of a given culture to inhabit culturally determined roles. These can include strongly coded subject positions such as woman, man, mother, father, child; but also less defined, more fluid roles such as jock, stoner, millennial, drama queen, nerd; and even negative roles such as redneck, slut, loser, or bully. Subject identities, as I use them in this text, are fluid, overlapping and often non-exclusive: Many people, for example, experience the dichotomy of being simultaneously a parent and a child. Likewise, many people can, with careful self-reflection, become aware of the shifting nature of what they previously assumed were fixed roles such as man or woman.

For my purposes, it is crucial to note that, when performing these subject identities, individuals transmit their culture's structure of feeling to one another. Williams' observation that a structure of feeling "doesn't appear to come 'from' anywhere" implies that this transmission happens primarily at a subconscious level: I strongly agree with this implication. The cultural DNA that makes up our culture's subjectivities is contained in the mostly hidden codices that are passed through the myriad clues and signals sent across the various forms of our culture's

⁷ It would be challenging here to attempt to list even the major theorists in the area of identity and subject position. Indeed, it is difficult even enumerating the various terminologies: individual, self, selfhood, identity, subject, ideological subject, subject position, subjectivity, etc. Disciplines as widespread as sociology, gender studies, philosophy and cultural studies have produced important theorists in this area. In this thesis, however, I lean most heavily on the term subject position, which is most commonly associated with Lacan, and, borrowing from Lacan, Althusser.

communications, both mass and interpersonal.⁸ In other words, the mechanism for the subconscious communication of our structure of feeling is simply our living enactment of the various subjectivities we occupy in our daily lives, along with the cultural milieu we enact them within. And, as previously discussed, the cultural texts authored from within a culture's borderlands (in this thesis the work of Wang and Ning) offer especially useful renditions of the lived experience of its structure of feeling.

But what is it about these particular fictions, and cultural texts in general, that facilitates reading the lived experience of a given culture's structure of feeling? To answer this question it is crucial to keep in mind that, for Williams, a community's structure of feeling is not "possessed" by any one individual, but rather, is held collectively by the community: "I think it is a very deep and very wide possession, in all actual communities, precisely because it is on it that communications depends" (48). Further, this structure of feeling is not "possessed in the same way by the many individuals in the community" (Williams 48). In other words, no two persons share the exact same image of their community's structure of feeling, and no particular person's version represents *the* definitive version. Each person experiences their community's structure of feeling, and its parallel subjectivities, in subtle and unique ways, and yet communication within that community depends on the ultimately *shared* nature of its structure of feeling. With this in mind, we can better appreciate Williams' perspective when he claims, "that the arts of a period,

⁸ In a Marxist context, subject positions make a structure of feeling tangible in the sense that they reify lived experience into formations that can be externally accessed—formations that can be seen in cultural (Fromm) or economic (Althusser) patterns. In this context, we might consider a culture's subjectivities as the end products of the commodification of a culture's lived experiences. In this way subject positions become formations allowing a culture's lived experience to enter into systemic flows of exchange and use value.

taking these to include characteristic approaches and tones in argument, are of major importance. For here, if anywhere, this characteristic is likely to be expressed; often not consciously, but by the fact that here...the actual living sense, the deep community that makes the communication possible, is naturally drawn upon” (48). In other words, for Williams, a community’s cultural texts naturally draw upon that community’s lived experience. In this way the cultural texts of a community, including its fictions, become a trustworthy expression of what it is like to live within a community’s structure of feeling, and its attendant subjectivities—what it is like to be alive in that culture. In the words of Jeroen de Kloet and Lena Sheen, “The experience of a city is intimately intertwined with existing and newly emerging imaginations of the city” (12). Put simply, our lived experience of our culture is deeply shaped by how we imagine the experiences of our culture, and crucially, these imagined experiences—our cultural texts—are deeply shaped by our lived experiences.

Thus, it is precisely within the *shared* cultural texts and their *widely understood* expressions of the lived experiences of a community’s people that we encounter some of the richest and most reliable renditions of that community’s structure of feeling. Therefore, a close examination of the cultural texts I have chosen affords me an excellent opportunity to read Beijing’s structure of feeling and the lived experience of its people.

Having established this foundation, I will turn now to the main work of this thesis: the development of a theoretical framework and an attendant methodology with which to explore and analyze the cultural texts produced by the inhabitants of the cultural borderlands of contemporary Beijing, and, through this analysis, to better understand the structure of feeling, especially the crucial subject positions, found therein. Before beginning that task I want to

provide a brief outline of my framework and methodology, and, importantly, provide a context for their use.

Within this thesis, my goal in constructing a body of theory—my theoretical framework—is *not* to suggest, nor engage with, a historical cartography of a supposed evolutionary progression of critical/textual theory, but rather, to demonstrate that what should underpin the strategic application of theoretical frameworks to the task of reading cultural texts is a clear foregrounding of the *usefulness* of any given theory. In other words, I believe that when we engage with cultural theory, it is *culture*, not theory, that should remain our primary concern. Having said this, I equally believe that cultural theorists should be willing to embrace any and all theoretical configurations—be they new or old, complex or simple, popular or out of favor—in order to better investigate the various aspects of a given culture. To do otherwise is to do something other than cultural analysis. And so, to be clear, my purpose is to explicate and demonstrate the usefulness of various interconnected theoretical vantage points, along with their underlying theoretical antecedents, in order to construct a framework that offers a uniquely productive mechanism for the analysis of my chosen cultural texts—those generated in the borderlands of contemporary urban China.

In brief, the theoretical framework I will construct combines specific elements from the psychoanalytic work of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek, along with several key cultural theories formulated by Walter Benjamin. Building on Lacan and Žižek, I will identify and focus on several interrelated themes that culminate in what I call the *fantasy construction of the desiring subject*. I will use this conceptual configuration to examine the crucial role that fantasy plays in the construction of contemporary urban Chinese individuals as *desiring subjects*. This notion of

the desiring subject is essential to the lived experience of contemporary Beijing's structure of feeling. I will draw on Benjamin's cultural theories specifically as they relate to his conceptions of history and the *flâneur*. I will also draw directly on Benjamin's theoretical methodology to engage in a method of analysis deeply connected to his views on cultural history and the role of quotation and citation in cultural theorizing.

It is crucial to understand how important the inclusion of *both* theory and praxis is to my work in this thesis. On the surface, what this means is that my project is split between the development of a theoretical framework combined with a demonstration of its usefulness through a more explicative methodology (Chapters One and Three), and a demonstration of that framework's usefulness through a more experimental (poetic) methodology rooted in Benjamin's own method of cultural analysis (Chapter Two). At a deeper level, however, it reflects my strongly held belief, as noted above, that for the cultural theorist, the measure of any theoretical framework must always be its usefulness. Further, as cultural theorists, we must always keep our focus on finding better ways to access the cultures we seek to examine, precisely in order to achieve better conceptual representations of the lived cultures we study. Finally, it is important to note that it is not simply the content of the theories I engage with: At times it is the *form* of the argument that is more meaningful to me than the content itself. At other times, it is even the poetics and language of the theory that most profoundly influence me, as will be evident in my second chapter. In order to clarify the structure of my thesis, I will now outline my three chapters.

Chapter One

In chapter one I have two broad goals: First, I want to establish the psychoanalytic foundation of the theoretical framework I will use in my analysis of contemporary Chinese cultural texts, and second, I want to demonstrate my explicative analytic method by applying this framework to a textual analysis of the subjectivities generated within Wang Yuan's short story *Lipstick*, paying particular attention to how these operate within a psychoanalytic context. Set in contemporary Beijing, Wang's story follows the lives of three typical Beijingers over the course of one night. For each of the three characters, Beijing's (and China's) rapidly changing economic and social structures place expectations on them which they struggle to meet. We can see each of them looking outward to make sense of their role in the urban society in which they live, while simultaneously trying to come to terms with the internal demands of rapidly evolving social, cultural and ethical assumptions.

Key to my construction of the theoretical framework I use in this chapter are the theories of Slavoj Žižek, and his re-configuration of Jacques Lacan's concepts of fantasy, desire and the subject into what I will refer to as the *fantasy construction of the desiring subject*.⁹ To generate this framework I will use a selection of theoretical approaches beginning with Freud, moving to Lacan (especially in the context of his work as a foundation upon which Žižek builds) and concluding with Žižek's fantasy construction of the desiring subject. Using this theoretical structure, we can begin to understand the fundamental role played by the combination of fantasy and popular culture in the process of subject constitution. Following Žižek's theoretical pattern, I

⁹ My configuration of this term is influenced by John Storey's framing of Žižek's "fantasy construction of reality" (Storey 110).

treat the subject positions produced in Wang Yuan's text as key pathways into a conceptualization which accounts for both fantasy and desire as crucial operations for the contemporary Chinese urban subject.

Equally important to the theoretical framework is the working methodology I will establish and use in this chapter and again in the third chapter, particularly how it relates to the relationship between theory and praxis. I will *weave together* seemingly disparate elements of scholarly writing: explication of theory; textual analysis; and a large volume of quotation. My goal with this specific working method is to allow for the greatest degree of contingency in my invocation and application of theory: As much as possible, I want to work against the reification found in much theoretical practice, and in so doing, encourage the reader to make multivariate readings of my text. Put simply, I want to allow primary texts to shape my reading of theory as much as I allow theory to shape my reading of primary texts. My goal is to put cultural investigation at the center of my work, regardless of where that leads me in terms of theoretical configurations and working methodologies. My inspiration for the methodology is Walter Benjamin, whose role in this thesis I will now address.

Chapter Two

In the second chapter my focus shifts to the theoretical terrain of Walter Benjamin's work, especially his conceptions of history, and his use of the *flâneur*. Benjamin is an iconoclastic thinker, and during his too-short life he produced works on a wide range of topics. In this chapter I will employ Benjamin via two distinct pathways: The first will consider two of his best known

texts—*On the Concept of History*¹⁰ and *The Arcades Project*—in order to incorporate his theoretical/philosophical perspective into the theoretical framework I established in the first chapter. In the second pathway, I will engage with Benjamin’s working *methodology*, making use of what I term his *poetics of method*, to push my own methodology further into an engagement with citation, quotation and the poetics of method itself. To elaborate, my goal in this chapter is to engage with Benjamin’s text—along with the two cultural texts identified—by using a Benjaminian methodology. One of the most striking aspects of Benjamin’s method is his extensive use of quotation and citation. In other words, the Benjaminian concepts in this chapter have an important role to play in two contexts: they both provide additional theoretical elements (with which I will extend my theoretical framework), and, pivotally, they inform my technique in using this enlarged framework to explore new terrain.

Following the design logic of Edward R. Tufte¹¹, especially his notion that making the complex accessible requires not simplification, but greater attention to structure and design, I will use a more intentionally designed structure in this chapter. Organized into three “folios”, this chapter will, broadly speaking, construct a conversation between the Benjaminian concepts outlined above, the theoretical concepts from chapter one, and the cultural texts used in this

¹⁰ In this text I make use of two different translations of this essay by Benjamin. Under the title “On the Concept of History” it appears in SW 4: 389-400; under the title “Theses on the Philosophy of History” in *Illuminations* 253-264.

¹¹ Tufte famously argues, counterintuitively, that in order to create greater clarity in the visual design of information graphics, the designer needs to include *more* detail, not less. By adding detail, Tufte argues, the designer provides more context which Tufte believes is essential to providing greater clarity. The trick, then, when designing complex information fields, is not to sacrifice the *density of information*, but rather, to thoughtfully arrange the information so as to allow for both greater density and greater readability. For more information see Tufte’s *Envisioning Information*.

thesis—Wang’s *Lipstick* and Ning’s *I Love Beijing*. These folios will make extensive use of what I refer to as Benjamin’s *poetics of method*. This way of working is deeply infused with what Arendt calls his “poetic thinking” and, crucially, with a type of intellectual *flânerie* which demands of the reader a willingness to let connections appear *as they will*. The poetic nature of these folios, in other words, will be less formally structured and contain less explication.

Allowing Benjamin’s poetics of method to influence my process, these folios will rely on, and delve deeply into, the notions of citation, quotation, documentation (the past) and memory (the present).

Focusing on Benjamin’s *On the Concept of History* and *The Arcades Project*, the folios will explore three related themes: In the first, I will follow Benjamin’s “attempt to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were” (Benjamin qtd. in Arendt 11). I will use this method to investigate both Ning’s use of the small, seemingly insignificant detail in her filmic imaging of the past, and Wang’s use of a bitter nostalgia in her development of Xiao Jianguo, the cab driver in *Lipstick*. I will consider these works from the perspective of a *poetics of method*: How do we conceive of a *process* with which to comprehend the phenomenon of the past? In other words, how do we *go about* making sense of the past? By what process or filmic technique does Ning make sense of the past in her film *I Love Beijing*? Underlying these questions is the understanding that any meaningful engagement with our present demands that we make use of some process of accounting for the past.

Benjamin, for example, prioritizes the accumulation of small details—primarily in the form of

quotations¹²—to slowly build a collection of indexical artifacts. Jordi Llovet notes that the Arcades Project “is a work founded on many details and individual aspects, which philosophers have always regarded as anecdotal and insignificant elements, as irrelevancies” (206). What limited commentary Benjamin provides is primarily citational or quotational in nature: As much as possible, small details are given sufficient space to interact both with one another, and with more overtly intentional elements included by the author. As Eiland and McLaughlin remark in their *Translators’ Forward* to the English language version of *The Arcades Project*, “Citation and commentary might then be perceived as intersecting at a thousand different angles, setting up vibrations across the epochs of recent history” (xi). In this way, Benjamin sought to let the past *speak for itself*, and allow the past culture, as much as possible, to generate its own structure of feeling. Further, as per Benjamin and Lacan, any such process begins within and can go no further than the boundaries of language. Thus, the crucial element of any such method can be considered a *poetics of method*.

The second folio will also explore Benjamin’s conception of the *flâneur*, especially as it is found in his *Arcades Project*. I want to use this as a contrast dye with which to “stain” the surface of Ning and Wang’s narratives. I’m not suggesting that the notion of the *flâneur* is directly transferable onto their works as an interpretive template (e.g. such and such a character is a perfect example of the *flâneur*). Rather, I’m interested in examining how Benjamin uses the notion of the *flâneur*, and the concomitant behavior of *flânerie*, to represent the past using artifacts that could not make sense of the past until they were re-activated *in the time he was*

¹² Here the term *quotation* should be read to include both textual and non-textual artifacts such as images and photos.

writing in. Put another way, I intend to apply Lacan's notion of *après-coup*, as outlined in the first chapter, to suggest that Benjamin's conception of the *flâneur* could not have carried the insight that it does into the nineteenth century until its contemporary usage. Like Lacan's *après-coup* symptom, the crucial tense is the future-perfect: the notion of the *flâneur* will have become significant in a Benjaminian context only after it was activated during Benjamin's life. In other words, it is the *flâneur* that possesses the capacity to access the structure of feeling of nineteenth century Paris. Of course, as Benjamin tells us, each moment of the past has a unique set of artifacts necessary to tell its story. And, crucially, each collection of artifacts is never fully revealed until the present (though, as Williams would remind us, the documentary record of the past is always selective). Equally interesting is the notion that the *flâneur*, like Wang and Ning, occupies a borderland position in relation to his¹³ culture's lived experience: Like the expatriate, the *flâneur* is *in*, but not quite *of*, the culture he moves endlessly through. Following this logic, I believe that there is a version of the *flâneur*, and of *flânerie*, that has become resonant with post-Mao China only in the present period, and that can be found, like Wang and Ning, in the borderlands of Beijing.

In the final folio I will conjoin Benjamin's philosophy of history (especially his conceptions of how we come to terms with the past) with Lacan and Žižek to construct a localized framework for exploring the meaning of Ning's *I Love Beijing* as a type of historical record, or, perhaps more accurately, a type of filmic memory. Integral to this exploration will be the question of *why* we remember—what is the value of looking backwards—in the context of

¹³ I am aware of the issues related to the use of assumedly male pronouns; however, in the case of the *flâneur*, as has been noted by Latham, the *flâneur* has assumed a male identity.

the desiring subject. Invoking both the concept of *après-coup*, along with the role of fantasy in subject formation, I want to explore how the characters present in Ning's film embrace, deny, and *live through* their own pasts.

Chapter Three

In the third chapter I will return to a more explicative analytic method to focus on further strengthening my theoretical framework. While this chapter is a return to my original approach to defining a theoretical framework for textual analysis (as in chapter one), it also embodies the changes wrought by my work in the Folios. If we think of the introduction of Benjamin's conceptions of history, his poetics of method, and the *flâneur* as extending my original framework's grounding in psychoanalysis, then I want to conceive of this chapter's theoretical conceptions—motion and scale—as being more of an inlay, adding richness to *existing* surfaces and structures of theory, more than establishing new theoretical terrain.

The cultural text I will examine in this chapter is Ning Ying's 2000 film *I Love Beijing*. This film—the third in Ning Ying's Beijing trilogy—focuses on Desi, a Beijing cab driver whom we see divorcing his wife at the film's beginning, and who spends the remainder of the film driving a seemingly endless series of routes within Beijing's ever-expanding traffic grid, transporting passengers who manifest a wide array of responses to the city around them. As we trace Desi's myriad paths we begin to see the accumulated impact of the almost unimaginable scale of Beijing's motion on its inhabitants as they move within and between its countless venues. Like the driver in Wang Yuan's *Lipstick*, Desi is not the silent cabbie so often seen in the background of our cultural narratives. Though he is at times shown silently observing his clients—indeed, his character is defined as much by what he doesn't say as what he does—Desi clearly

views himself as an active subject in their adventures within the city. In the end, his cab proves to be only a limited barrier as it propels him into the city-in-motion that is at the heart of how we understand the contemporary metropolis. Focusing on the personalities, artifacts and situations Desi encounters, my analysis of the film overlays motion (and scale) onto the themes previously described in order that we may better grasp that which, according to Arendt, “profoundly fascinated Benjamin from the beginning”: namely, the “paradox [of] the wonder of appearance” (12). Motion is also at the heart of Benjamin’s *flâneur*: Like the shark, this obsessive collector must keep moving or risk conceptual annihilation. Motion, then, is at the heart of this chapter’s approach to textual analysis.

Motion, a complex subject both physically and, more importantly, conceptually, is intertwined with its concomitant element, scale: As the scale of Beijing expands, motion becomes more urgent, more necessary. In an important sense, it is scale that underpins motion as an element in any city; however, given Beijing’s breathtaking physical scale, motion within it takes on an almost transcendent quality. For Beijingers, navigating the city is perhaps the biggest single element of their lives. As mentioned previously, it is my intention to use these concepts not so much to *extend* my theoretical armature as to *inlay* these concepts onto the previously exposed surfaces. To accomplish this, I will examine scale and motion in two ways: First, I will consider how they directly impact the city and its inhabitants. Second, I will explore how they connect to the theoretical concepts introduced in both the first chapter—fantasy, desire and the subject—and in the Folios—the past, the *flâneur*, and a *poetics of method*. As stated previously, my goal throughout is to allow the themes raised to complicate my framework, thus making it more “messy” but at the same time more useful in generating a textual analysis.

Chapter 1: Lipstick, Lacan & the Fantasy Construction of the Desiring Subject

Subjectivity, in Lacanian theory, is not given, but acquired, and is sustained thereafter only with a degree of difficulty. Lacan's account of the subject as constructed in language confirms the decentering of consciousness so that it can no longer be seen as the origin of meaning, knowledge and action. —Catherine Belsey (*Critical Practice* 56)

Although the truth about desire is present to some degree in all speech, speech can never articulate the whole truth about desire; whenever speech attempts to articulate desire, there is always a leftover, a surplus, which exceeds speech.

—Dylan Evans (36)

Through fantasy, we learn how to desire.

—Slavoj Žižek (*Looking Awry* 6)

Introduction

In the first chapter I have two broad goals: First, I want to establish the psychoanalytic foundation of the theoretical framework I will use throughout this thesis in my analysis of contemporary Chinese cultural texts. Second, I want to analyze the subjectivities generated within Wang Yuan's short story *Lipstick*, paying particular attention to how these operate within a psychoanalytic context. My analysis of Wang's text will use the more explicative of the two analytic methodologies I will employ in this thesis, which I will use primarily in my first and third chapters. The theoretical framework I will establish in this chapter is based primarily on the theories of Jacques Lacan and Slavoj Žižek. In particular, I will focus on Žižek's reconfiguration

of Lacan's notions relating to fantasy, desire and the subject. Ultimately, I will shape my use of Žižek's theory around what I call *the fantasy construction of the desiring subject*. As I will show, this theory offers productive perspectives for the textual analysis I will undertake. To generate this framework I will use a selection of theoretical approaches beginning with Freud, moving to Lacan (especially in the context of his work as a foundation upon which Žižek builds) and concluding, ultimately, with Žižek's fantasy construction of the desiring subject. Catherine Belsey's perspectives on Lacan and Žižek's usefulness in literary analysis also contributes to my thinking in this chapter.

Using this conceptual framework, we can identify a useful method for understanding the fundamental role played by the combination of fantasy and popular culture in the process of how the individual constitutes themselves as a subject. Following Žižek's approach, I use the subject positions produced in Wang's text as a means to build an understanding which accounts for both fantasy and desire as crucial subject formation operations for the individual in contemporary China.

As previously mentioned, my chosen text for this chapter is Wang Yuan's 2011 short story, *Lipstick*. Set in contemporary Beijing, this story follows the lives of three typical Beijingers over the course of one night and into the next morning. Each of the three characters deals with their own personal versions of the pressures they face adapting to the swiftly evolving economic, cultural, and social structures emerging from a rapidly expanding capital city. They each focus outward—as they try to make sense of the shifting world around them—and inward—as they try to come to terms with their own unique internalizations of the expectations placed on them by their urban environment. In short, they each struggle with identity.

I have organized this chapter's structure around the theoretical framework I intend to construct. Beginning with Freud's radical decentering of the Cartesian subject, I will track the subject backwards to Descartes, and consider the implications of the famous Cartesian split between the mind and body. Next, I will trace elements crucial to the developing conceptions of the subject in the twentieth century via Lacan's re-reading of Freudian psychoanalysis through the semiotics of Saussure. This section will focus on Lacan's notions of the Symbolic and the Real, along with his configurations of desire, fantasy and the subject. Finally, I will introduce Slavoj Žižek's re-configuration of Lacan. In particular, I will focus on Žižek's ideas relating to the role of fantasy as the screen or staging area for desire, and the concomitant subjectification of the individual.

Turning to the practical application of my framework, I have chosen to weave passages of textual analysis throughout the chapter. I've done this, rather than turning to textual analysis only after completing the explication of my theoretical framework, because I want to allow for the greatest degree of contingency in my invocation of theory: As much as possible, I want to work against the frequent reification found in much theoretical practice, and in so doing, encourage the reader to make multivariate readings of my text. As noted in my introduction, I believe that we must allow primary texts to shape our reading of theory as much as we allow theory to shape our reading of primary texts.

1. Lipstick, Freud and the Decentered Subject

Immediately the manager's expression changed, "Look, it's raining. Maybe that will bring down the temperature." Xiao Jianguo knew he was wasting his time sitting there glaring at his boss,

who obviously wanted to leave for the night. So he reluctantly stood up and headed out. His boss accompanied him to the door, patting him on the shoulder, saying, "You know, Xiao, if it's too hot in the daytime you can always do the night shift. It's cooler at night." Xiao Jianguo said nothing, but just as he got to the door, his boss suddenly added: "AC's not so great anyway. Did you hear about that driver last week? He was waiting for someone at the airport and left his air conditioner on all night. After a while he fell asleep and suffocated in his car" (Wang, *Lipstick* 2).

~ Our Subject's Radical Cartography ~

My goal in the theory sections of my thesis is *not* to investigate how we arrived at our current state of affairs, vis-a-vis the subject, through the generation of a grand narrative (as if such a project could withstand the withering irony of our current era), but rather, to lay the necessary foundation for a framework that is more intellectual cartography than historical chronicle. In other words, I envision something that is more a collection of individual cultural moments and/or locations when and/or where differences came to signify, rather than a singular narrative which casts these elements as points along a great arc of inevitability, or coordinates on an artificially coherent cultural map. Like many of the unanticipated outcomes of the past century and a half of vigorous, chaotic theorizing, this approach to developing my theoretical framework, and the resultant framework itself, may appear at times more patchwork than unified fabric. To the degree that the post-Enlightenment theoretical landscape is more rocky than smooth, this can't be helped. The logical place to begin, I believe, is with Freud.

Prior to Freud, the Cartesian notion of the conscious mind as guarantor of a supremely unique individual self, the cornerstone of Enlightenment concepts such as personality, identity

and liberalism itself, had existed virtually unchallenged in Western thought for two and a half centuries. As Catherine Belsey explains, however, “Freud, in challenging the Cartesian basis of liberal humanism, the concept of personality determined by conscious subjectivity, the transcendent mind of the unique individual, challenges the ideology of liberal humanism itself” (131). Chief among Freud’s impacts, then, are the changes within the core ideological field of liberal humanism instigated by his theories. And yet, as Belsey goes on to explain, Freud’s work might best be seen as a *necessary*, but *not necessarily sufficient* cause for the most profound changes unleashed on the ideological underpinning of the liberal humanist subject: “Freud decentered the individual and Marx decentered history, [but] it was finally Saussure’s decentering of language which made possible so much of the subsequent work” of twentieth century theorists (136). In others words, if we want to fully understand the radical impacts that psychoanalysis has on the transcendental subject, we need to see it as but one (albeit crucial) element of the psychoanalytic/political/semiotic matrix within which these changes developed.

~ *Lipstick* ~

As foreshadowed in its opening pages, by the end of Wang Yuan’s story *Lipstick*, the unhappy cab driver Xiao Jianguo, one of the story’s three main protagonists, has suffocated in his taxi cab in the parking lot of the Capital Guesthouse, with the formerly broken air conditioning, ironically, once again running. And yet, in many ways this story, which takes place from one afternoon to early the next morning, ultimately focuses more on the lives of the two young women who share Xiao’s cab in the ride that anchors the first half of the narrative: Shen Ruolang, the buttoned-down night manager of the guest services department at the hotel; and Chen Xiaohong, a struggling singer desperate for any opportunity to advance her singing career

who hopes to do just that by meeting Mr. Deng, a famous Hong Kong music producer, at the Capital Guesthouse. The ride, from downtown Beijing to the hotel on one of the hottest days in Beijing's sweltering summer, features building animosity between the young singer Chen Xiaohong and the driver Xiao Jianguo and climaxes when Xiao swerves the cab just as Chen applies her lipstick, causing her to smear red lipstick all over her face, creating "a red curly Central Asian-style mustache" (Wang, *Lipstick* 16). Infuriated by this, Chen runs from the cab without paying her half of the fare.

The second half of the story takes place at the guesthouse and follows the three characters over the course of their evening. Xiao angrily spends his night focusing on confronting and, hopefully, humiliating Chen Xiaohong, who he is now convinced is a prostitute who has come to the guesthouse to meet a client. Meanwhile, Shen Ruolang, the other woman in the cab, efficiently dispatching her duties as night manager of the Guest Services Department, overcomes her panic at forgetting her musician-brother's demo CD in the cab when Xiao Jianguo comes into the hotel to search for Chen Xiaohong and she is able to safely retrieve the disc. As dawn approaches, Xiao Jianguo gives up his search for Chen Xiaohong and retreats to his cab to sleep. After spending the night ambivalently helping the hotel's Chief of Security who is trying to track down Chen, Shen Ruolang takes a break to walk in the cool dawn air, only to discover Xiao dead in his cab in the parking lot, his face "purply blue" from suffocation (Wang, *Lipstick* 47).

Meanwhile, for Chen Xiaohong, the evening is spent in a futile, karaoke-singing attempt to impress Deng, who is in reality more interested in sleeping with her than listening to her. Forced to make a choice about just how badly she wants success, Chen has an epiphany about her life and her future: "...what Chen Xiaohong now had finally understood was that all along,

behind her search for success, she was really searching for love. And with this realization came a renewed sense of self-respect” (Wang, *Lipstick* 37). Bolstered by her realization, Chen spends the night in the hotel workers dormitory talking with the old friend who had arranged her meeting with Deng. Shen, meanwhile, has recovered from the shock of seeing Xiao dead, and has completed her mission of passing on her brother’s demo CD to a breakfasting Deng.

The climactic scene takes place as Shen, her evening shift finished, boards the hotel’s morning shuttle to downtown Beijing only to run face to face into Chen Xiaohong, who, tired from her sleepless night, is applying her makeup “a bit thicker than usual” (Wang, *Lipstick* 48). Shocked by seeing Shen—who now realizes that the aspiring singer has indeed spent the night at the hotel—and worried about the conclusions the night manager would draw from this, Chen Xiaohong’s hands begin to shake and she again paints “a lipstick mustache above her mouth” (Wang, *Lipstick* 48). The resulting obtrusive smear of red lipstick visually confirms Shen’s dislike for Chen Xiaohong, and even her professional outlook is not enough to overcome the disgust she feels towards the aspiring singer: “Having satisfactorily ‘labeled’ Chen Xiaohong in this way, she then gave her a contemptuous look. And having done that, she felt much more contented” (Wang, *Lipstick* 49). Chen Xiaohong, however, knows nothing of Xiao Jianguo’s death, and assumes that Shen’s contempt stems solely from her belief that Chen is a prostitute. Of course, as the narrator points out, “if truth be told, Chen Xiaohong had almost proved her right” (Wang, *Lipstick* 49). As the bus makes its way back to the centre of Beijing, the author describes Chen Xiaohong’s state of mind as “sad, but also proud” (Wang, *Lipstick* 50). As the story ends, we are told that these emotions, “inexorably overflowed into tears running down her face” (Wang, *Lipstick* 50).

2. Descartes' Dissected Subject

Shen Ruolang had developed a method for evaluating people, which she called 'labeling.' She was convinced she could judge people's status and position based upon the subtle features of their outward appearance. Labeling was an abstract concept that included peoples' clothing, make-up, accents, and so on. No single factor was decisive, but the most important component was outward appearance, otherwise how could it be called a 'label'? ...These days everyone preferred to focus on efficiency, not just Shen Ruolang herself but the guests too. And because guests generally found that those in Shen Ruolang's position tended to use labeling methods to evaluate others, they would make a special effort to attach obvious labels to themselves, and both sides would work together to make the labeling method more and more effective (Wang, Lipstick 8).

~ Cogito Ergo Sum ~

As noted, Freud's model of the psyche complicates the transcendent, unified Cartesian subject in several foundational ways: First, he instigates a process of questioning that leads to the weakening and eventual splitting of the unified mind into two distinct, irreconcilable hemispheres: the conscious and the unconscious. Second, he initiates the breakdown of the important separation between the thinking Cartesian mind and its unreliable organic body. Taken together, these reconfigurations undercut foundational aspects of the Enlightenment subject and doom the liberal humanist individual. Put simply, Freud splits Descartes' unified mind, and unifies Descartes' split person.

Descartes, in his search for first principles of knowledge, famously declared that while his body was untrustworthy, his mind was indeed the true source of all knowledge. His famous

cogito ergo sum (I think, therefore I am) is but the shorthand marker for a fully developed theory of knowledge that accorded absolute privilege to the transcendent, unified, thinking mind.

According to Descartes, our bodies and their organic sensations cannot be trusted against deceit.

For Descartes, however, our mind, in its pure and transcendental state, remains untouched by physical weakness and therefore becomes the essential foundation upon which all rational knowledge systems must be constructed. To elaborate, the one thing we can truly be certain about is that we exist precisely *because* we think. The organic body and its untrustworthy perceptions, however, cannot be separated from uncertainty and potential delusion.

The transcendent, independent subject and the so-called Cartesian split between mind and body are essential to the development of the Enlightenment Project. Without these two interlocking aspects of the Cartesian subject, liberal humanism as we know it would not be possible. Only if we can imagine an autonomous individual can we assign to it such grand entitlements as “inalienable rights.” Further, while it is true that the reexamination of the autonomous individual was begun by Freud over a hundred years ago, it is also true that the ideologies founded on this artifact remain, even today, as widely entrenched common-sense truths. As Margaret Thatcher famously noted (laying down an ideological mantra for neoliberalism that is still celebrated today) “there is no such thing as society. There are individual men and women, and there are families” (Thatcher). That even today such sentiments appear so straightforwardly common sense to so many people is a sure sign of the ideological nature of their existence. As Belsey contends, “Within bourgeois ideology it appears ‘obvious’ that people are autonomous individuals, possessed of a subjectivity that is the source of their beliefs and actions. That people are unique, distinguishable, irreplaceable entities is ‘the elementary

ideological effect” (*Critical Perspectives* 54). Over one hundred years of critical analysis have yet to substantially dislodge the heroic superman at the heart of free-market capitalism.

~ *Shen Ruolang & Free-Market Science* ~

For Shen Ruolang the independent agency of the transcendent human subject is never examined beyond its surface individuality. For her, the independent Enlightenment subject is a necessary reality at the heart of her understanding of neoliberal global capitalism and its holy grail of efficiency: “...she had to meet so many people every day. If she stopped to make a rigorous analysis of each one before deciding how to deal with them, it would seriously lower her efficiency level” (Wang, *Lipstick* 8). If there is a threat to the transcendent enlightenment individual in Shen Ruolang’s assembly line approach to human interaction, it is not, ironically, that they might be reimagined as a complex, messy collection of shifting drives and desires, or subject identities, but rather, that their individuality will, eventually, be reduced to nothing more than a ‘label’. Stripped of any uniqueness, her subjects fit neatly into a few obvious and efficient categories. Here then, we have the potential for identity as a mere two dimensional covering applied to the empty organic human body cum commodity. And though there is a hint of an almost Althusserian configuration of the subject at work here, in the end it is something fundamentally less than the complexity that is interpellation: “because guests generally found that those in Shen Ruolang’s position tended to use labeling methods to evaluate others, they would make a special effort to attach obvious labels to themselves, and both sides would work together to make the labeling method more and more effective” (Wang, *Lipstick* 9). One gets no sense of a complex ideological mechanism operating on the individuals as they enthusiastically “attach obvious labels to themselves”. Rather, we sense the pragmatic imperatives of the so-

called efficiency expert. Here, then, the individual chooses their ‘label’ precisely for its ability to hasten efficiency (and the more manifest and one-dimensional their subjectivity, the better).

Finally, while Descartes creates his thinking subject, his *cogito*, specifically to establish a solid foundation for the epistemological project that underpins the scientific revolution and the enlightenment project itself, Shen Ruolang’s motivation, like so much of our contemporary world, is the obverse: “Shen Ruolang probably wouldn’t have considered her method totally scientific, but in the hotel business science wasn’t required” (Wang, *Lipstick* 8). Here her character perfectly captures the sentiment inherent in the view of science that has emerged from the crucible of free-market capitalism: the pursuit of knowledge and truth conflated into the pursuit of efficiency, control and money.

3. Freud & the Unconscious

...It wasn't just about the money. If she had been a robber or a thug and had refused to pay....That would have been an obvious case of evil versus good, black versus white. If his whiteness could not defeat that kind of blackness, what could he say? But Chen Xiaohong wasn't like that, she was a person like him, yet she still wanted to cheat him. It wasn't really that she was a single individual who wanted to cheat him, it was more like she represented a kind of force against him. In other words, viewed as an individual, she may have had a few black spots on her character, but overall she was still more or less white. Yet when you linked her together with everyone else, they formed this immense gray force arrayed against him. And who were all these other people? His boss? The Security Chief? That woman walking behind him? In some ways they were part of it, but in some ways not—Xiao Jinguo couldn't put his finger on it. He just felt

that he was stuck in a gray world, a world that one couldn't describe clearly but which went to enormous lengths to make life difficult for him. Xiao Jianguo did his best to fight back against that world, but right now he couldn't even work out where he should land his blows (Wang, Lipstick 32).

~ *Après-Coup and Freud's Messy Psyche* ~

Fundamental to Freud's model of the psyche is the division between the *conscious* and *unconscious* aspects of our minds. Freud argues that in order to enter into civilization, each individual must suppress their instinctual (animal) drives—drives he associates initially with sex, and later, also with death—in a process he calls sublimation. In his final model of the psyche, Freud identifies the *id*, entirely located within the unconscious, as the location into which these instinctual drives are sublimated. According to Freud, the *id* “is the dark, inaccessible part of our personality...a chaos, a cauldron full of seething excitations....[It has] only a striving to bring about the satisfaction of the instinctual needs subject to the observance of the pleasure principle” (Freud 106). In other words, at the same time that Freud has clearly separated the unconscious and conscious aspects of our minds, he has brought the very animal nature of our organic bodies—our instinctual drives—directly into our minds. With this act he has severed the clean separation between our rational mind and our animal physicality so famously articulated by Descartes in his *cogito ergo sum*. As Alexandre Leupin notes, “the *cogito* presupposes a transparency of the subject of enunciation (a clear subject without an unconscious), an inconceivable notion after Freud's discovery” (2). Likewise, Freud's theory directly casts doubt on our subjective autonomy and unique individuality: If a substantial aspect of our psyche and its function is defined and controlled by shared, base animal instincts, then we cannot claim to be

fundamentally unique individuals with autonomous minds. Descartes' elegant, rationally-clockwork mind is replaced by Freud's fractured, messy psyche—a mind constantly in conflict with its own animal drives. It is precisely in this way that Belsey conceives of Freud having “decentered the individual” (*Critical Practice* 136). It is now our wild animal drives and state of constant conflict that is at the center of our psychic life, not our own, supposedly unique identity. Further, our own self-propelled autonomy—the Enlightenment individual's celebrated liberty to make themselves as they will—becomes little more than an optimistic fiction in a psychic world ruled by Freud's animal drives.

The irony of Freud's reliance on Descartes' *Discourse on Method* (the Descartes of algebra and geometry) to irrevocably undermine the Cartesian subject (the Descartes of the *cogito*) appears to us today as just another example of the inherent instability of our contemporary postmodern experience¹⁴. The truly radical nature of Freud's theories, especially his theory of the unconscious, have only become fully realizable to us in the one-hundred plus years since he first published them. The logic of this “paradoxical formula, whereby progress is secured by looking back,” is not only essential to our encounter with Freud, it is, Kay tells us, “central to psychoanalytic thinking” (18). Even more intriguingly, in a radical doubling of meaning, it is Freud's theories themselves that explain to us how, precisely because of their traumatic nature, they will only become fully available to us as *having been* traumatic through this process of looking back—what Lacan calls *après-coup*.¹⁵ In other words, Freud's theory of

¹⁴ For a complete explication of this theme see Leupin 2.

¹⁵ *Après-coup* is the French translation of the German *Nachträglichkeit*, which Freud used to refer to this phenomenon which, according to Evans, the Standard Edition [of the *Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*] translates as “deferred action” (207).

the unconscious comes with its own instruction manual; it's just that we can't fully apprehend those instructions until the neurosis caused by reading (and re-reading) those instructions has fully manifested itself.

Trauma, in its myriad forms, is the essence of *après-coup*: “[A] childhood experience *will* reveal itself *to have been* traumatic if it is reactivated as such—for example, in a neurotic symptom—by some subsequent turn of events” (Kay 159). Like the symptom that reactivates a long-past trauma, it is only in our contemporary, postmodern neurosis that we fully understand our encounter with Freud *to have been* traumatic. Lacan's re-reading of Freud, then, is arguably *the* exemplar of Freud's own notion of *Nachträglichkeit*.¹⁶

It is crucial to understand that, for Lacan, the psycho-sexual developmental stages of the child, which underpin Freud's work, should not be taken literally as past events. Lacan doesn't accept Freud's conception of the child's developmental stages (e.g. the oral stage) as chronologically real; rather, Lacan views these stages as ageless configurations projected retroactively by the adult subject onto their past. From Lacan's perspective, the psychoanalytic stages of a child's development are abstract ideas that are activated by analysis and projected by an adult subject onto their own past: “It is by starting with the experience of the adult that we must grapple, retrospectively, *nachträglich*, with the supposedly original experiences” (Lacan *The Seminar Book 1* 217).

Après-coup, then, can be seen as the process by which the lived experience of the past one-hundred plus years of our grappling with Freud's radical notions is overlaid with those very same radical notions, essential now for making sense of the trauma the past one-hundred plus

¹⁶ “deferred action” (Evans 207).

years of our past lived experience *will have* become. In other words, it is only now, in an increasingly post-Freudian world, that we are able to project our present symptoms back onto our radically traumatic encounters with Freud. And, like the stages of Freud's developing child, we must not mistakenly try to see the stages of our own past one-hundred plus years of engagement with Freud in the actual past: These stages are more timeless configurations we project onto our own past to try and make retroactive sense of it.

~ *Xiao Jianguo's Gray Consciousness* ~

For Xiao Jianguo the contemporary world is out of focus. When he looks at Chen Xiaohong he sees someone not all that different than himself; "a person" who "viewed as an individual...may have had a few black spots on her character, but overall...was still more or less white" (Wang, *Lipstick* 32). When he is able to see her as an individual, Chen Xiaohong is, for Xiao Jianguo, a regular person who, while not pure white, is "still more or less white" (Wang, *Lipstick* 32). Yet, like an individual pixel on a screen, when seen at greater distance, her identity bleeds into everyone else, their individual cartographies of white and black merging into an "immense gray force arrayed against him" (Wang, *Lipstick* 32). What are we to make of Xiao's inability to stay focused at the level of the individual and the dread he feels as he looks out and sees an ocean of grayness standing against him? One straightforward answer might be that we can see in Xiao's angst a type of paranoia: Clearly, there is something—perhaps even an entire world—out there and against him. Yet I find this explanation unconvincing on its own: It seems that confusion and uncertainty are components of Xiao Jianguo's psyche at least as important as his fear, or his feeling that he needs to fight back.

A more satisfactory analysis might include several perspectives. First, Xiao Jianguo can be seen as experiencing a crisis of faith in the validity of the Cartesian subject. As Lacan notes, “the philosophical *cogito* is at the centre of the mirage that renders modern man so sure of being himself even in his uncertainties about himself” (*Écrits* 165). In this interpretation, Xiao experiences the disorientation of no longer being able to grasp onto the mirage of Descartes’ liberal human subject. Put simply, the people around him no longer signify as individual subjects: “It wasn’t really that she was a single individual ... it was more like she represented a kind of force against him. ... when you linked her together with everyone else, they formed this immense gray force arrayed against him” (Wang, *Lipstick* 32). From a second perspective, Xiao can be seen as running up against the limits of the Symbolic order: language. Key to this view is the narrator’s description of how Xiao struggled to put his ideas into language: “He just felt that he was stuck in a gray world, a world that one couldn’t describe clearly but which went to enormous lengths to make life difficult for him” (Wang, *Lipstick* 32). It’s not that the world has no affect on him; rather, he simply has no means of describing it. Even more intriguing is the description of Xiao’s desire to be able to see the world through a binary lens: “That would have been an obvious case of evil versus good, black versus white. If his whiteness could not defeat that kind of blackness, what could he say?” (Wang, *Lipstick* 32). Unfortunately, as noted, Xiao is stuck in “a grey world.” It’s clear in this description that Xiao longs for the clearly delineated choice: the binary of language. In the end he is no longer able to focus on the individual binary—evil/good, black/white, subject/object—and his focus slips outward, onto the mass of linked subjects that become one, eventually, with the Lacanian Real of the world itself. The resulting disorientation and trauma strips him not only of the certainty of Cartesian subjectivity, but also of

the Symbolic itself. Viewed this way, Xiao Jianguo's experience can be seen as inevitably pointing us towards a re-reading of Freud's traumatic theory that is vital to our contemporary engagement with him: Lacan.

4. Lacan's Symbolic Subject

Chen Xiaohong scrambled to put on her clothes and rushed out to the hotel entrance.... as she sat in the bus waiting for it to leave, she began putting on her makeup and thinking about what she would do today...her face was looking a bit rough, so she spread the makeup on a bit thicker than usual. She was just getting out her lipstick to complete the final stages of the process when Shen Ruolang got onto the bus.

Shen Ruolang's appearance gave Chen Xiaohong a huge start, and her heart began to beat faster. After all, Shen Ruolang was a witness who could testify that she had spent the night at the hotel, and even though she had done nothing wrong....seeing Shen Ruolang's expression, Chen Xiaohong felt embarrassed and guilty. Her agitation made her hands unsteady, and once again she inadvertently painted a lipstick mustache above her mouth.

This time, applied to her over-powdered face, the mustache seemed all the more obtrusive. Finally, Shen Ruolang understood that she really did dislike this girl, and despite the fact that she still placed her in the category of "guest," it didn't help her overcome her disgust this time. Lipstick, if applied to the lips, might easily be seen as emphasizing their natural color. But once it has left the region of the mouth, one can no longer escape its stark redness....

Having satisfactorily 'labeled' Chen Xiaohong in this way, she then gave her a contemptuous look. And having done that, she felt much more contented (Wang, Lipstick 48).

~ *The Real, The Symbolic & The Imaginary* ~

As described above, Lacan's re-reading of Freud is, arguably, *the* exemplar of Freud's own notion of “deferred action” which, in essence, refers to the manner in which “in the psyche, present events affect past events *a posteriori*” (Evans 207). Crucial to both Freud and Lacan's configuration of this concept is the notion that the past event is not simply remembered; rather, it is reconfigured by present experience.

Lacan's radical reconfiguration of Freud through the theories of Saussure's semiotics—language, or culture—is arguably the most important development in the one-hundred plus years of the psychoanalytic tradition, particularly for any attempt at theorizing the subject. For Lacan, the subject is not a natural entity, nor a vessel of *a priori* knowledge, nor the original source of meaning and action: The subject is something constituted through language itself. As Belsey notes in this chapter's opening quotation; subjectivity, for Lacan, is something the subject is not freely given, but rather, something the subject must acquire and work diligently to maintain. Further, she notes that the Lacanian subject, constructed as it is in language (the Symbolic), represents a “*decentering* of consciousness so that it can no longer be seen as the origin of meaning, knowledge and action” (*Critical Practice* 56). Here, then, we can see that in Lacan's *après-coup* reading, Freud's full potential impact on the Cartesian tradition is felt: The transcendent conscious subject is no longer the origin of meaning and knowledge, nor the source of a person's agency; rather, it is only in the acquisition of subjectivity, precisely through the acquisition of language itself—what Lacan identifies as the entry into the Symbolic—that the subject can begin to speak and enunciate itself into existence. The subject, then, is merely a product of our entry into the Symbolic. “It is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the

exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is no other testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself thus gives about himself” (Benveniste qtd. in Belsey *Critical Practice* 55).

In an important sense the Symbolic can be seen as the middle of the three orders¹⁷ within Lacan’s organization of the psyche: Outside, surrounding the Symbolic, is the Real; inside, within the Symbolic, is the Imaginary. In the Lacanian configuration the infant begins life outside the Symbolic, in the pre-language state of the Real. Before its passage from the Real into the Symbolic there is no separation between the infant and the world around them. Without the binary distinctions at the heart of language’s capacity to signify (he/she, I/you, male/female) the infant is not capable of seeing itself as separate from, or other to, anything—it simply *is*. In other words, without language—without *signifiers*, the infant lacks the capacity to divide the Real into separate *things*: Indeed, the inability of the Real to be divided into separate objects—its existence *outside of* language and signification—is its key defining feature. Within the Real, then, since the infant cannot recognize itself as a separate entity, it follows that it is connected to everything¹⁸. In its pre-language state within the Real, therefore, the child has no sense of identity or self—no subjectivity. It is only with its entry into the Symbolic order—the key point in Lacanian development—that the infant can enter into the process of subject formation.

¹⁷ Lacan uses both the terms ‘order’ and ‘register’ to refer to the three structures within his model of the psyche (cf Evans). In this paper I will exclusively refer to them as orders. The three orders are: the Real, the Symbolic and the Imaginary (cf Evans, Kay or Lacan). Note: In this essay I am following Žižek’s convention of capitalizing Lacan’s orders to reduce confusion with the more standard meaning of the words.

¹⁸ In one of the most endearing formulations of Lacan’s theories relating to the infant and the Real, Belsey quotes Coward and Ellis: “The infant is initially an ‘hommelette’ — ‘a little man and also like a broken egg spreading without hindrance in all directions’ (Qtd. in Belsey *Critical Practice* 56).

According to Lacan, the crucial process in the child's entry into the Symbolic order—and its concomitant subject formation—takes place in the mirror stage¹⁹. It is in the mirror stage that the child first 'recognizes' itself in a mirror as a unified entity. Here, for the first time, the child becomes capable of seeing itself as a distinct object, something separate from the world around itself. And the development of subjectivity is initiated precisely at this moment. Crucially for Lacan, however, the child's recognition of itself as a unique entity is, in reality, a false identification: It is in fact an identification with an 'Imaginary' self that only *appears* to it as naturally unified and independent. As Belsey explains, "The self is imaginary because imaged, and also because it is visible as a unit only in the mirror world, over *there*. The recognition is also a misrecognition" (*Critical Practices* 56). Put differently, in the reflected falseness of the Imaginary order, the subject believes that the binaries at the heart of the Symbolic can be pulled apart and occupied separately. Mistakenly, I believe I can exist as subject—'I'—without necessarily also being an object—'you'—to another. Rather than seeing the world as symbolically organized into both presence and absence—the signifier as 'absence made presence'—in the Imaginary order the individual mistakenly takes the Symbolic divisions introduced by the binary of language and treats them as if they are in the Real. So, in the

¹⁹ In his early work, Lacan saw the mirror stage as occurring between 6 - 18 months of age (Lacan *Écrits* 1). In his later work, however, the mirror stage becomes "a permanent structure of subjectivity, the paradigm of the Imaginary order" (Evans 115). In other words, Lacan comes to believe that the mirror stage, like other stages such as the oral, anal, or Oedipal, are not descriptions of literal past events, but rather are forms of psychic structure which are projected by the adult onto their own past. While there certainly is a stage where a child can recognize their own image in a mirror—indeed, they will become fascinated by it—for the mature Lacan, emphasis is clearly on the structural value of the stages.

Imaginary order, the person believes there can be presence *without* absence; pleasure *without* pain; fact *without* fiction; life *without* death.

Crucially, according to Lacan, the child encounters both the Symbolic and the Imaginary orders in the mirror stage. The Symbolic order—and its exemplary mode, language—affords the child a role as fully speaking subject, but in doing so requires that the child submit to the binary distinctions required by language, the most fundamental of these being ‘I/you’. As Belsey explains “In order to speak, the child is compelled to differentiate; to speak of itself, it has to distinguish ‘I’ from ‘you’. In order to define what it wants, the child learns to identify with the first person singular pronoun, and this identification constitutes the basis of subjectivity. Subsequently, the child learns to recognize itself in a series of subject-positions (‘he’ or ‘she’, ‘boy’ or ‘girl’, and so on)” (*Critical Practice* 57). Lacan argues that if the child is to participate fully in the society in which it lives, it must enter the Symbolic order, submitting to “the discipline of the signifying systems of culture, among which the supreme example is language” (Belsey, *Critical Practice* 56). This connection of the emergence of the subject to the person’s entry into the Symbolic order also, and at the same time, marks a profound limit on the very nature of that subjectivity. “The subject speaks, but only in so far as language permits the production of meaning, including meaning of the subject’s own identity” (Belsey, *Critical Practice* 131). In other words, language gives us our subjectivity, but at the same time, limits what we are capable of thinking and expressing as subjects. It is language, then, that both gives the subject voice, and at the same time, places limits on the constitution of that voice. Our subjectivities can never speak to our relationship to the Real from which we came, and to which we will return at death.

Understanding Lacan's formulation of the Real, and its relationship to the Symbolic subject, is of crucial importance for an understanding of the Lacanian subject. Having said that, it is important to recognize that the Real is one of the most difficult Lacanian concepts. It is possible, however, within the confines of an essay of this length, to gain a reasonable understanding of the Real as long as one acknowledges its limitations²⁰. First, the Real is not, in any fashion whatsoever, to be confused with what we refer to in language as "reality." In fact, our Symbolic signification of "reality" is the opposite of the Real precisely because the Real is, for Lacan, what cannot be put into language—what cannot enter the Symbolic order: the Real is "everything we lose by becoming speaking beings" (Kay 4). It is also important to understand that the Real is not simply outside or exterior to us. The Real *is* outside of us in the way in which it suggests everything that is beyond our language: "The real is the disgusting, hidden underside of reality which we cannot fail but to step on, however much we imagine that our minds are set on higher things²¹" (Kay 4). At the same time, however, the Real is *also* inside of us, for Lacan, because in conjunction with language—the Symbolic order—it determines the very nature of the subject's unconscious. For, at the moment of the subject's entry into the Symbolic, those elements within the Real that cannot enter into the Symbolic order—the drives which cannot be articulated in language—enters into the unconscious. It is from within the Real that the child emerges to enter into the Symbolic, and it is from this surplus beyond the Symbolic—the Real—that the unconscious is constructed. In other words, if the self, and its consciousness, are constructed by entry into language, it follows that this consciousness can only contain what

²⁰ To fully understand the magnitude of the challenge, consider that, in essence, almost all of Žižek's texts and almost all of Lacan's later texts focus on the concept of the Real (Kay 3).

²¹ Kay notes Lacan's joke that the Real "dogs our every step—as though stuck to the sole of our shoe" (4).

language itself contains. Inversely, if those elements within the person that cannot exist in the Symbolic order—cannot be spoken in language—cannot become part of that person’s conscious thought, those elements must reside within the unconscious. As Belsey explains:

Constructed of elements whose entry into the Symbolic order is barred, the unconscious is structured like a language. Its ‘speech’, metaphoric and metonymic, appears in dreams, in jokes and slips of the tongue, threatening the apparent autonomy of the ego and undermining the seeming fixity of the subject-positions available in the Symbolic order....Unfixed, unsatisfied, the human being is not a unity, not autonomous, but a process, perpetually in construction, perpetually contradictory, perpetually open to change. (*Critical Practice* 132)

This quote makes clear just how far we have travelled from the stable, autonomous, unified, transcendent Cartesian subject. For Lacan and Freud, the discovery of the unconscious has completely upended the apple cart: disrupting the liberal humanist subject’s stability, unity, individuality, and most importantly, transcendence. Thus, Freud’s psyche, split between the conscious and the unconscious, and subsequently reconfigured *après-coup* by Lacan’s recasting of it into the Symbolic, Imaginary and Real orders²², irreparably disrupts the autonomous individual at the heart of liberal humanism. As Belsey notes, the human being becomes “a process.” In this way, our understanding of how people constitute themselves as individual subject is forever ruptured by the line between the conscious and the unconscious. And it is precisely at this point of splitting within the subject that the element of desire enters.

~ *Chen Xiaohong and Traces of the Real* ~

²² See note 17.

For Chen Xiaohong, making herself up is an important act of self constitution—a self-reinforcing ritual: In the application of perfume, powder and lipstick she constructs a self within which she can survive in the Symbolic order: “The more she was in the presence of people who looked down on her, the more she would make herself up to look dazzling. This was one of her tried and tested formulas. . . . She leaned back in her seat, and giving a wicked smile, fished out her makeup kit” (Wang, *Lipstick* 14). For this young Beijing woman, then, the physical act of “making herself up to look dazzling” is an important Symbolic maneuver that allows her to articulate her value as a subject. She draws crucial strength as she engages the Symbolic world by “putting on her face.” When this mechanism fails her, however, as it does twice during the narrative, her sense of self is threatened and deformed by the pressure the Real suddenly exerts onto the Symbolic order. In the first instance, the eruption of the Real occurs at the climax of the taxi ride:

Chen Xiaohong then fished out her lipstick and . . . began working on the final stages of her facial transformation. . . . Just as she began applying the lipstick, the taxi suddenly darted forward. . . it also made a sharp turn to the right and then to the left, followed by a sudden brake to a halt. . . . Collecting herself, she looked back in the mirror and was incensed by what she saw. . . . she had inadvertently painted a thick smear of lipstick across her cheek, forming the right half of a red curly Central Asian-style moustache (Wang, *Lipstick* 15).

Looking in the mirror (what could be seen as a key reenactment of the mirror stage and her original entry into the Symbolic order) Chen Xiaohong is confronted with the “thick smear of lipstick across her face”—a striking Symbolic vestige of the Real in the the potentially fatal

violence of motion itself: “Chen Xiaohong was flung from side to side by the car’s abrupt motions, but fortunately...[she] was not injured” (Wang, *Lipstick* 15). Like the trace of the ink-needle on a seismic graph during an earthquake, Chen Xiaohong is confronted with the shocking red trace of the lipstick’s record of the absent Real in the Symbolic order in which she lives her subjective life. The lipstick, then, is the absence (of the Real of the violence of physical motion) made present (by the Symbolic inscription of the lipstick on her face). And it is in this way that we can see the lipstick as the example, precisely, of the inevitable failure of any substitute for the Real in the Symbolic. No signification in the Symbolic order can ever adequately demarcate the Real—there is always an unavoidable surplus of meaning. And it is this surplus—this meaning trapped within the Real that is forever unable to enter the Symbolic order—which, at this moment in the narrative, Chen Xiaohong has so violently smeared across her face. Like the arm of the seismic graph, her arm and hand record the Real of the brutal truth at the heart of motion and its coiled power—waiting, always ready to commit unspeakable violence against the organic bodies we inhabit.

At the story’s climax, Chen Xiaohong once again faces the traumatic entry of the Real into the Symbolic order of her life. In this case, however, it is not the violent Real of physical motion that imposes its trace onto her face. This time it is the Real of her own physical clumsiness that inserts itself into her Symbolic order. The shock of seeing Shen Ruolang causes Chen Xiaohong’s hand to shake and in a spasm of mis-coordination—a striking re-enactment of the physical ineptitude present at the infant’s first encounter with the mirror—the Real once again erupts into the Symbolic through a smear of lipstick across her face. This time it is not the inevitable violence lurking behind the laws of physics that disrupts Chen Xiaohong’s Symbolic

world, but rather, it is the obverse: The disgusting smear of red lipstick across her face foreshadows the Real of her own eventual physical decline and the countless spasms that await us all as our bodies slowly lose their battles against momentum and inertia. The absent Real insinuates its anticipation of the subject's own inevitable absence: In doing so, the Real reinscribes subjectivity's finite reality.

5. Lacanian Desire

After graduating high school, Chen Xiaohong began singing in Karaoke halls and lounges on the provincial performing circuit, but no matter whether she was singing at a Beijing venue or on some hastily constructed stage out in the sticks, she was never able to find the stage she had seen in her vision, or feel the way her imagination told her she should feel. It seemed she would never have the opportunity to perform on a big-time show-business stage. Getting that opportunity became a kind of obsession, and for a while she completely forgot about her search for love. The entertainment world is based on fame and profit, and if despite your struggle you can't become famous, you have no value at all. And when you yourself have no value, your feelings have even less value. (Wang, Lipstick 37)

~ The Real, Lack & Desire ~

As mentioned above, the Real is precisely that which cannot be signified in—or, is surplus to—the Symbolic order: When the infant enters into the Symbolic, they by necessity leave the order of the Real. According to Lacan, the shock of this separation leads directly to the creation within the subject of the unconscious drives. The drives, then, are the echoes of this traumatic split. And it is precisely these traumatic echoes—utterly resistant to the language systems of the Symbolic

order, that take the place, for Lacan, of what Freud referred to as the instinctual drives—the *id*. Further, the splitting of the subject's psyche into conscious (Symbolic) and unconscious (traces of the subject's traumatic exit from the Real) can be seen as mirroring the binary splitting that occurs within Symbolic signification (I/you us/them male/female). Thus, when we attempt to signify the Real—which can be usefully defined as precisely that which cannot enter language—within the Symbolic order there is always a surplus of meaning which the signifier, trapped within the Symbolic order, cannot convey. Put simply, since the Symbolic cannot directly access the Real, it cannot directly signify the Real. When the subject tries to do so, a surplus of meaning is produced: When trying to reference the Real, they literally mean more than they can say. It is precisely this surplus which Lacan named *lack*.

Approached from another perspective, we can say that lack designates the Symbolic order's inability to signify the Real: The Symbolic is lacking due to its "deficient relation to the real" (Kay 159). Deficient precisely because the Symbolic is lacking what is in the Real—no matter how many signifiers are added to the Symbolic order, it can never contain the Real. Language is, therefore, "said to be 'non all' because it is at once 'all' (that there is) and 'not all' (in the sense of not consistent, not convincing, not satisfying)" (Kay 165). As Jacques Lemaire explains, "Lack implies the idea of a lived drama of an irreversible incompleteness....it subsumes all the radical anxiety in man; the anxiety which results from his human condition" (162). In other words, we use the term lack to refer to that which cannot be referred to, yet which we know all too well: Lack absorbs all the innate anxiety produced by our lives lived within the inevitably flawed incompleteness of our human condition—our Symbolic order.

And from this lack is born our desire. As Belsey notes, "Desire, the experience of lack, is the effect in the subject of the condition imposed by the division between conscious and the unconscious, separated by the signifying splitting" (*Critical Practice*, 132). In other words, the result of the split between conscious and the unconscious is a condition—lack—which is experienced by the subject as desire. The effect of this split is that the subject experiences lack—in the form of desire—which can be seen in one context as a desire for the return of/to the Real; a desire to undo the rupture that the entry into the Symbolic created. And yet, while desire *is* for a return to, or reunion with, the Real, desire *manifests* in the Symbolic. How then can we signify our desire for something that cannot be signified? In Lacan's model it is the *objet petit a*—the little object—that signifies our desire within Symbolic order. As Sarah Kay explains, *objet petit a* is "a paradoxical object which is the remainder of the Real in the subject....it functions in contradictory ways as presence/absence, treasure/shit, sublime/abject.... It is also the mysterious object which appears to cause desire but which is in fact created by it" (166). This last point is crucial: we ordinarily think of the object of our desire (say, a new car) as the *cause* of our desire, and yet Lacan is clear that it is precisely our desire—our experience of lack—that *creates* the object for us to desire. As Kay notes, *objet petit a* "is both the object and the cause of the subject's desire" (166).

Crucially, our desire operates as a *process* of endless desire focused on an endless series of objects, each signifying within the Symbolic, for however brief a time, the *objet petit a*. This constant jumping of our desire from one object to another is precisely related to the very nature of our desire, which is never for the object, but in fact, for desire itself. As Lamaire explains "This path, which is none other than the path of lures and of alienation, is sign-posted by a series

of objects. Exhausted in its course, desire ultimately becomes its own object” (174). Desire then, is ultimately the desire *for* desire. And this is why our desire must constantly jump from object to object: The moment we get close to the object of our desire, our desire jumps to a new object precisely because what we desire is the desire itself. According to Lacan, getting too close to the actual manifestation of our desire—the *objet petit a*—leads to anxiety. And so, the true object of our desire must be forever kept at bay by the very nature of our desire itself—lack. As Evans explains, ultimately “desire is not a relation to an object, but a relation to a lack” (37). Evans further notes that, “There is a limit to how far desire can be articulated in speech because of a fundamental 'incompatibility between desire and speech' (E, 275)²³. . . . Although the truth about desire is present to some degree in all speech, speech can never articulate the *whole* truth about desire; whenever speech attempts to articulate desire, there is always a leftover, a surplus, which exceeds speech” (36). In other words, we *cannot know* desire precisely because of its construction out of the Real, and its consequent resistance to speech—especially speech that attempts to articulate desire. Put simply, the closer our Symbolic language comes to describing desire/lack, the more acutely we are aware of what it cannot say—grasping this can cause us great anxiety.

In the end then, we are left with the objects of our desire—an unending chain of desired objects—as the signifier within the Symbolic of what cannot enter the Symbolic register: Lack—our experience of the desire for the return of/to the Real. Therefore, as subjects we desire a series of Symbolic objects that act to signify for us our desire for *objet petit a*—stand-ins within the Symbolic register for our true, unsignifiable, unnamable desire for the Real. And as our desire

²³ In Evans, “E” denotes the English language version of Lacan’s *Écrits*.

slips endlessly from object to object, ultimately, our desire becomes simply desire for desire. Acknowledgement of this fact, however, would be too traumatic for us to endure, and so we struggle along throughout our lives seeking an endless chain of objects that incompletely signify our true, unspeakable desire.

~ *Chen Xiaohong's Desire for Fame* ~

For Chen Xiaohong, the manifestation of desire in her singing career can be seen in the endless chain of stages upon which she performs, but upon which she was never able to “feel the way her imagination told her she should feel” (Wang, *Lipstick* 37). The endless nature of the desiring chain (the way in which our desire slides unendingly from one object to the next) and its aspect as the experience of lack is strikingly evident in the following description of Chen Xiaohong’s situation “Chen Xiaohong began singing in Karaoke halls and lounges on the provincial performing circuit, but no matter whether she was singing at a Beijing venue or on some hastily constructed stage out in the sticks, she was never able to find the stage she had seen in her vision” (Wang, *Lipstick* 37). For Chen Xiaohong, something is missing in each and every performance, irrespective of the location of the stage (Beijing or the sticks). Like desire itself, the stages she treads upon can never provide Chen Xiaohong with the connection to the Real that she imagines for herself precisely because her obsession with getting the opportunity to sing on a “big-time show-business stage” is ultimately doomed to failure—no stage will ever be big-time enough precisely because her desire for the stage “in her vision” represents a Symbolic signification of what can never be sufficiently signified—namely, the Real.

Initially, Chen Xiaohong substitutes (sublimates) the stage for her desire to be loved by another: “Getting that opportunity became a kind of obsession, and for a while she completely

forgot about her search for love” (Wang, *Lipstick* 37). Through her endless pursuit of fame, Chen Xiaohong is able to postpone her need for love—arguably the ultimate expression of desire (and supposed solution to our overwhelming feelings of lack) in contemporary global culture²⁴. And yet for Chen Xiaohong the cultural pressure to return to love as the central theme of desire is too strong, and she realizes that “What she wanted was this: to dress up her declarations of love and give them depth and grandeur....when she stood on a glorious stage, suddenly she became much more powerful and her love seemed so much more profound” (37). Interestingly, then, the stage is ultimately not an escape from the desire for love, but a means by which to ennoble her feelings of love. The “glorious stage,” however, can do little more than make her feelings of love *seem* more meaningful—in the end the stage, and even love itself, are simply signifiers for something greater. The bitter unsatisfactoriness of these concepts—these signifiers—can never overcome the gulf between the Symbolic and the Real. There is always a surplus: for Chen Xiaohong, she is always trying to say more than is possible.

As we follow the evolution of Chen Xiaohong’s desire from object to object, ultimately landing on a desire to express what she believes is her “powerful love,” we see perfectly that it is within desire itself that she is locating the objects of her desire. Further, we can see in her a dogged belief in the power of language—her singing—to overcome its own limits and to communicate her “profound love” (Wang, *Lipstick* 38). And yet, as Evans reminds us, “Although the truth about desire is present to some degree in all speech, speech can never articulate the *whole* truth about desire; whenever speech attempts to articulate desire, there is

²⁴ For centuries love has been romanticized as what we could, in a Lacanian sense, see as the ultimate object with which to fill the psychic hole represented by our lack. For an excellent exploration of the relationship between desire and our Symbolic constructions of love, see Belsey, *Desire*.

always a leftover, a surplus, which exceeds speech” (36). Chen Xiaohong’s singing, then, is destined to ultimately fail to satisfy her desire to express the Real of her love, no matter how large the stage or the audience.

6. Žižek and the Fantasy Construction of the Desiring Subject

Back then she had secretly fallen in love with a boy in her class, but the boy remained completely oblivious to her feelings. Feeling the pain of unrequited love, Chen Xiaohong had constantly imagined herself standing on a lofty revolving stage. The stage was surrounded by seats in curved rows, with multicolored spotlights shining down from above, and Chen Xiaohong stood there singing her songs full of pain and intense emotion. In the darkness among the crowds below, possibly he was there, possibly not. It didn’t really matter. She could always find some way to convey the message to him...she was singing these songs for him and him alone. Yes, they were all for him, every sentence was formed with their special love in mind, and every phrase would strike directly and piercingly at his heart. But there was a problem: if this was the reason for her singing, then why did she not imagine herself in a single private room, with one candle burning, singing to him alone in the dim flickering light? She had never once pictured a scene like that. Her dreams of love were always inseparably tied to performing onstage. It would be more appropriate for her to express her feelings in an intimate whisper, but she always chose to make a public declaration. (Wang, Lipstick 36)

~ Fantasy: Learning How to Desire ~

In the previous section I noted Kay’s description of the *objet petit a* as “the mysterious object which appears to cause desire but which is in fact created by it” (66). Similarly, for Slavoj Žižek,

fantasy is not, as is commonly understood, the state we enter to fulfill, or ‘live out’, our desires. Rather, fantasy is the space in which we learn how to express our desires within the Symbolic order: In other words, it is precisely *within* fantasy that our desire, and our desires, are created. The fantasy space becomes the location in which we transfer our unending desire for the Real—*objet petit a*—into our desire for an unending series of signifiers. Fantasy, then, can be seen as the process of transferring our desire—our experience of lack—onto our Symbolic objects of desire. The crucial question then becomes, what objects and from where? The answer, according to Žižek, is our culture and the life we live within it. Thus we arrive at one of Žižek’s most famous reconfigurations of Lacan (and Freud): For Žižek, our lived, waking lives are the true fantasies within which we both locate our Symbolic objects of desire, and, at the same time, escape the unrelenting horror of the Real as manifest in, for example, our dreams. It is precisely the task of our waking lives to provide a fantasy realm from which we can escape the horrors of the Real contained within our unconscious. And, within the nooks and crannies of our fantasy lives, we find the blank canvases upon which we can use the Symbolic objects our culture provides for us to construct our Symbolic versions of desire. Here, then, we can think of the ads, the popular movies and TV, our literature and journalism. From all of these raw materials we construct our Symbolic desires. And so, I view car ads precisely to learn how to transfer my desire onto a shiny new Audi.

Fantasy is usually conceived as a scenario that realizes the subject’s desire. This elementary definition is quite adequate, on condition that we take it *literally*: what the fantasy stages is not a scene in which our desire is fulfilled, fully satisfied, but on the contrary, a scene that realizes, *stages*, the desire as such. The fundamental point of

psychoanalysis is that desire is not something given in advance, but something that has to be constructed—and it is precisely the role of fantasy to give the coordinates of the subject's desire, to specify its object, to locate the position the subject assumes in it. It is only through fantasy that the subject is constituted as desiring: through fantasy, we *learn how* to desire. (emphasis mine) (Žižek, *Looking Awry* 6)

Crucially, fantasy is the mechanism through which we both define the environment of our desire and identify that which we desire, and further, in which we locate our position and role within our desire. For Žižek, fantasy is a blank screen on to which we project our desires: We don't enter the fantasy theatre with our desires preexisting, but, we enter into the fantasy theatre and stare at its blank screen precisely to conjure up our desires.

If we think about it, we realize that we have no choice but to construct our desires out of the Symbolic elements—our culture—that make up our lives even though our true desire is precisely for what is outside our Symbolic lives. The Symbolic order, while a completely impoverished location for the subject to encounter their desire for the Real, is all they have. And so we use fantasy to construct a Symbolic stand-in for our lack. In other words, our desire is a product of our entry into the Symbolic, therefore it is only within the Symbolic that it can be encountered. And it is precisely through fantasy that we learn how to fixate on the unendingly unsatisfactory Symbolic object—*objet petit a*. Thus, in one context, the whole of our waking, lived lives are the fantasy in which we learn how and what to desire—to constitute ourselves as desiring subjects. For example, I see the wonderfully choreographed ads for the new iPhone, and watch the young people effortlessly connect to the world, and touch the iPhone in the mobile store. In this way I accumulate the collection of Symbolic-cultural elements unique to my

experience, and from this collection I construct my own individual desire. And it is this desire, according to Žižek, that makes me who I am. In other words, our unique collection of Symbolic elements, procured in our own unique journey through the symbolically mediated reality of our lives—our culture—becomes the raw material we take with us as we enter into the fantasy space, wherein we use them to determine how and what our desire will fixate on. In this way, it is precisely through our desires that we constitute ourselves as unique subjects.

In making use of Žižek's notions of the fantasy construction of the desiring subject I want to focus on the three specific aspects of the process of Žižekian fantasy: First, the coordinates of the subject's desire; second, the object of the subject's desire, and thirdly, the location the subject assumes within their desire. I will reconfigure these as desire's boundaries, objects and locations. Each of these three elements are fundamentally useful in examining the nature of the desiring subject.

~ *Chen Xiaohong's Fantasies of Performing Love* ~

Driven by the pain of her inability to signify her emotions to the boy she had fallen in love with, Chen Xiaohong fantasizes herself upon a revolving, circular stage standing under multicolored spotlights, singing her songs “full of pain and intense emotion” (Wang, *Lipstick* 36). Following Žižek's conception of fantasy as a location in which we stage our desires, it seems clear that for Chen Xiaohong, the solution to the obliviousness of the boy to her feelings of love is to fantasize herself into a position as someone able to easily signify the deepest feelings of pain and emotion in a highly visible situation—a position that constitutes her as that most widely admired communicator: the pop musician. In her fantasy, as a performer singing love songs overflowing with emotive energy, Chen Xiaohong sheds all past skins and becomes a star, confidently

occupying the center of everyone's attention, using the language of music to unmistakably signify her profound feelings of love for the boy. Music, then, especially popular song, establishes the cultural coordinates of this fantasy by establishing the location while also demarcating the boundaries of this desire. To be able to sing in front of an audience in contemporary global society is to matter—to signify: “Chen Xiaohong had always believed the old saying that ‘the words of ordinary people have little influence’” (Wang, *Lipstick* 37).

If popular music marks the coordinates of Chen Xiaohong's desire, surely the object of that desire is fame itself. Chen Xiaohong, the author directly tells us, believes that, “[even] if despite your struggle you can't become famous, you have no value at all” (Wang, *Lipstick* 37). Fame then, is the surest way to achieve self esteem and self worth. It goes without saying, I would suggest, that fame, and its related object, popularity, is seen as an object worthy of desire in today's contemporary global entertainment-focused world. Surely there can be no questioning where a contemporary young Beijing woman would learn to construct a fantasy subjectivity based on being a famous pop singer; there is perhaps no more common fantasy for teenage girls than to become a famous pop star. Global culture presents not only the examples to follow (Madonna, Britney Spears, Beyonce), but, perhaps even more importantly, our contemporary capitalist consumer culture inundates young women with a wide range of what we might call *source materials* for the pursuit of the fantasy of pop stardom. Here we can think of the multitude of magazines dedicated not to the performances of pop stars, but rather to their lives and their histories—often these materials focus intently on *how* these stars achieved their fame. Fictional television shows feature young women in roles about being famous stars, while ‘reality’ musical-talent shows promise clear pathways to becoming a star. In other words, for a young

woman, contemporary global culture provides a nearly endless supply of Symbolic materials from which to assemble fantasies about pop stardom, and, if the popularity of televisions shows such as *American Idol* are taken at face value, there are many young people around the world today who constitute themselves precisely through such desires.

The third element of Žižek's fantasy construction—the location the subject assumes within their fantasy—is, in the case of Chen Xiaohong, the most interesting. Driven by the pain of her own invisibility to the boy she has fallen in love with, Chen Xiaohong fantasizes herself upon a revolving, circular stage standing under multicolored spotlights. She is, in the circular configuration of her specific fantasy, literally at the center of attention: Alone on stage. As a performer, Chen Xiaohong sheds all past skins and becomes a confident singer, skillfully occupying the center of attention and using the language of music to speak from an unmistakable position of cultural power. And yet, there is something deeply amiss in how she locates herself within her own fantasy. While she is clearly the center of attention on her circular stage, she fails to capture the attention of the boy at the heart of her fantasy. The long quote that begins this section clearly illustrates this dichotomy (see page 54).

In the conflicted locations she assumes within her own fantasy, I believe that Chen Xiaohong reveals an important truth about the cultural formations at the heart of the fantasy construction of the desiring subject: Our fantasies—the locations within which we construct ourselves as desiring subjects—are based on widely shared Symbolic (cultural) signifiers, and yet the range of subject positions these signifiers are capable of forming are by no means organized into any sort of coherent social or ethical order. In other words, if we see these shared Symbolic signifiers as the building blocks of more complex subject positions, then we should

also be aware that this myriad of signifiers is entirely capable of creating subject positions in conflict with both themselves, and with other subjectivities that a single person might inhabit. It follows then that there will often be built-in tensions between the conflicting blueprints of what constitutes a valid (valuable) subject in contemporary cultures, especially as these subject positions, and their constitutive cultural signifiers, circulate across cultural and national boundaries in the contemporary age of global consumer capitalism. For Chen Xiaohong, the well established cultural artifact of the “one true love” grinds against the more contemporary configuration of fame and attention. In other words, within the fantasy construction of her own subjectivity Chen Xiaohong faces conflicting claims to happiness: one true soulmate versus wide-spread adulation. “It didn’t really matter [if he was in the audience]. She could always find some way to convey the message to him, perhaps through some kind of newspaper announcement, that she was singing these songs for him and him alone” (Wang, *Lipstick* 36). And yet, she is precisely not singing these songs “for him and him alone.” She is on a stage singing for an audience, an audience that may or may not include him. But, no worry, she could always publicize her intentions that these songs were for him and him alone. She doesn’t really need to perform the songs for him alone, she only needs to tell the world that the songs *are* for him alone. Her love need only be declared—signified—not actually *lived*. In this way, Chen Xiaohong’s fantasy enacts the bitter truth at the center of Lacan’s view of our lives: We live in a world of signification—the Symbolic order—a world forever separated from the horrors, and the beauty, of the Real. Trapped in subjectivities that are forever separate from all other people by the radical split at the center of language, what more can we do than speak the lines that signify a communion with the other that we can never truly experience? For Chen Xiaohong, as for all of

us, we are forever cut off from true connection with any other individual by the necessity to objectify all other humans in order to gain our own subjectivity.

7. Subjectivities and the Urban Chinese Structure of Feeling

According to Žižek, fantasy is not a psychological space we enter in order to conjure an imaginary scene in which our desire is fully satisfied. On the contrary, for Žižek we enter the fantasy space with our collection of Symbolic objects—some small item, or great assemblage of which will become the object of our desire—precisely in order to create our desires. In other words, working with the Symbolic inventory of our lives, our fantasy constructs the desire that appears—mistakenly—to have originally led us to the object *in the first place*. For Žižek, then, it is in the fantasies they project onto these popular culture representations that individuals learn how to desire; how to constitute themselves as desiring subjects. And it is precisely through the process of fantasizing themselves onto these representations that individuals learn how to desire, and, crucially, *what* to desire. In other words, it is from within these pop culture representations that they will find the objects of their desire, and, further, that they will learn how to enact their desire towards these objects. From a Lacanian context, the true desire of these individuals is for an end or closure of the *lack* they feel as a result of their violent separation from the Real—a separation forced upon them by their entry into the Symbolic order. Fundamental for Lacan and Žižek, however, is the reality that entry into the Symbolic absolutely forecloses any possible return to, or direct connection with, the Real. The Lacanian notion of lack, then, is precisely this unquenchable desire to reconnect with the Real; however, since individuals cannot access the Real within their Symbolic lives, they will, according to Žižek, constitute themselves as desiring subjects within the Symbolic order precisely by articulating a series of substitute objects of

desire. These substitute objects will be found within the popular culture realms within which they live their lives, and upon which they project their fantasies. It is within these cultural realms, and the fantasy they stage upon them, that they will learn what, how, and from what position they will desire. Therefore, a close textual analysis of these cultural representations constitutes an important part of any project aimed at understanding the changing nature of the subjectivities in which contemporary Chinese urban individuals live their lives. In other words, in the fantasies they experience within contemporary culture, they locate the nature, dimensions and cartographies of the subject positions they will occupy in their lives—for Lacan their desires are central to these subjectivities. And it is these subject positions, collectively considered, that represent our best chance to access the true cultural experience—the ‘structure of feeling’—of contemporary urban life in China. Employing this theory and method, I have carefully examined the unique Symbolic subjectivities provided to the readers of Wang Yuan’s *Lipstick*.

This chapter represents only the first step in my overall project to consider how this theoretical framework can help foster a new method of textual analysis, aimed specifically at allowing a better understanding of contemporary urban Chinese cultural texts. In the remainder of this thesis I will build on this framework—the *fantasy construction of the desiring subject*—along with my method of textual analysis, pushing both in a way which complicates them (in keeping with Tufte’s claims) in order to provide greater context and clarity. In my next chapter I will extend my theoretical framework by integrating certain key themes found in the work of German social theorist Walter Benjamin. At the same time, I will radically push my method of textual analysis into a Benjaminian context by embracing the lessons of what I refer to as his *poetics of method*. In keeping with Benjamin’s ideas of method, I will be working heavily with

quotation and citation, and reducing my authorial voice—in essence, I will afford the collected voices space to speak for themselves. Arranged into three *folios*, the next chapter represents a progression both in terms of theoretical terrain, and in terms of a working methodology.

Chapter 2: Benjamin's Poetics of Method - Folios and Other Miscellany

*Benjamin was not much interested in theories or “ideas” which did not immediately assume the most precise outward shape imaginable....For a metaphor establishes a connection which is sensually perceived in its immediacy and requires no interpretation, while an allegory always proceeds from an abstract notion and then invents something palpable to represent it almost at will. The allegory must be explained before it can become meaningful, a solution must be found to the riddle it presents... Since Homer the metaphor has borne that element of the poetic which conveys cognition; its use establishes the **correspondences** between physically most remote things... Metaphors are the means by which the oneness of the world is poetically brought about. What is so hard to understand about Benjamin is that without being a poet he **thought poetically** and therefore was bound to regard the metaphor as the greatest gift of language. Linguistic “transference” enables us to give material form to the invisible—“A mighty fortress is our God”—and thus to render it capable of being experienced.* — Hannah Arendt

(13)

*“You do realize what you are researching are works of **fiction**, don't you?” she asked with a British accent, while her smile expressed a confusing mixture of sincere friendliness and wry skepticism. “Oh dear, are you telling me that all of these stories are based on **lies**?”*

—Lena Scheen (n.p.)

What seems paradoxical about everything that is justly called beautiful is the fact that it appears.

—Walter Benjamin (qtd. in Arendt 12).

This chapter consists of three folios. The first folio will engage Benjamin's philosophy of history to examine both Wang Yuan's *Lipstick* and Ning Ying's *I Love Beijing*, while also beginning the task of coming to terms with what, building on Hannah Arendt's observations, I am calling Benjamin's *poetics of method*. The second folio will further reflect on Benjamin's notions of history by engaging with his epic *Arcades Project*. At the same time, this folio will continue my exploration of Benjamin's *poetics of method*. Here I will delve deeply into how one creates a method of working, writing, research, or perhaps, of *thinking*. I will also use the notion of *flâneur*—central to *The Arcades Project*—as a contrast dye with which to “stain” the surface of the cultural texts used in this thesis. The third folio of this chapter will explore Benjamin's relationship to psychoanalysis by exploring two interrelated notions: The first is Benjamin's conception of language, and its crossover with Lacanian notions of the Symbolic. The second is the idea that there is a strong *après-coup* characteristic to Benjamin's conception of history and the past. These explorations will integrate previously considered notions of the past (history) and Benjamin's *poetics of method*.

As mentioned in my introduction to this thesis, my working method in this chapter will differ markedly from the first and third chapters. In this chapter I am not intending to provide a traditional explication of Benjamin in order that his theories may be efficiently used to analyze the cultural texts at hand. Rather, I intend to engage the poetics of Benjamin's method of working to generate a text that is more open, contingent, and, I trust, useful, than it might otherwise be. The shift in methodology in this chapter reflects my belief that there is something fundamentally important about Benjamin's method as it relates to my project that cannot simply be explicated. It must, I believe, be demonstrated. And so, this chapter might best be described as

a demonstration of how Benjamin's belief in a new way of constructing a literary (historical) analysis strongly resonates with my project here, and more importantly, with the cultural texts I examine in this thesis. In other words, I believe there is something fundamentally useful that can only be shown through example regarding how Benjamin's conception of method can inform my textual analysis.

Several elements of this chapter likely demand some explanation beforehand. First, this chapter will address both cultural texts I am analyzing in this thesis; however, only one—*Lipstick*—has been described at this point. The second text, Ning Ying's 2000 film *I Love Beijing*, is more fully described in the introduction to the third chapter. I believe, however, this should not be a barrier to reading this chapter. Second, I will be providing limited explication in this chapter, relying more heavily on Benjamin's notions of quotation and citation. Though both these concepts will be explored deeply in this chapter, any explanation of them will take a more poetic form. Third, elements that are not directly connected to either cultural text or the theoretical framework I am using will be introduced in this chapter. It is my goal that these artifacts will afford the development of tangential and contingent connections to appear between these elements without the weight of an overly determined architecture supporting (and confining) them. This chapter is composed, primarily, of three folios, each relating to a Benjaminian theme that connects to my larger project.

Folio 1. *But a Storm is Blowing from Paradise*

* * *

— *Stay, Awaken the Dead* —
(On the Concept of History)

* * *

I wonder, should I explicate Benjamin before I begin? But isn't such consistent thinking absurd?

As one of his most compelling images (metaphors), Benjamin's *Angel of History* casts a long shadow over that portion of his corpus dedicated to history, the past, and memory.

Benjamin's conception of the angel was influenced by Paul Klee's *Angelus Novus*, which Benjamin owned from 1921 until his death in 1940. In his *Ninth Thesis*, Benjamin describes the angel: facing backwards towards the past—a past which for us is an unending chain of events is for him but one singular catastrophe. Splayed wide, the angel's wings are caught in the fierce, unrelenting storm blowing from Paradise. This wind hurls him, backwards, into the future.

“What we call progress” Benjamin tells us “is *this* storm” (SW 4: 392).



Figure 1. Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus*, 1920.
Israel Museum, Jerusalem.
commons.wikipedia.org, 21 Oct. 2015.

...nothing could be more “undialectic” than this attitude in which the “angel of history” ... does not dialectically move forward into the future, but has his face “turned towards the past.” ... The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and join together what has been smashed to pieces.” (Which would presumably mean the end of history.) ... In this angel... the flâneur experiences his final transfiguration. For just as the flâneur, through the gestus of purposeless strolling, turns his back to the crowd, even as he is propelled and swept by it, so the “angel of history,” who looks at nothing but the expanse of ruins of the past, is blown backwards into the future by the storm of progress. That such thinking should ever have bothered with a consistent, dialectically sensible, rationally explainable process seems absurd.

—Hannah Arendt (12)

An oil transfer, commonly called a mono-print, is an eccentric artistic technique. Even in Benjamin's day, it must have seemed somehow quaint. The artist executes their work on a surface resistant to the chosen medium (in this case oil paint, the surface most likely a metal plate). Once completed, the surface is turned over and placed onto the final surface (in this case paper) and pressure is applied to force the transfer of the medium from one surface to another. Like all prints, the image will be reversed—backwards from its origin: Unlike all other types of print, there is no way to produce more than one copy. The method interrupts the print's inherent potential for mechanical reproduction²⁵. Having inherited Klee's *Angelus Novus* after Benjamin's death in 1940, his close friend Gerholm Scholem eventually donated it to the Israel Museum.

*Images—my great, my primitive passion.*²⁶

— Walter Benjamin (SW 4: 199)

Film negatives, of course, are also reversed, although once printed to a diapositive²⁷ they right themselves. So where film requires a reversal of the imaged world as a point along its journey to the screen, the mono-print freezes the point of reversal and captures it for eternity.

²⁵ For more information on Benjamin's ideas regarding the mechanical reproduction of works of art, see his seminal essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction."

²⁶ This is a paraphrase from Baudelaire. In a posthumously published collection of unfinished work he writes, "Glorifier le culte de images (ma grande, mon unique, ma primitive passion)" "Praise the cult of images (my great, my unique, my primitive passion)" (Benjamin SW 4:199).

²⁷ Film cameras normally produce what are called negatives—where the light and dark areas are reversed. Positive versions of these negatives are normally printed onto paper. When such positives are printed onto transparent films or glass, they are known as diapositives or transparencies. If mounted on small cardboard frames designed for use in a slide projector, these are commonly called slides. When such diapositives are printed onto rolls of film and screened in theaters, we commonly call this cinema.

“The past,” Benjamin said, “flits by.” Each frame does indeed “flit by,” and it is only in our subconscious that we are aware of each individual frame.

Photography is truth. The cinema is truth twenty-four times a second.

—Jean-Luc Godard (Le Petit Soldat)

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image that flashes up at the moment of its recognizability, and is never seen again. ... For it is an irretrievable image of the past which threatens to disappear in any present that does not recognize itself as intended in that image..

— Walter Benjamin (SW 4: 390)

In what manner does the unrecognizable stillness of the frames of the film signify? The truth of each frame can be comprehended only as an image flashed on the screen. Significance exists only for the community of frames: Can we speak of a film’s *structure of feeling*? Only as a part of a greater whole does it coalesce—become itself—in your mind. Once gone, the frame “is never seen again.”

And yet, only by the persistence of the image in our mind’s eye does the film’s technique work. Without the *persistence of vision* we would see each of the individual frames frenetically “flit[ing] by”. How much is the past, then, like a film? *I Love Beijing* is replete with short images—vignettes—of Beijing: construction workers soar above the city on bamboo scaffolding; pedestrians, cars and bikes dart past each other at an intersection; a girl sits on an idling bus waiting for others to embark. While discrete, these images merge over the course of the film into some sort of whole.



Figure 2. *Persistence of Vision & the thaumatrope*, n.d.,
Collection of Jack & Beverly Wilgus, brightbytes.com, 12
Jan. 2016.

Only through the power of accumulation do Ning's filmic perceptions become a cohesive whole: a past. But, the accumulation operates *now*, in your eyes and mind *here*, as you watch her film. The images quote the past, but they cite thoughts that are of the present.

The zoetrope—a decidedly nineteenth century artifact—is like this: The past image flits by the observer's eye. And, according to the theory of the persistence of vision, that image stays in our mind's eye for the briefest of instances. If we spin fast enough—if the frame rate is sufficient—the images bleed into one another and continuousness emerges. The mechanics of *après-coup* demonstrated: The image of the bird does not become the trauma of the caged bird until it *will have become* activated in the future of the image of the cage. The classic zoetrope then is also a trap: the mind's eye trapped inside an *après-coup* loop.

Yet, doesn't the zoetrope also imagine the future? Don't we see the bird already trapped in the image of the cage? The cage as signifier of the Symbolic order, par excellence.

The genuine picture may be old, but the genuine thought is new. It is of the present. The present may be meager, granted. But no matter what it is like, one must firmly take it by the horns to be able to consult the past. It is the bull whose blood must fill the pit if the shades of the departed are to appear at its edge. —Walter Benjamin (qtd. in Arendt 44)

We must stay in the present precisely to awaken the past.

* * *

— *Absolutely Spellbound* —

(A Poetics of Method - Part 1)

* * *

Jordi Llovet opens his essay, *Benjamin Flâneur: The Arcades Project*, with the story told by Scholem of a 1927 exhibit at the Musée Cluny in Paris:

For him everything small exerted the greatest attraction.[...] In August 1927 he—absolutely spellbound—dragged me to the Musée Cluny in Paris in order to draw my attention to a collection of Jewish ritual objects including two grains of wheat on which a fellow spirit had inscribed the entire Shema Israel.

—Gerholm Scholem (qtd. in Llovet 205)

Searching for the smallest detail, amongst the smallest of scraps, this was Benjamin's preferred method. His way into the past was through the smallness of artifacts and memories and the accumulated nature of their truths. Control, even with the smallest of details, is still control. Yet, as Adorno, Arendt and others tell us, Benjamin's method of thinking, arranging, and writing

became, over his lifetime, less about controlling and more about locating. More and more, he allowed the cited artifact to stand alone and tell its own story. Ning too seems at times more compelled by what she can show us; what she can find amongst Beijing's alleyways and markets, and along its highways and boulevards. It can appear—but this is wrong I think—that she simply lets Beijing unfold before her camera. Ning's filmic city, however, is artfully composed: It may appear random or out-of-control, but that is an intentional illusion. And yet, could we say that like the flâneur she allows her filmic imagination to wander the city without purpose—finding connections where it may? How intentional can her initial process be?

It is as if the big city had brought the intellectual to the point where theory falls silent so as to simply allow juxtaposed phenomena to bring forth the meaning they conceal. It is as if a discourse on progress voluntarily sacrificed itself in order not to harm the truth which is contained in the documents scattered throughout city culture.

— Jordi Llovet (218)

While it is true that the seeming random rush of Beijing past the window of Desi's cab is in fact highly orchestrated, Ning has, at the same time, relinquished a great deal of control. The images—vignettes—that we see out the cab's windows go uncommented on by the driver and passenger. We see them looking; we see them thinking; but we hear nothing. When Ning's characters do speak, they are focused inwards on their own lives, not outward at the “the hidden laws that govern life in the metropolis and the behavior of contemporary urban people” (Llovet 214). Like Benjamin, I believe Ning wants to “simply allow juxtaposed phenomena to bring forth the meaning they conceal” (Llovet 218). Her characters seem disconnected from their past,

as if they have magically appeared in the present of her film. Or, perhaps, their past appears to vanish with each present moment: Benjamin's *Jetztzeit*—Aquinas' *nunc stans*²⁸.

Insofar as the past has been transmitted as tradition, it possesses authority; insofar as authority presents itself historically, it becomes tradition. Walter Benjamin knew that the break in tradition and the loss of authority which occurred in his lifetime were irreparable, and he concluded that he had to discover new ways of dealing with the past. In this he became a master when he discovered that the transmissibility of the past had been replaced by its citability and that in place of its authority there had arisen a strange power to settle down, piecemeal, in the present and to deprive it of "peace of mind," the mindless peace of complacency. "Quotations in my works are like robbers by the roadside who make an armed attack and relieve an idler of his convictions" (Schriften I, 571).

—Hannah Arendt (38)

Can we say that Ning's scenes are her quotations? Her images of Beijing are a type of *après-coup* ruins. They possess not the *past inside the present*, but rather, the *past inside the future*: These filmic memories will reveal themselves *to have been* ruins only in the city's upcoming life. The film's stock will become ruins with age, but the memories (and the reality they document) will be shown to *always already* have been ruin: No city built this frantically could be ever be anything other than a prefabricated ruin.

²⁸ The translator Harry Zohn argues that Benjamin's use of quotations around *Jetztzeit* in the original German clearly indicate that he meant to signify more than simply present. "He clearly is thinking of the mystical *nunc stans*" (Benjamin, *Illuminations* 261). *Nunc Stans* (lit. "eternal now") describes the temporal notion of time standing still in the present; the existence not subject to the passage of time; eternity. (Leftow 112).

[Benjamin had a] *simply invincible passion.... That was his starting-point for understanding the meaning of history out of its least products—even out of its ruins, its ultimate remnants and traces.*

—Jordi Llovet (205)

And so Ning gives us a sensual tour of Beijing's *après-coup* ruins: what will have become ruins someday once properly activated by a future point in time—an ensuing *now*. Her camera simultaneously captures present and future city. If you look hard you can see the decay hiding within the newly built buildings and roads. She shows us a Beijing erecting its own obsolescence as quickly as it can. Much about the modern Chinese mega-city is like this: it is born already in old age. Or, it is born destined never to leave infancy. Borrowing from Satie, one might wonder, has contemporary Beijing come “very young, in a world that was very old” (Davis 13). We could reverse the sentiment and consider the Cultural Revolution: all those people suddenly “very old, in a world that was very young.” The amnesia of progress—the repression of all potential *après-coup* symptoms.

When will the Real demand return?

Each new edifice in the ancient capital is destined to be replaced almost immediately by something better, faster, taller, larger—something *newer*. But in this future, where will Beijing's descendants find their scraps? Where will they find the insignificant artifacts from Ning or Wang's present? How will they know today's city without the “small details” capable of reigniting the today *that will have* become past significance?

Oh! Of course, online.

When Adorno criticized Benjamin's "wide-eyed presentation of actualities" (Briefe II, 793), he hit the nail right on the head; this is precisely what Benjamin was doing and wanted to do. Strongly influenced by surrealism, it was the "attempt to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were" (Briefe II, 685).

—Hannah Arendt (11)

In Ning's film *Desi's* first girlfriend, Xiaoxue, is overwhelmed by the trauma of a past rape. As the film progresses, Xiaoxue is unable to bear the growing weight of the trauma and kills herself. *Desi*, called by the police, rushes out of a chaotic drunken party with his fellow cabbies to answer their questions at Xiaoxue's apartment.

As *Desi* stands with the police in Xiaoxue's apartment, he takes in her life's scraps. He does this, of course, on our behalf. Like Mulvey's male gaze, the audience looks not at her past, but at *Desi* (and the police) looking at her past. The trauma of her past only fully signifies in *Desi's* silent gaze on the ruins of her life. What is crucial for us, as audience, is to see him looking—spellbound—at her past. Through him we voyeuristically experience the flash of recognition of the past suddenly made significant. Is there an equivalent in Beijing's destruction of its own past traumas? And, again, is today's frenzied lifestyle not simply an embedded *après-coup* symptom, waiting to *have become*?

Ning shoots the scene without the suspense of a film noir drama. There is no darkness, only the grey smog-filled air of a Beijing summer day. Absent any foreboding, the sequence

plays out in a mumbled detachment—the audience as *flâneur* to a scene without narrative momentum, only the *to-be-watched-ness* of the city and its inhabitants.

Where the normal city-dweller sees nothing but the everyday, well-worn appearance, which seems to exhaust its significance in pure representation as a spectacle within the framework of the metropolis, Benjamin endeavored to break through the accidental order of appearances in order to intimate—and only intimate—the hidden laws that govern life in the metropolis and the behavior of contemporary urban people.

—Jordi Llovet (214)

What hidden laws govern life in Ning's Beijing?

Only for the sake of the hopeless ones have we been given hope.

—Walter Benjamin (qtd. in Arendt 17)

Folio 2: Benjamin, *The Arcades & the Flânerie of Method*

* * *

The theatre of all my struggles and all my ideas

(The Arcades Project)

* * *

(But the notion of the flâneur—isn't it already exhausted?)

How Benjamin makes sense of the past in *The Arcades Project* is complex and filled with contradictions. First, he prioritizes the accumulation of small, obscure details—primarily in the form of quotations²⁹—to slowly build a collection of indexical artifacts. According to Arendt, his work, “consisted in tearing fragments out of their context and arranging them afresh in such a way that they illustrated one another and were able to prove their *raison d'être* in a free-floating state...a sort of surrealistic montage” (Arendt 47). Secondly, Benjamin’s method is rooted in randomness:

This monumental work about the Paris of the Second Empire is ultimately nothing but precisely...a wandering from the straight and narrow, a drifting, a constant and labyrinthine digression. It is a work founded on many details and individual aspects, which philosophers have always regarded as anecdotal and insignificant elements, as irrelevancies when concerned with circumscription of an intellectual's “thinking”.

—Jordi Llovet (206)

²⁹ Here the term quotation should be read to include both textual and non-textual artifacts such as images and photos.

Randomness, in an important sense, is the antithesis of rationality: The accidental scene stands in opposition to the purposeful composition. There appears, at first glance, to be little possibility for rigor in such method, and yet for Benjamin it is precisely randomness that allows him to tenaciously pursue the “detritus” of the past. What is passed over by selective history contains most of the lived experience of those the “documentary record”³⁰ has forgotten. Key to accessing these hidden traces is that the observer meanders, wanders, idles and is pulled along by the collective current of the crowd: This is precisely the (scholar as) *flâneur*.

Benjamin’s intention from the first, it would seem, was to grasp such diverse material under the general category of Urgeschichte³¹, signifying the “primal history” of the nineteenth century. This was something that could be realized only indirectly, through “cunning”: it was not the great men and celebrated events of traditional historiography but rather the “refuse” and “detritus” of history, the half-concealed, variegated traces of the daily life of “the collective,” that was to be the object of study, and with the aid of methods more akin—above all, in their dependance on chance—to the methods of the nineteenth century collector of antiquities and curiosities, or indeed to the methods of the nineteenth-century ragpicker, than those of the modern historian. Not conceptual analysis but something like dream interpretation was the model.

—Eiland & McLaughlin (ix)

³⁰ For Williams, the documentary record is what is left of any culture. It represents all that’s available to anyone not living in the culture.

³¹ The most common translation is prehistory, or prehistoric.

For Benjamin, the choice was not between the structural urban forces and the “traces of the daily life of the collective.” This is a false dichotomy. Like a pointillist, for Benjamin it is from the accumulation of small detail that the larger structure emerges.



Figure 3. Stetar, Doug. *Riding the Subway*, 2012.

What all other cities seem to permit only reluctantly to the dregs of society—strolling, idling, flânerie—Paris streets actually invite everyone to do. Thus, ever since the Second Empire the city has been the paradise of all those who need to chase after no livelihood, pursue no career, reach no goal—the paradise, then, of bohemians, and not only of artists and writers but of all those who have gathered about them because they could not be integrated either politically—being homeless or stateless—or socially.

Without considering this background of the city which became a decisive experience for the young Benjamin one can hardly understand why the flâneur became the key figure in his writings.

—Hannah Arendt (21)

In contemporary Beijing much of life is still lived on the street, and today many streets still invite residents to stroll, idle and even dance. Does the *flâneur* exist in Ning's Beijing? Desi seems to manifest the driver-as-*flâneur* as he follows Zhao Yun, who is herself chiefly idling as she walks to take her family's vacuum to the repair shop. Strolling along a busy Beijing sidewalk, she window-shops with a decided lack of ambition. Her body betrays her boredom and rather than buying a dress, she spends the afternoon sizing up Desi as the one-night-stand she will later make of him.

There appears, at first glance, to be little rigor in collecting the "detritus" of a given place and time. Yet Benjamin believed that such collecting was key to uncovering the "retroactive force" of a given past. To collect the past's "cultural treasures" was to trade in "document[s] of horror": To find the spirit of "the collective" one must look among formal historian's discarded waste. "Nothing that has happened," Benjamin tells us, "should be regarded as lost for history" (Benjamin SW 4: 390). Like Freud's dream interpretation, Benjamin as analyst needs to learn the secret meanings in the fragmented language of the city, not analyze the narrative of its historical detritus. In his *flânerie* the scholar accumulates an abstract narrative that cannot be read linearly: the symbol, the metaphor and randomness reign.

These reflections, like so much else in Benjamin, have something of the ingeniously brilliant which is not characteristic of his essential insights, which are, for the most part, quite down-to-earth. Still, they are striking examples of the flânerie in his thinking, of the way his mind worked, when he, like the flâneur in the city, entrusted himself to chance as a guide on his intellectual journeys of exploration

— Hannah Arendt (43)

For both nineteenth century Paris and twenty-first century Beijing the swift pace of change has been driven by the rapid development of a consumer-capitalist economy, and its concomitant social and cultural disruptions. Issues such as the widespread proliferation of private-property ownership, the development of mass media based on large-scale marketing/advertising, and the growth of a large urban underclass are examples of disruptive social experiences that result from such economic upheaval: it abounds in both histories. And too, the physical manifestation of these disruptions in the construction of unique structures to house their nascent consumer cultures. In nineteenth century Paris it is the arcade; in twenty-first century Beijing, the *supermall*. In Beijing these cavernous spaces have become centers of luxury and recreation: consuming and idling. Like Benjamin's arcades, China's supermalls exist beyond their use value as places to consume—both facilitate the idling, distracted window-shopping of their respective middle-classes: the *flâneur*?



Figure 4. Doug Stetar. *Beijing Rider*. 2012.

* * *

the only ... hope that something might survive this age—because it was wrenched from it

(A Poetics of Method - Part 2)

* * *

This is Benjamin's understanding of citation: It is the Janus of language: destroyer and redeemer. Quotation rips language from its original context, returning it to its fundamental role in naming. Stripped of their context and quoted into a new structure, for Benjamin cited words regain their power to simply name, to work as signifiers, and ultimately, to create new contexts.

It is in this way that citation is both the destroyer and redeemer of language. Inextricably conjoined, the twin powers of quotation become the only power that is still capable of hope in Benjamin's rapidly waning modernity. To redeem the small, individual meaning, the larger context must be destroyed—only then can new meaning take root in the montage of quotation. And, as Europe descends deeper and deeper into the abyss, is it any surprise that he leans more and more on the poetics of citation in his method: Only in citation can the monstrous structures of fascism be destroyed and its component pieces redeemed. Only by being “wrenched from it” might something survive Europe's modern darkness. Only in citation can language be redeemed—made whole again.

*Such wrenching will return as the method of *The Arcades Project* as well as the way in which history happens in Benjamin's last writings.*

— David Ferris (90)

Before it can be collected, the artifact must be removed. Before the word can be redeemed, it must be wrenched from its context: Is it the same with the image? Does Ning's camera “wrench” pieces of Beijing from its own flesh, destroying its temporal context? In doing so, does her filmic citation also make whole the language of images—their capacity to name? Benjamin was insistent that his conception of language was not metaphoric, thus his concept of names cannot be applied to Ning's filmic language. But does the language of film include that which is *named* in the filmic image? Put another way, is the citational capacity of film separate

from the language of film? Film is obviously indexical, but is it capable of being, in Benjamin's sense, *linguistic*?

I suspect that Ning has an answer.

...quotation emerges as a montage-like form of discourse capable of possessing a significance beyond the context from which the passage is drawn.

—David Ferris (89)

In the quotation that both saves and punishes, language proves the matrix of justice. It summons the word by its name, wrenches it destructively from its context, but precisely thereby calls it back to its origin. It appears, now with rhyme and reason, sonorously, congruously, in the structure of a new text. As rhyme, it gathers the similar into its aura; as name, it stands alone and expressionless. In citation the two realms—of origin and destruction—justify themselves before language. And conversely, only where they interpenetrate—in citation—is language consummated.

—Walter Benjamin (SW 2: 454)

What do we call the empty citation a city makes of its own past (quick—picture China's architectural history bastardized onto the Beijing Apple store) when it presumes capital and energy are somehow a human context: is it pastiche? What if it doesn't even rise to that level? Certainly it is something less than montage. Ning cites Beijing's self-destruction, but is there any redemption in this? *Yes!*—It may be the only redemption possible for this hyper-energized Beijing: what Ning's montage can wrench from its present frenzy.

By the time of the Kraus essay, this interest in quotation has become more than a source of knowledge or scholarly endeavor; quotation emerges as a montage-like form of discourse

capable of possessing a significance beyond the context from which the passage is drawn. In the drafts of the Kraus essay, a sense of this significance is discernible in the admiration that accompanies Benjamin's simple observation that "Kraus has written an article in which not a single word is by him" (GS 2, 1093).

—David Ferris (89)

Rather than the death of the author, perhaps the absorption of the author. The author fully sublimated to the ego of the past. Benjamin tells us that the claim the past makes on us "cannot be settled cheaply."

In the structure of a new work, quotation calls words back to their origin in language, their origin in the name. The understanding expressed here recalls the 1916 essay "On Language as Such and on the Language of Man" in which Benjamin defines the name as the means by which things and objects can be communicated (the means by which we have knowledge), but he also adds, in that communication, that the name marks the difference between language and things. When quotation summons the word by its name, it summons language to its origin in this difference (without which no communication could occur in language). By being destructively wrenched from their context, the quoted words are thus brought back to that capacity to name in which language originates.

—David Ferris (89)

Man's desire is the desire of the Other.

—Jacques Lacan (*Seminar Book XI* 235)

Could we say, then, that language's desire is the desire for this difference—this gap between name and named? Is it the desire of language to destroy this difference—to erase the rift between the Symbolic and the Real? Language wants to contain the Real within its infinite branches. Is this the secret wholeness at the center of the citation?

Am I the one is who is called W. B. or am I simply called W. B.?

—Walter Benjamin (qtd. in Ferris 145)

In your own city, you can become an outsider, a stranger, and become uncertain about your own identity.

—Ning Ying (“A Dialog” n.p.)

Thus the heir and preserver unexpectedly turns into a destroyer. “The true, greatly misunderstood passion of the collector is always anarchistic, destructive. For this is its dialectics: to combine with loyalty to an object, to individual items, to things sheltered in his care, a stubborn subversive protest against the typical, the classifiable.” The collector destroys the context in which his object once was only part of a greater, living entity, and since only the uniquely genuine will do for him he must cleanse the chosen object of everything that is typical about it.

—Hannah Arendt (45)

We collect ourselves right out of our humanity. But, perhaps, we can cite ourselves back into it.

Folio 3: *A Victory Wrested From the Powers of Darkness*

* * *

The Naming of Things

(Benjamin, Lacan & Language)

* * *

For Benjamin, God proscribes the limits of language, and language proscribes the limits of man. “Man communicates his own mental being (insofar as it is communicable) by *naming* all other things.” But, he asks, “Does man communicate his mental being *by* the names that he gives things? Or *in* them?” Benjamin’s conception of language “knows no means, no object, and no addressee of communication. It means: *in the name, the mental being of man communicates itself to God*” (SW 1: 64).

...it is language itself which, by differentiating between concepts, offers the possibility of meaning. In practice, it is only by taking up the position of the subject in language that the individual is able to produce meaning.

—Cathrine Belsey (*Critical Practice* 55)

Only with an ‘I’ and a ‘you’ can we speak. Who, then, is the first ‘you’? “The mirror,” says Lacan. (And, once the self is seen, it is forever trapped in the mis-recognition.) But what is the mirror but the origin of human citation? Are all our citations forever doomed to be deformed by this mis-recognition? Does every author continually mis-recognize themselves in each citation?

The existence of language...is coextensive not only with all the areas of human mental expression in which language is always in one sense or another inherent, but with absolutely everything. There is no event or thing in either animate or inanimate nature that does not in some way partake of language, for it is in the nature of each one to communicate its mental contents.....we cannot imagine a total absence of language in anything.”

—Walter Benjamin (SW 1: 62)

Man speaks, then, but it is because the symbol has made him man.

—Jacques Lacan (*Écrits* 65)

What were we before language? Perhaps this is a question that, as Benjamin says about another, “can bear no fruit even within that realm of Ideas whose circumference defines the idea of God” (SW 1, 62). The Real, that which is forever outside of language, and by that very fact precisely proscribes into what and where language may not tread, begs to find expression in our names. But, of course, what is without name is forever barred from such testimony.

Wang cuts the Real into her characters through the description of inexpressibility.

Xiao Jinguo couldn't put his finger on it. He just felt that he was stuck in a gray world, a world that one couldn't describe clearly but which went to enormous lengths to make life difficult for him. Xiao Jianguo did his best to fight back against that world, but right now he couldn't even work out where he should land his blows.

—Wang Yuan (*Lipstick* 32)

Xiao Jinaguo's world can never be described clearly—his only option to fight back against the abyss of the indescribable. Is it the fighting back that defines our existence? Are we

all just Jacob wrestling with the angel, struggling over every word we wrench from the abyss of the Real?

Israel—he who struggles with God.



Figure 5. Gustave Doré. *Jacob Wrestling with the Angel*. (1866).
Web. wikiart.org. 15 Oct. 2015.

...the real can be thought of as the limit of language, and thus as everything we lose by becoming speaking beings.... If we attempt to trace it, it wraps back into the heart of language, just as the hole in the middle of the doughnut is a continuation of the space that surrounds it.

Thanks to the hole, the doughnut is a doughnut, even though, in a sense, the hole is precisely what is not in it; analogously, the real is what shapes our sense of reality, even though it is excluded from it.

—Sarah Kay (4)

After graduating from high school, Chen Xiaohong began singing in Karaoke halls and lounges on the provincial performing circuit, but no matter whether she was singing at a Beijing venue or on some hastily constructed stage out in the sticks, she was never able to find the stage she had seen in her vision, or feel the way her imagination told her she should feel.

—Wang Yuan (*Lipstick* 37)

Our inner-voice. The way in which we speak to ourselves in our most-secret recesses when we are most fully aware—or convince ourselves we are most fully aware—of who we are, or, perhaps, what we could be. The justifications we tell ourselves. The things we admit—but only ever to ourselves. The words we use to describe ourselves to ourselves. Like Chen Xiaohong, we are all trapped by the limits of our own language, trapped in what we can imagine ourselves to be: This treachery of language.

...it is literally true that the basis of subjectivity is in the exercise of language. If one really thinks about it, one will see that there is no other testimony to the identity of the subject except that which he himself thus gives about himself.

—Emile Benveniste (qtd. in Belsey *Critical Practice* 55)



Figure 6. Doug Stetar. *Police on Sale*. 2012.

Derrida goes on to raise the question whether, even if we accept that it is only signifying practice that makes possible the speaking subject, we can nevertheless conceive of a non-speaking, non-signifying subject, present to itself as ‘a silent and intuitive consciousness’ (146) The problem here, he concludes, is to define consciousness-in-itself, as distinct from consciousness of something, and ultimately as distinct from consciousness of self. If consciousness is in the end consciousness of self, this in turn implies that consciousness depends on differentiation.

—Catherine Belsey (Critical Practice 55)

Consciousness depends, in the end then, on the name.

Benjamin claims that “what is communicated in language cannot be externally limited or measured, and therefore all language contains its own incommensurable, uniquely constituted infinity. Its linguistic being, not its verbal contents, defines its frontier” (SW 1: 64).

...It is language which provides the possibility of subjectivity, because it is language which enables the speaker to posit himself or herself as ‘I’, as the subject of a sentence. It is in language, in other words, that people constitute themselves as subjects.

—Catherine Belsey (*Critical Practice* 54)

*Benjamin claims that the effects of modern experience—the incursions of modern **anomie**, commodification, and violence—are inscribed onto the most monadic levels of an individual’s psychophysical life. Like psychoanalysis, Benjamin argues that the individual’s psychically and materially determined body and the subject’s language are inextricably linked. Both discourses do nothing less than to imagine—and also realize—forms of individual “redemption” (the Benjaminian term) of body-language and body-mind through transformative constellations of thought, corporeality, and language. Imagining such a “re-written” and “re-read” subject involves imagining a radically new configuration of a coherent Lebenswelt for a subject that rests on new ontological foundations of the real.*

—Elizabeth Stewart (6)

* * *

— *Absolutely Spellbound* —(Benjamin, Lacan & the *Après-Coup* of History)

* * *

[Benjamin's] preoccupations lie with the various violences and spell-binding encroachments occurring on the individual's psychophysical fields of experience. They are echoed in various corners of psychoanalytic theory in these same years and in other related cultural productions—related, whether Benjamin was aware of them or not.

—Elizabeth Stewart (2)

These past artifacts will only *have been* significant—the ever-present future perfect—once they are significant, again, in our present. A present in which they will appear as always already containing the significance that has, in fact, only been activated by our future look backwards. Like the angel, the storm of the past “has got caught in [our]...wings,” driving us “irresistibly into the future to which [our]...back is turned.”

The past carries with it a secret index by which it is referred to redemption. Doesn't a breath of the air that pervaded earlier days caress us as well? In the voices we hear, isn't there an echo of now silent ones? ...If so....Then our coming was expected on earth. Then, like every generation that preceded us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim. Such a claim cannot be settled cheaply.

—Walter Benjamin (SW 4: 390)

For Benjamin, the index is generational; For Lacan, it is trapped inside our own Symbolic existence. For Ning and Wang, it seems to resonate between the two: The narrative index at the

heart of their works, like Lacan's Real, can never be passed between subjects. But they know, *sub rosa*³², that theirs is a world mirrored with gazes—the audience. Their narrative's *après-coup* index can use the audience as conduit to force an intergenerational Lacanian jump.

The audience as *weak messiah*—demigod to the text.

[T]he historical index of the images not only says that they belong to a particular time; it says, above all, that they attain to legibility only at a particular time. And, indeed, this acceding “to legibility” constitutes a specific critical point in the movement at their interior. Every present day is determined by the images that are synchronic with it: each “now” is the now of a particular recognizability. In it, truth is charged to the bursting point with time... It is not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. ... The image that is read—which is to say, the image in the now of its recognizability—bears to the highest degree the imprint of the perilous critical moment on which all reading is founded.” — Walter Benjamin (The Arcades Project 463 [N3, 1])

³² In secrecy.



Figure 7. *Cixi, Empress Dowager of China, 1835-1908*, Photographs, Freer Gallery of Art and Arthur M. Sackler Gallery Archives. Smithsonian Institution, Washington, D.C., Purchase. Web. 23 Oct. 2015.

In the field of history, the projection of the past into the present is analogous to the substitution of homogeneous configurations for changes in the physical world [Körperwelt]. The latter process has been identified by Myers as the basis of the natural sciences (De l'explication dans les sciences). The former is the quintessence of the "scientific" character to history, as defined by positivism. It is secured at the cost of completely eradicating every vestige of history's original role as remembrance [Eingedenken]. The false aliveness of the past-made-present, the elimination of every echo of a "lament" from history, marks history's final subjection to the modern concept of science. —Walter Benjamin (SW 4: 401)

Après-coup, Sarah Kay explains, is "a kind of backward loop...[wherein] the crucial tense is the future perfect: what 'will have been'...a childhood experience *will* reveal itself *to have been* traumatic if it is reactivated as such...by some subsequent turn of events.... Thus

significance is always grasped retrospectively” (159). Seen this way, any given element of text is indexical to any given audience at precisely the moment of its reading—*will* reveal itself *to have been* meaningful precisely when reactivated as such at the moment of overlap with the reader. But, crucially, *après-coup* does not inhabit a linear conception of time. Not the *arrow of time*³³, the past is conceived as strata or strands, coexistent in all moments, and yet, of course, not. Freud explains it thus “...our psychological mechanism has come into being by a process of stratification: the material present in the form of memory traces is being subjected from time to time to a re-arrangement” (Freud 233).

Adaptation presents a special case of *après-coup*.

How do we understand an element of the adapted film that *will* reveal itself *to have been* meaningful only if it is reactivated as such by a subsequent reading of the novel? Put another way, how do we theorize the capacity of the novel to *subsequently reactivate* an element of a film that was not yet made when it was written? Is this the bridge between Benjamin and Lacan: the intergenerational *après-coup*?

³³ Denotes the characteristic of time, which makes it asymmetrical, that it can only run in one direction.

Chapter 3: Motion & Desire: The Flâneur in Post-Mao China

I decided to use a taxi driver as the main character because he could move at a higher speed

I wanted to move the eye of my camera at the same speed of today's fast moving city.

—Ning Ying (“A Dialog” n.p.)

Drifting characterizes Dezi's existence: as a taxi driver, he goes around town, drifts in and out of strangers' lives, and connects public and private spaces.

—Zhang Yingjin (82)

With great acumen Adorno has pointed to the static element in Benjamin: “To understand Benjamin properly one must feel behind his every sentence the conversion of extreme agitation into something static, indeed, the static notion of movement itself” (Schriften I, xix)”

—Hannah Arendt (12)

Introduction

Building on my previous two chapters, this chapter fits within my overarching thesis by introducing the concept of motion (and to a lesser degree, the related concept of scale) into my project—not so much to extend or build outward, but as an inlay, to further augment or enrich the existing planes and surfaces of my theoretical edifice. I will anchor this constellation of ideas (to borrow a concept from Benjamin) with my textual analysis of the film *I Love Beijing* (2000) by Beijing director Ning Ying. Ning's film focuses on the experience of Beijing's residents as they adapt to the rapid changes that have reshaped the Chinese capital. While the film's focus is more temporal, it nevertheless shares a connection to Wang's story in its deep concern for how

individuals make sense of their unique encounters with the environment, and how the choices made in these encounters ultimately shape their identities. Like Benjamin's *flâneur*, both artists' characters at times appear passive or even bored with their lives. And yet, at other times (like Benjamin himself) they struggle to understand the complexity of their own past, as well as their culture's.

In approaching my work in this chapter, I am deliberately using the term "inlay" to evoke a process much more akin to marquetry³⁴ than to fabrication, to enrichment rather than enlargement. Such a process also evokes quotation rather than statement: *Oak cited in ash*. I want to push my theoretical approach to become at once more complex, and at the same time, more lucid. Following the design logic of Tufte, I want to add detail to improve clarity, data to provide context. In the context of my project here, my goal is to use the related concepts of motion and scale as a way to include more detail (and thus context) and by doing so, to create greater clarity. The source of detail is Ning's film *I Love Beijing*. As in chapter one, I will integrate textual descriptions of Ning's film directly into the chapter's theoretical writing.

* * *

I will begin my final chapter by introducing the interrelated notions of scale and motion both as they relate to *the city* in a general thematic manner, and more specifically, how they allow us to engage in a complex reading of the city of Beijing, and the film *I Love Beijing*. As I will make

³⁴ Marquetry is a form of inlaid work wherein small pieces of wood of contrasting colors and shade are used to construct often intricate patterns and designs on larger wood surfaces in furniture, flooring and other situations. Relevant to my use of this term is that it requires both that material be excavated out of existing surfaces, and that contrasting elements be inlaid in order to create a meaningful design.

clear, these concepts have a far more complicated relationship to the city and its inhabitants than we may first suspect. I will use *I Love Beijing* to unpack these concepts further, specifically by focusing on how the different dimensions of scale and motion can be usefully applied to the close analysis of a particular city—such as Beijing—or a particular cultural artifact—such as Ning Ying’s *I Love Beijing*. Put simply, I will simultaneously use the concepts to better understand the film, and the film to better understand the concepts. The second section will connect scale and motion to the core concepts I discussed in the first chapter—fantasy, desire and subject identity as represented in cultural texts. Building on this work, I will further complicate the theoretical structure established in the first chapter—namely, my notion of the *fantasy construction of the desiring subject*—to show how the themes related to motion and scale can be useful in an analysis of the textual materials from which Beijing’s inhabitants construct themselves as desiring subjects. In the final section, I will build on my work in the previous chapter to explore how the concepts of motion and desire can be seen as productively coalescing in Benjamin’s conception of the *flâneur*.

1. Scale & Motion

Most people, when asked what constitutes a city, would likely point to scale: A city is simply a larger version of a town. If this is true, however, it is also true that a city cannot exist without motion: New York—the epitome of the city in the 20th century—is equally famous as both “the big apple,” and “the city that never sleeps”. In this section I will weave together the conceptual aspects of scale and motion simultaneous with my textual analysis of the film *I Love Beijing*.

The multivariate complexity of the physical motion within a city pales by comparison to the complexity of our cultural and psychological conceptions of motion. Consider a single example: cinematic depictions of the motionless city: Such scenes—even if they do not denote some type of apocalyptic outcome—evoke in us a strong sense of the uncanny. The city devoid of motion is not quite the city; it is, in a conceptual sense, if not dead, than at least something less than living. Although we may say that an early-morning motionless city is simply “sleeping,” its inanimate nature holds the power to deeply unsettle us. Describing the city of San Francisco as seen from within the interiors in the American film noir classic *The Maltese Falcon*, Foster Hirsch notes how, “Eerily motionless and poised, “the City” here looks like a painting; it is inert, lifeless, far away” (78).³⁵ The motionless city, unnaturally still, unnerves us; it is, however, but one example from our Symbolic inventory of the city in motion.

For the vast majority of city-dwellers, the cost of daily transits through the city is significant: Moving within the city taxes us physically, mentally and spiritually. If heat is an unavoidable physical outcome of motion, exhaustion is the parallel psychological outcome. To

³⁵ In the context of early American film noir representations of the city, no painter comes to mind more readily than Edward Hopper. While Hopper’s iconic cityscapes present an altogether unsettling version of the city, in terms of motion they are particularly rich. Rather than freezing his subjects in motion, the inhabitants of Hopper’s worlds are often shown in stasis—as if waiting for something to happen. c.f. *Summertime* (1955), *Morning Sun* (1943) or *Sunlight on Brownstones* (1956). Even when Hopper does depict his subjects in the midst of movement, there is an uncanny lack of any sense of motion in his subjects—something akin to Adorno’s notion that Benjamin captured “the static notion of movement itself” (Arendt 12). c.f. The subjects that appear to be in the midsts of speaking in *First Row Orchestra* (1951): Hopper’s subjects don’t appear to be frozen in the act of moving so much as caught in some type of contingent motionless space/time outside of actual motion. They can perhaps best be seen as analogous to frames of a motion picture (film), motion not captured, but rather, the component parts from which motion is constructed: the individual images on the zoetrope (See page 71).

ride mass transit at day's end in any contemporary megacity is to surround oneself with the enervated faces of endless commuters. Put simply, our movement through the city costs us dearly.

In the end, however, it may be precisely what motion occludes that presents its greatest psychological affect: To be ever more in motion is to be less and less at rest. And, as inertia dictates, once in motion, we find it harder and harder to arrest our momentum.

Counterintuitively, the lack of motion is not the same as rest or stillness. We need only consider the suffering commuter trapped in his car in endless rush-hour traffic to realize that the lack of (forward) motion can, ironically, cause more stress than movement itself. As the city becomes more crowded we compete with one another not only for space, but for opportunities to move in space: the queue at the bus stop, the line of cars in merging traffic, or the seat on the subway. Frustration with our inability to move can be as taxing as the demands of motion itself. But stillness—the restful state away from the the city's grindingly staccato movement—is a fundamental human need, and the city's demand that we put ourselves in motion more often, and for greater stretches of time, continually lessens our opportunities to find this rest.

In one context, we can see motion and scale as two sides of the same coin: Scale can be seen as the documentary record of motion, as well as its root cause. The greater the amount (or rate) of motion, the greater the scale of travel. Conversely, the greater the scale of the city, the greater the amount (or rate) of motion required to navigate it. In Ning's *I Love Beijing*, scale and motion are both on vivid display: From the opening scene with its contracting shots foregrounding scale (and the lack of motion: traffic), to the blurred shots of Beijing as it flies past the window of Desi's taxi. As Ning herself explains in the opening quote to this chapter, she

used a taxi driver as the main character because she wanted to be able to “move the eye of my camera at the same speed of today’s fast moving city” (“A Dialog” n.p.). Motion, and its primary characteristic of speed, figure strongly into Ning’s narrative choices precisely because motion (and speed) are integral to 21st century Beijing life. Likewise, Ning can’t invoke motion without simultaneously invoking Beijing’s scale. From the first scene, until almost the last, the scale of Beijing’s changes are interwoven into the visual representation of the city.

In the end, motion and scale are inexorably linked to any conception of the metropolis: We don’t, after all, come to the city for peace and quiet. The opening scene of *I Love Beijing* allows us to reflect on the city’s scale and motion as the director constructs a mediation of movement in the city.

~ *Seeing the Large Inside the Small* ~

— Beijing Intersection (00:00:48 - 00:02:05) —

The opening scene of I Love Beijing is a meditation on, and a wrestling match between, two of the dominant characteristics of the ancient capital: scale and motion. As Zhang Yingjin describes it, the opening scene of I Love Beijing begins with, “A high-angle, extreme long shot [that] presents a panoramic view of a Beijing intersection congested with multidirectional flows of pedestrians, bicycles, cars and buses. As a few jump cuts get the viewer closer and closer to the congested intersection, the patterns of traffic change and slow, and at times even appear to stop completely. Car radios announcing traffic and other news become audible intermittently. After two minutes, the camera pulls back slightly to emphasize the grand scale and duration of Beijing’s traffic nightmare” (81). To this description I would only add that as we move into the

intersection we see a street corner dominated by Western outlets—McDonalds—and what appears to be a large-scale shopping mall.

Scale and motion, two of the dominant elements in any metropolis, are abundantly present in Beijing. Though existing in parallel, one often eclipses the other in the city's day-to-day existence. In the opening scene of *I Love Beijing*, Ning Ying balances these two elements within her grand opening scene. Her use of the high, extreme long shot emphasizes the enormity of both the city and its infamous traffic, while her medium shots capture the reality of the herky-jerky motion of Beijing's traffic. With this scene Ning both establishes a tone for the film and offers us a sense of the profound challenge these two elements present to the human occupants of the capital city: Beijing's size requires almost constant, extended movement across its wide, flat avenues, and yet, at the same time, that very size means that its inhabitants have to share the city's byways with a daily human flow that numbers in the tens of millions. The scale of what is in motion, along with the city's great distances, are both further complicated by the abrupt fluctuations in the speed and direction of a mass so overwhelmingly large. The tension between these elements is emphasized by the director's use of jump cuts as she moves us first into, and then back out of, the intersection at the focus of her opening scene. Anchored in the pulsing flux of motion and scale, this scene mirrors our own struggles to simultaneously register both the city's immensity (large/fast) and its intimacy (small/slow). It focuses on the often unspoken challenge at the heart of life in any city: How do we survive the city's subtle but constant demand for us to make conceptual leaps (consider the way in which, over the course of the film, the director's jump cuts work their way under our skin) between the personally intimate and the inhumanly large? How do our identities survive the violent psychological adjustments required

to survive within a city that never stops oscillating between the personal and the impersonal; a city that demands so much of its inhabitants in a multitude of both micro and macro contexts? As the ambiguity of this opening scene suggests, Ning Ying's film does not advance any solutions; rather, it maps out the terrain—both internal and external—upon which Beijing's inhabitants toil to resolve this dilemma.

As mentioned above, in one context we can simply see motion and scale as the two sides of the city's Janus persona. This truth lies at the heart of Beijing's taxis: As the capital city's scale grew larger and larger the forms of transportation become increasingly frantic. An Ning herself observes:

During 1996-97 a new change was taking place in the exterior look of Beijing: a vast number of yellow microvan-taxi took up the roads, the demolitions were continuing in always larger scale, road overpasses sprouting up everywhere. This city suddenly had become unfamiliar. The transformation of the city appearance, the administrative reforms, the rapid economic development, produced undeniably deep changes in people's psychology. Worryingly enough I felt that the people's attitude was becoming passive towards the continuous changes (Ning "A Dialog" n.p.).

For the taxi driver, Beijing's scale is omnipresent in their lives, shaping almost every decision they make in moving around the city. For example, the scale of Beijing forces drivers to adjust their profit-making strategies to account for the increasing distances between meaningful points on Beijing's destination map. As Xiao Jianguo complains in *Lipstick* in reference to the distance to Capital Guesthouse, "I'll get nothing on the way back and I'll have wasted over twenty

kilometers” (Wang, *Lipstick* 6). As the city spreads apart across an ever-increasing scale, life becomes more and more complicated for those who must navigate its distances.

This tension within a city’s scale—the immense inside the intimate, and the intimate inside the immense—is also a concern for Walter Benjamin. For Benjamin—a decidedly unconventional Marxist—the historical materialist must “blast open the continuum of history” (*Illuminations* 262). To do this, Benjamin believes the historian must directly engage the tension between the intimate and the immense. In discussing how to generate a “heightened graphicness <*Anschaulichkeit*>” in historical materialism, Benjamin writes:

The first stage in this undertaking will be to carry over the principle of montage into history. That is, to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components. Indeed, to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event. And, therefore, to break with vulgar historical naturalism. (*The Arcades Project* 461 [N2, 6])

For Benjamin, the process of seeking the large in the small can be accomplished within the notion of filmic montage. Ning’s cinematic expression takes the form of a “rhapsody” that she uses to specifically illustrate “the magnitude of changes shaping our lives” in her film *I Love Beijing*. (qtd. in Abbas n.p.) Throughout the film the director uses jump cuts—sometimes subtle, sometimes not—to juxtapose noncontiguous elements of scale, thus emphasizing the profound tension between the intimate and the immense. In doing this, she highlights that movement between discordant examples of scale comes at a mental cost. Ning invokes this conceptual movement by cinematically generating a series of physical disconnects through jump cuts, thus forcing us to see the contradictions in the city before us. For Ning these physical disconnects and

their conceptual motion are represented by the space *in-between* the jump cuts: the distance—and time—that is missing. She refuses to let us move smoothly between the large and the small, forcing us to confront what is missing in our everyday glossing of this tension. Precisely by removing pieces of this distance—the missing footage in the jump cuts themselves—Ning invokes in her viewer an uneasy experience of the tension inherent in the city's scale.

~ *The Terrible Cost of Movement* ~

— Desi , Zhao Yun & Guo Shun in the Taxi (00:39:20 - 00:40:58) —

As the scene opens we are looking out the foggy, wet window of the taxi. Across lanes of traffic we see a large stone Chairman Mao looking back at us from in front of the university library. Cyclists in brightly colored ponchos move steadily through the rain. A long accordion-hinged bus lumbers across the frame, filled with passengers. As the camera focus pulls inward, the rain on the outside of the taxi's window comes into focus and we see the water running down. Like the rain, the traffic seems unending. The next shot has us looking into the cab as Desi stares out the side window, looking away from the person in the passenger seat next to him. She is Zhao Yun, a librarian he has had a one night stand with earlier in the film. The wet window creates a cold tinge to the frame and as Desi stares off past our point of view, his face is impassive, blue, and exhausted. We hear Zhao Yun describe Guo Shun (who is sitting in the back seat):

— *She's a country girl. She's been a temp at our school for two years. Everyone likes her.... You two would make a good match.... I'll let you get acquainted.*

With that Zhao Yun leaves Desi and Guo Shun alone in the taxi. They sit without looking at each other for a moment, and then Guo Shun breaks the silence:

— *She's been after me to meet you.*

— *What did she say about me?*

— *That you're a good person.... I'm not expecting anything special. Just a simple wedding ceremony. But a real nice set of portraits.*

After considering her matrimonial expectations for a moment, Desi finally turns to look at her and asks:

— *Have you been to the Great Wall?*

— *No, I work every day.*

— *Let's go. I'll take you.*

Like the ubiquitous resistance of a current flowing through a wire, movement through the city's numerous byways relentlessly drains the city's inhabitants of their energy, threatening always to exhaust them to the point of extinction. Moving through the city, especially through the increasing isolating mass of cars, pedestrians, motorcycles, and bicycles that epitomizes contemporary megacities (and in China represents a prime symptom of that country's drive towards consumer-driven capitalism), taxes the city's inhabitants physically, mentally, and even spiritually. As Desi sits and listens to Zhao Yun arrange a match between him and Guo Shun, he faces the hard truth that though his taxi makes him good money, money alone cannot buy him access to the educated class. As Zhang Yingjin notes, "Zhao Yun is an educated local whose parents teach at a university.... [But] in spite of his decent income, a taxi driver is still not eligible for admission to the educated circles by marriage" (83). As Zhang also alludes to, Zhao Yun is a local, whereas all the women whom Desi has serious relationships with—his first wife, Xiaoxue and Guo Shun—are migrants. Class, as Zhang notes, still plays a central role in contemporary Beijing. As this scene highlights, Desi can move *within* the city, but his movement

is, in an important sense, illusory—he remains “stuck” within the city’s entrenched class structures.

Throughout the opening portion of this scene Desi appears to be looking out at the traffic as it flows by his taxi. Ning’s image of the bus, crowded with anonymous passengers whose faces we can’t make out through the rain-soaked, fog-covered windows, highlights the demands movement in a metropolis makes on its inhabitants. The passengers Ning shows us are necessarily anonymous—we can barely make out individual bodies through the rain and glass—as a single mass of humanity they become the perfect filmic backdrop for Desi’s realizations of the limits motion has placed on his own life. As a taxi driver, someone who navigates the city’s motion for a living, Desi has no energy left to generate more than the thinnest hope that he can somehow move up in Beijing’s hierarchy. While he might have hoped that his liaison with Zhao Yun could lead to something better, her quick insistence on setting him up with Guo Shun as a serious love-interest extinguishes any hope he holds out. As we watch the bus passengers, we are reminded of the precariousness of existence in the city. Motion exacts a heavy toll on those who must move.

Of course, it is the city’s promise of so many different places that draws so many people to contemporary city life. Throughout the film, migrants are constantly in motion around Desi’s taxi, moving forward simply because they can’t afford to stop. Desi’s connection to the migrants, something he desperately wants to overcome, constantly pulls him back into the city’s endlessly flowing traffic. Like everyone else in the city, Desi needs to keep moving.

Ironically, it is the increasing lack of momentum that characterizes human motion within the city: the stop-and-go of traffic. And it is precisely this lack of forward motion that amplifies

the drain on our energy as our destination moves (or so it seems) further and further away from us. This reality sits at the center of the opening sequence of Ning Ying's film: The larger the city, the greater the speed required to cross its terrain, and yet, as the city grows, its greater mass—both human and infrastructure—begets a faster pace of change which generates a greater sense of disorientation in those who travel its streets, all of which contributes to slower and slower motion. Ironically, the farther the distances within the city, the slower we are forced to go, and the more energy each step demands of us.

In the end, Desi surrenders to the inevitable truth in Zhao Yun's matchmaking, and he marries Guo Shun near the end of the film. After doing so, he once again returns to his taxi, though seeming less willing to engage his passengers than before. By that point, the cumulative toll of his endless movement across Beijing has left him unable to even hope for movement out of his life.

2. Motion & Desire

In Chapter One I laid out a framework for the analysis of cultural texts based primarily on Žižek's reconfiguration of Lacan's notions of lack, fantasy and desire: *the fantasy construction of the desiring subject*. Before integrating the notions of scale and motion into that framework, I will briefly reiterate its core elements³⁶: the subject, the Real and the Symbolic, lack, desire, and fantasy.

For Lacan the subject is not a natural, autonomous occurrence; rather, it is a constructed artifice that must be constantly sustained. Specifically, Lacan views the subject as the result of a person's movement from the Real (a state of pre-language) into the Symbolic (language). This

³⁶ For a complete discussion of this please see chapter one.

process generates the subject, an unstable state defined primarily by, and limited to, what exists in language.

Lacan identifies the developmental point that triggers the entry into the Symbolic (language)—the *mirror stage*—as the moment when a child is first able to recognize themselves in a mirror. This recognition allows the child to see themselves as a discrete entity, separate from the world. For Lacan, however, this is a mis-recognition, because the child's conception of themselves as a unique, whole being is illusory. What they see is merely an image—thus their sense of self is really part of what Lacan terms the Imaginary. In the Imaginary the individual mistakenly takes the Symbolic divisions introduced by the binary of language (self/other, subject/object, good/bad) as if they also exist in the Real, and can articulate the physical world. Therefore, in the Imaginary, the person believes there can be presence *without* absence; pleasure *without* pain; life *without* death.

Importantly, although we move into the Symbolic, the Real continues to exist both outside and inside us. It remains *outside* as everything we cannot put into language. It remains inside us, according to Lacan, because at the moment of our entry into the Symbolic, the elements within the Real that cannot enter into the Symbolic (the drives we cannot articulate in language) are sublimated into our unconscious. Further, when we attempt to describe the Real with language (i.e. from within the Symbolic) there is always a surplus of meaning. This surplus of meaning is what Lacan calls *lack*—what is missing when we use language to describe what is *beyond* language—what *cannot be put into words*.

Our experience of *lack*, which Lacan calls desire, can be seen as the yearning we feel to suture the rupture between our conscious selves and the Real. Yet, while desire is a desire for a

reconnection with the Real, desire manifests *inside* the Symbolic. How, therefore, can we signify our desire for something that cannot be signified? For Lacan, it is the *objet petit a*—the little object—that signifies our desire within Symbolic. While we ordinarily think of the object of our desire (say, a new car) as the *cause* of our desire, Lacan is clear that it is in fact our desire itself that *creates* the object for us to desire. As Kay notes, *objet petit a* “is both the object and the cause of the subject’s desire” (166). Desire, then, is a succession of fixations on an endless series of objects, each signifying within the Symbolic the *objet petit a*.

For Žižek, fantasy is not, as is commonly understood, the state we enter to fulfill our preexisting desires. Rather, fantasy is the space in which we learn how to express our desires within the Symbolic order. The fantasy space is where we transfer our yearning for the Real into a speakable desire for some thing—the *objet petit a*. Thus, in one context, the whole of our waking, lived lives are the fantasies in which we learn how and what to desire—how to constitute ourselves as desiring subjects. But *from what* do we construct ourselves as desiring subject? The answer, according to Žižek, is our culture.

In this section, then, my goal is to overlay the cultural constructions of scale and motion onto Lacan’s fantasy construction of the desiring subject.

~ *The Violent Real at the Indifferent Heart of Motion* ~

— Xiaoxue’s Apartment (00:53:45 - 00:56:08) —

The scene opens as Desi in his cab races up to a large, nondescript apartment building with a small crowd and a police car at the entrance. As Desi runs up to the doorway, he pushes through the crowd and is then escorted up to the apartment where we find Xiaoxue’s body on the floor, a smashed bottle lying beside her. As a police officer questions Desi about a cigarette burn on

her arm, Ning's edits jump us quickly between shots: two smoking police, seemingly indifferent to Xiaoxue's death; another officer rifling through a pile of cassettes; a shot of an elderly neighbor being questioned. Then, even more quickly: pieces of broken glass; a fly on Xiaoxue's bruised knee; the police photographer. All of these jump-cut shots are shown without their own sound—we hear only his inquisitor and Desi's halting voice as he explains Xiaoxue's cigarette burn:

— *She...had problems getting over something.*

— *What?*

— *She...was raped.*

As the scene continues, the police ask about Xiaoxue's parents, and Desi explains that they are from the industrial Northeast. Xiaoxue, like so many of Beijing's inhabitants, is a migrant. As the scene ends, Desi explains that the kite hanging on the wall above Xiaoxue's body was one they flew together at Tiananmen when she first arrived in the city—a memory of a time filled with promise—but over his voice we hear the thunder of the rainstorm he must face in the next shot as he drives alone through another of Beijing's endless highways.

— *Migrant Workers & Morning Exercise (00:56:56 - 00:57:08)* —

With the rain stopping, Ning shows us Desi, his taxi screeching to a halt through a series of abrupt jump cuts. We share Desi's disorientation as Ning purposefully violates the filmic line of

action³⁷ and Desi's cab suddenly appears to jump in at us from both sides of the screen. With the car stopped, but the engine still running, a group of exhausted migrant workers appears out of the nighttime fog and moves past Desi's cab. Like the fog itself, they flow around the car on all sides. We see Desi lighting a cigarette as the last stragglers slowly drift back into the darkness.

The next morning, as Desi awakes in his cab and steps outside onto the empty, early morning boulevard, we find that his abrupt stop the night before has put him next to a park. Hearing a strange sound, Desi enters the park and as he walks through the pines, encounters a series of older people doing their morning exercises. The elderly swing gently from branches, jog slowly along paths, and engage in a range of distinctly Chinese exercises and stretches. In a state of disorientation, Desi peers around trees and watches from a distance. Disorienting the viewer as well, Ning gives us the only scene in the movie with a sense of quietude—gone are the traffic sounds, replaced by the sounds of birds and exercise.

Though scale is an obvious exemplar of the city's inhuman nature, it is motion, through its ever-present lethal potentiality, that most disturbingly epitomizes the callousness at the heart of today's city. Take one wrong step and an anonymous fraction of the total of the mass in motion at any given second (Can anyone even calculate the sum-total of the tonnage simultaneously in

³⁷ The line of action represents a fundamental filming technique that the so-called continuity system (the dominant form of filmmaking in Hollywood) follows. As Steven D. Katz explains, "The purpose of the line of action is quite simple: It organizes camera angles to preserve consistent screen direction and space.... We can think of the line of action as an imaginary partition running through the space in front of the camera. It was originally devised to make sure that if multiple angles of a scene were shot, they could be edited together without a confusing reversal of left and right screen space. This way, a subject moving through the frame in one shot continues in the same direction in a subsequent shot." (Katz 129) This is exactly what Ning violates as Desi's cab appears to come at the viewer from both the left and the right as it screeches to a halt. (Ning 00:56:57)

motion within any given city at any given time?) will, with perfect insouciance, profoundly alter or even end our life. In this sense, motion embodies both physical violence and the sublime inhumanness of the city. In a Lacanian sense, motion contains within it the Real of an unspeakable, utterly indifferent physical violence. Existing beyond the Symbolic, this violence, lurking within the overlapping currents of motion that criss-cross our cities, threatens constantly to inject the Real into the psychic safety that is, according to Žižek, the fantasy of our lived experience. Unable to directly incorporate such violence into our Symbolic language, and thus unable to incorporate it into the fantasy of our conscious lives, we sublimate its existence beneath the seeming calmness of the smooth, anonymous flow of urban living.

In these two scenes, linked together by Desi's lonely drive through the violent thunderstorm, Ning allows us a glimpse of the edges of the Real within the city. In the first scene, Xiaoxue's body confronts us with such a complete lack of motion—a kinetic flatness—that even with the numerous police ambling around her, the scene holds us in an eerie sense of stasis. It is precisely the indifference of the police to the dead body that causes our anxiety—we sense the officer's retreat into the safety of indifference (an indifference rooted in the city's vast scale) to mask their own unease. For the police, Xiaoxue's death is just one more in a long line of anonymous deaths; they cannot afford to see the intimate—the Real—in her corpse. From a Benjaminian perspective, the intimacy in Xiaoxue's death illustrates his notion of the “small details” that he saw as the key to reigniting the “spirit” of a given past. In Williams' configuration, the detritus in her apartment constitutes the entirety of the documentary record of her existence: all that remains of her contribution to Beijing's structure of feeling. In an important sense, these small artifacts and details are the precise psychoanalytical and historical

source of intimacy—and, for the film’s audience, strongly suggest the Real. Seen this way, the police’s role in repressing this intimacy—this Real—becomes crucial. Their *flânerie* as they meander through the physical details of her life—especially the ominous suggestion that they will “collect”, in a Benjaminian sense, from among her life’s *petit objets*—reminds us that for Benjamin the Real of these small details precisely locates the significance of Xiaoxue’s life. In this way Ning’s work clearly articulates a fascinating overlap—perhaps even an interweaving—of the conceptual perspectives of Benjamin and Lacan. In a Lacanian sense, the corpse represents a rupture of the Symbolic by the Real of death. And it is precisely because Ning draws our attention to the policemen’s response to this situation—their denial of the Real by framing death within the anonymity of the everyday—that we are confronted with the scene’s intense sense of alienation. As we watch the police officers repression of the Real within the film, we cannot escape the repression of the Real within our own lives. We are confronted, not with the horror of the dead body, but with the horror of our own sublimation of the city’s indifference to our very existence.

In the second scene, the close physical intimacy between the violent potential of the idling taxi and the exhausted bodies of the migrant workers generates within the viewer a strikingly similar sense of dread. Ning’s scene sharply highlights the countless physically-intimate encounters we all have with the lethal potential of the vehicles we walk past daily. We are reminded that each and every time we walk in front of an idling car or bus—at an intersection, in a parking lot, or even in our driveway—we confront a risk, however small, of the Real of physical violence. As we watch the spent workers pass within inches of the car that was only seconds before hurtling along at lethal speed, we cannot help but fear the potential rupture

such violence represents. The director, by showing us the violent potentiality in these scenes, ultimately heightens our overall sense of connection to the actual city—Beijing—precisely because she evokes in us a disconnection from the cinematic Beijing on the screen, and a sympathy for Desi and his alienation. As in Žižek’s theoretical analysis, we wake from the horrifying Real of our dreams precisely to escape into the fantasy of our actual, conscious lives. Likewise, the horror of the Real presented to us by Ning’s film—the city’s ultimate indifference as manifested by its ever-present violent potentiality—pushes us to reconnect with the actual city we inhabit in our daily lives. From a Benjaminian perspective, the migrants themselves can be seen as an example of what Adorno called his “wide-eyed presentation of actualities” (Arendt 11). Arendt agrees that, “this is precisely what Benjamin was doing and wanted to do” (11). She quotes Benjamin’s desire “to capture the portrait of history in the most insignificant representations of reality, its scraps, as it were” (*Briefe* II, 685)” (11). As audience, we are caught in the migrant’s intense stare, becoming the object of their hollowed-out gaze, and are instantly implicated—in both a Lacanian and a Benjaminian sense—in the horror of their collective actuality. This is the unrelenting force of the Real at the heart of Beijing, a Real we can only hope to escape by leaving the dreamworld of the cinema.

To summarize, in a Lacanian sense, motion contains within it the Real of a potential physical violence beyond language: At any given moment, a small fragment of the enormous volume of mass in motion within the city could irrevocably alter our life. In this sense, motion embodies both physical violence and the sublime indifference of the city to its human inhabitants. In these two scenes, Ning has elegantly fused these two aspects into a text that offers us a profoundly complex reading of motion and scale. At the same time, these scenes afford us an

excellent opportunity to examine the interconnections between the Lacanian Real and the Benjaminian actuality.

~ *Motion, Fantasy & the Desiring Subject* ~

— The Radio Romance Host (00:53:45 - 01:01:39) —

The scene opens in the bright daylight as Desi's taxi rolls through a landscape of endless construction cranes and apartment developments. Slowly we hear, before we see, the boisterous passenger in the back of the cab. When we do see her, the frame once again is the rear view mirror. We see the back of Desi's head and the face of the passenger as she speaks into her cell phone. Surrounding the image of the rear view mirror, on the perimeter of the frame, we see both the past and the future: The disappearing roadway behind, and the approaching roadway in front of the taxi. The passenger—a famous radio romance show host—laughs uncontrollably as the street flies both towards and away from her. The director jumps between closeups of her laughing face and the rear view mirror's perspective before cutting away to show us a passing construction site outside the cab's windows. As the cab speeds along we see a large construction site with workers perched atop bamboo scaffolding. As the image pivots past the moving taxi the workers seem to be floating above the incomplete building. Though they are probably no more than 10 meters off the ground, the camera's perspective makes them appear to be floating precariously amongst the tall construction cranes in the background. As the passenger continues her animated phone conversation the scene outside shifts to a string of street level views of endless construction, destruction and tired-looking pedestrians. As the views of Beijing's endless cycle of redevelopment floats by, the passenger's conversation comes into focus and she becomes intensely serious:

— *I really want that commercial. I'm never too busy for extra work. I'm a ball of hyperactive energy!*

Her phone call over, she asks Desi if he can drive her to Maxim's tonight. He responds with a boast:

— *No problem! I know every hot place in town.*

He continues, telling her that he always listens to her show. Suddenly the cab is transformed as she assumes her sonorous on-air voice:

— *On this blissful night, the one you passionately pursue is waiting for you with desire. I hope this night is the start of love, a Bridge for Star-Crossed Lovers.*

Desi excitedly responds:

— *I know that voice and all the words!*

His excitement fades, however, as she asks if he is married and he is forced to confess that he is divorced and without a girlfriend. Her reply is enthusiastic, if rehearsed:

— *So handsome and no girlfriend? Call in during next week's show. Some sweet girl out there is waiting for you.*

As he drives on, an endless cityscape of construction cranes streams past his window.

The notion of the fantasy construction of the desiring subject may have few better exemplars in contemporary Beijing than the romance-dating show. As the city-in-flux streams by the taxi's windows, the radio host assures Desi "Some sweet girl out there is waiting for you." Entering into the self-evident fantasy of the dating show, Desi is invited to discover his desire's object, boundaries and locations³⁸. The radio host's clear promise to Desi—some sweet girl—

³⁸ See the first chapter for a full explication of these concepts.

provides both the object of his desire (i.e. his *objet petit a*), and the specific boundaries of that desire: sweetness, and an implied youthfulness. For Desi, who confesses that he “always listen[s]” to the show, radio’s auditory nature leaves him free to combine its fantasy space with that of his taxi. Combining the show’s promise—delivered now in person by the host—of a girl who “is out there waiting for you,” with the steady stream of visually available women in his cab—delivered daily by his rear view mirror—Desi has a rich fantasy space in which to locate his next *objet petit a*. It remains only for him to fix upon an exemplar of this object and its boundaries. This, then, is where his constant movement—his endless circulation through Beijing and the endless series of young women he picks up in his taxi—coalesces with the fantasy construction of the desiring subject. Desi stages his fantasy within the seemingly endless flow of young, beautiful women that pass through his cab, locating the specific object of his desire based precisely on what he is most recently presented with. In other words, for Desi, motion is precisely what provides him with the boundaries of his desire. His desires are framed by the endless stream of culturally determined Symbolic images of young woman that pass through his taxi: the intellectual librarian, the innocent migrant worker, the anonymous drunk party-girl. Each one presents a new potential object of desire, whose most important aspect is its capacity to replace the previous object of his desire. This fantasy stream of young women that pass through Desi’s taxi also provide the location which Desi assumes within his own desire. This location is two-fold: first, as the radio host signifies, Desi is wandering through his fantasy space, drifting along on Beijing’s highways. Second, as he wanders through Beijing and the stream of women he encounters, his next object of desire is “out there...waiting for [him].” Interestingly, both

facets of his location within his desires are strongly suggestive of Benjamin's notion of the *flâneur*—a subject I will turn to in the next section.

3. Motion & the Flâneur

It is to [the flâneur], aimlessly strolling through the crowds in the big cities in studied contrast to their hurried, purposeful activity, that things reveal themselves in their secret meaning: "The true picture of the past flits by" (Philosophy of History), and only the flâneur who idly strolls by receives the message. With great acumen Adorno has hinted to the static element in Benjamin: "To understand Benjamin properly one must feel behind his every sentence the static notion of movement itself" (Schriften I, xix).

—Hannah Arendt (12)

Initially championed in the writing of Charles Baudelaire, the notion of the *flâneur* is, today, most commonly associated with Walter Benjamin. The concept finds its most complete expression in his epic work *The Arcades Project*, his unfinished project documenting the birth of modernism and consumer capitalism in 19th century Paris. For Benjamin, the construction of the Paris arcades in the early 19th century—covered shopping streets that allowed Parisians to stroll small boulevards that were dry, artificially lit, and filled with the burgeoning consumer goods of the early industrial period—was a direct material result of capitalism and its accompanying technological developments, especially advances in iron construction. The arcades were a crucial nexus at which capitalism, modernism and consumerism meet. The *flâneur*—the key human agent in this process—is both the instigator for, and an outcome of, this profound social

transformation. For Benjamin, the Marxist concepts of commodity (and commodity fetishism) and exchange value find their combined social manifestation in the *flâneur*:

Empathy with the commodity is fundamentally empathy with exchange value itself. The *flâneur* is the virtuoso of this empathy. He takes the concept of marketability itself for a stroll. Just as his final ambit is the department store, his last incarnation is the sandwich-man (*The Arcades Project* 448 [M17a,2]).

The *flâneur* can be seen as the original ancestor of a variety of contemporary consumer-capitalist species: the shopper; the (traveling) salesperson; the marketer. I will begin this section by establishing the configuration of the *flâneur* before examining two specific scenes from the film.

Movement is central to the historical notion of the *flâneur*. For Benjamin and Baudelaire, as the *flâneur* moves through the Paris crowd, he encounters a city in flux, a flux generated primarily by the rapid development of a consumer-capitalist economy, and its concomitant social and cultural disruptions—Baudelaire’s modernity. As Latham reiterates, “the *flâneur* has come to personify a key moment in the emergence of consumption-driven, modern, capitalist urban economy.” (189) For Benjamin, the *flâneur*’s movement is more than simple locomotion; it is a force that pulls him further and further along as his momentum gathers pace, ultimately draining him of his energy.

An intoxication comes over the man who walks long and aimlessly through the streets.

With each step, the walk takes on greater momentum... ever more irresistible the magnetism of the next street corner, or a distant mass of foliage, of a street name. Then comes hunger.... Like an ascetic animal, he flits through unknown districts—until,

utterly exhausted, he stumbles into his room, which receives him coldly and wears a strange air. (Benjamin, *The Arcades Project* 417 [M1, 3])

The *flâneur*, then, is driven. He is compelled forward by something which is beyond his direct comprehension: a something, I argue, we can usefully see as Lacan's small object (*le petit objet a*). As discussed in the previous chapter, for Lacan, *lack* generates a desire which drives the individual—in our case the *flâneur*, or the consumer—to endlessly search for some object on which to focus their desire. And so, like the *flâneur*, Lacan's individual is pulled towards an endless chain of small objects—*objet petit a*—in a futile attempt to sate his desire. Alas, by their natures, neither *lack* nor its resultant desire can be satisfied.

Benjamin's notion of the *flâneur* is useful for my project here in two important contexts: first, the important parallels that exist between 19th century Paris and the 21st century Chinese megacities such as Beijing³⁹ that, while they should not be overstated, offer fertile ground for a cultural analysis of the latter based on Benjamin's analysis of the former; and second, the manner in which Ning Ying's auteur-based filmmaking, particularly in her Beijing trilogy, evokes a striking resonance with Benjamin's concerns and methodologies in his *Arcades Project*.

³⁹ Chinese cities commonly considered as megacities include: Shanghai, Beijing, Guangzhou, Shenzhen and Wuhan, though there are by some counts as many as a dozen or more megacities today in China if one uses the common definition of a megacity as containing ten million inhabitants or more. Given the large number of such cities in China, and their widely varying geographies, cultures, etc., it seems questionable to paint them all with the same brush. For the purposes of my project, however, I am concentrating on Beijing, and so I will focus on the specifics of Beijing as opposed to any other cities in China. Having said this, I am not trying to suggest that any of the elements I discuss about Beijing are unique to that city. Other Chinese megacities share similar experiences with Beijing.

There are several important connections I want to draw between 19th century Paris and 21st century Beijing. The most obvious is the astonishing pace of social, cultural and economic change that underlies life in both nineteenth-century Paris and contemporary Beijing. In the first half of the nineteenth-century Paris was at the forefront of the tumultuous period of European industrialization known in the West as the “Industrial Revolution.” Similarly, in the post-Mao era, Beijing, along with other Chinese megacities, has been at the forefront of enormous social, cultural and economic changes. One result of the rapid pace of change is the wide-spread unease felt by these city’s inhabitants—to their occupants, these reconfigured cities often appear as some uncanny manifestation of their former selves. For Ning, this is of particular concern in *I Love Beijing*, “I wanted to see the changes of the city through the eyes of a taxi driver, hoping to deliver a sense of alienation within a city we were all once familiar with” (qtd. in Wei 67). The parallels between 19th century Paris and 21st-century Beijing present a range of useful contexts in which to utilize Benjamin’s work, especially his notion of the *flâneur*, in analyzing the cultural works of contemporary Beijing.

The more counter-intuitive assertion I want to make is the connection between Benjamin’s methodology in *The Arcades Project*, and Ning’s methodology as a filmmaker. Both are highly original thinkers within the context of their given media: Even today Benjamin’s *Arcades Project* defies easy categorization, as, perhaps to a lesser degree, do Ning’s films. More importantly, I see a similarity in their desire to understand experience in a specific materialist/realist manner. As noted earlier, Benjamin wants to imbue his work with “a heightened graphicness....[to] assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut

components...to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event” (*The Arcades Project* 461 [N2, 6]). By using small, precise details and individual moments, Benjamin works to capture the essence of the “total event” of a specific history. For Ning, capturing small, meaningful details is crucial to her process of capturing a reality within both her documentary and narrative films. She notes that critics have described her filmic approach as the “integration of pure recording with fiction” (“A Dialog” n.p.). Like Benjamin, Ning’s desire for certain type of realism (Benjamin’s “graphicness”) leads her to search for and make use of what we may usefully see as authentic “small individual moments”:

I keep on observing our daily life in Beijing today with a certain psychological distance... We use a lot of street shots, using the city’s endless and spectacular construction fields as the background... we even shot a restaurant during their regular business hours. Usually we always choose real locations for shooting, for example traditional men’s bath houses, police station, traditional courtyards where the common people live.... In the end it looks like we just took our cameras there and shot by chance.” (“A Dialog” n.p.)

Ning, also famous for her use of non-professional actors in her films, is, like Benjamin, interested in the intersection between a heightened, graphic⁴⁰ realism and the creation of specific histories. For both Benjamin and Ning, the result is a text that merges the realms of history and memory. Referring to her Beijing trilogy Ning notes that, “people still come to me saying, ‘we

⁴⁰ While the term *graphic* is most commonly used in the North American cinematic context to describe extreme violence or sexuality, I’m invoking it here in its more subtle connotation of instilling an image with a certain vividness through the use of explicit detail. Ning’s films, especially *I Love Beijing*, use real locations and real people (i.e. non-actors) to instill her films with a graphicness by allowing the explicit details of actual locations to infuse her work.

can see Beijing's recent history through your films.' Somehow these films have become a piece of visual memory about our changing way of life." ("A Dialog" n.p.) This notion of the past inside the present is, according to Rolf Tiedemann, also crucial to Benjamin's work. He quotes Benjamin's explanation that in his writing he tries to "pinpoint the precise spot in the present my historical construction would take as its vanishing point" (Benjamin quoted in Tiedemann 929). For both Ning and Benjamin, the historical nature of their creations, and the memories they contain, are inexorably linked to the methods by which they construct their texts in the present.

~ *The Gaze of the Flâneur Upon the Flâneur* ~

—Desi Follows Zhao Yun as She Window Shops (00:28:30 - 00:32:05) —

In this scene we first see Zhao Yun walking along a Beijing shopping street. The shot is from the cab's point of view and we become aware almost immediately of the sense that she is being watched. As she strolls down the sidewalk the taxi—our point of view—comes directly beside her and matches her speed. There is no doubt now that we are Desi, watching the young woman walking. This assumption is confirmed by a shot of Desi behind the wheel, sunglasses pushed half-down, slowly driving along the street. Looking in the rear view mirror, he adjusts his hair.

The next shot moves us from the the taxi to inside the shop windows; we have become part of the objects to be examined by her gaze. Though she never looks directly at the camera, as she moves into a close-up of her face and shoulders we follow her eyes as they look up and down the merchandise on offer. As we see Desi pull up in the background, we watch her face as she regards the merchandise. Her expressions reveal her thinking through the possibilities of what she surveys. As she turns and walks out of frame we can see Desi in his taxi matching her pace.

Finally, he pulls up beside her and we see she is carrying a vacuum. Driving beside her Desi uses what must be his best line:

— *Hey, do you need a ride?*

She abruptly waves him off and turns away, but he pursues her offering a discount rate. “No meter,” he tells her, “Just 10 yuan.” She agrees and jumps into the taxi.

The similarity between the momentum of Benjamin’s *flâneur* and the endless desire of Lacan’s subject is striking: Motion is essential to the conception of both. Like the shark, both the *flâneur* and Lacan’s desiring subject must continue moving to survive. And motion brings no satisfaction to either: In the end they are each left with only ceaseless movement within the endless cycles of postponement in which each are trapped. They both consume—for one it is the commodity, for the other the very crowd itself—but consumption does not sate their real appetites. Likewise, we understand that Desi is alienated as much from his own subjectivity as from a rapidly changing Beijing.

In this scene Desi and Zhao Yun are both caught in the act of looking, complicating Laura Mulvey’s notion of the male gaze⁴¹ both by doubling, and by inserting an element of Benjamin’s *flâneur* into its meaning. The audience gazes at Desi as he gazes at Zhao Yun as she gazes at the commodities on display on Beijing’s consumer-good laden streets. The Director’s readjustment of the gaze—especially its placement directly on a 21st century Beijing shopping street—allows us a more nuanced understanding of the *flâneur* and the male gaze itself. Though the *flâneur* was normally assumed to be male⁴², Ning gives us a female *flâneur* in the form of the

⁴¹ Mulvey lays out her seminal theory on the “male gaze” in “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema”.

⁴² cf. Latham.

librarian. Smartly dressed, she is clearly a member of Beijing's emerging middle-class. As she stops to look in the window, Ning shifts the shot behind the store's window so that the audience shares the same placement as the commodities Zhao Yun peruses. As she looks in the window, she doesn't look directly at the camera, and thus the audience does not so much *become* the commodities to be gazed upon, as come to share an intimate knowledge of the *flâneur*. We see her eyes as they move up and down the object of her gaze. As she scrunches up her mouth, and tilts her head quizzically, we see the process of her fantasizing possession of the object. As she turns abruptly and quickly moves out of the frame, we understand the constant movement of desire from one object to the next. As she moves on, Desi's taxi comes into focus in the background and the audience becomes aware of the second level of gaze as Desi watches her from his cab. Thus, Desi becomes the *flâneur* and Zhao Yun the commodity. Although the male gaze and the commodification of women occupy well trodden theoretical ground, Ning presents something novel here. Refusing to see the librarian's role as simply a commodified object, Ning allows her to occupy a complex role as simultaneously commodity and *flâneur*—both object of desire *and* desiring subject. In doing this, Ning uses Benjamin's "small individual moment" to imbue her character with great depth of realism in relation to women in contemporary Beijing.

Ultimately, it is the librarian who, in the midst of operating as the object of Desi's desire—his *objet petit a*—refuses the role as commodity-to-be-desired and pushes Desi to meet her work acquaintance, a young woman from the country, someone more appropriate for his desire. Thus, as she undercuts both Desi's role as desiring subject (by rejecting his desire and foreclosing his fantasy space) and his role as *flâneur* (surely any *flâneur*'s drifting existence

would be threatened by the refusal of the commodity to be fetishized), she reclaims her own subjectivity and leaves Desi further alienated in the city.

~ *The Audience as Flâneur* ~

— Desi & the Singing Woman (01:13:10 - 01:15:02) —

As the scene opens we are once again looking into the rear view mirror at the passenger in the back seat. A sad looking young woman sits quietly listening to the radio. She begins to sing:

— *Do you remember the dreams of youth?*

As she sings, Desi turns off the radio and we hear only the traffic sounds and her melancholy song.

— *Like a flower that never fades...*

They carried me through storms and rain...

They watched the world change.

For the loves that you paid a price,

As she sings, the taxi slowly overtakes a flatbed truck filled with migrant workers. With her song in the background, we see some of their faces as they turn to look in at the young, middle-class woman. As the truck slowly drifts past the taxi/camera, we are able to pick out individual faces—here then, we are confronted with the intimate. As the worker's truck speeds along the highway the workers will undoubtedly pass innumerable other cars, trucks, buses, bicycles and pedestrians. Yet here, driving at 60 or 70 kmh, the truck and the taxi pass within a meter of each other and the workers have the momentary opportunity to glimpse the beautiful young woman

singing. What do they make of her? Ning will not supply us with an easy answer. As the truck passes from view, the young woman continues to sing:

— *Fly, Fly.*

Find a home for your heart.

Hurt and in tears, down and in despair.... This is the price of love.

Her song over, she looks out the window at the passing traffic and asks Desi a question.

— *Driver, have you ever had your heart broken?*

This is the last line of the movie. We see Desi's face in close up as he remains silent, either unable or unwilling to answer. The next shot returns to the woman in the back seat and for the first time she looks directly at the camera. Given the closeness of the shot, and the Director's choice to use slow motion, the viewer cannot escape the woman's gaze. Slow motion tears stream down her cheeks as she first holds our gaze and then looks away. In the final shot of the film she resolutely returns her gaze to us and with tear-streaked lips slowly begins a long, sad smile. Her intense gaze makes the audience aware that they are the object being looked at.

The young woman singing in the back of Desi's cab fills a deceptively complex, albeit relatively short, role in the film. As she first starts to sing the taxi drifts past a flatbed truck filled with migrant workers. The truck passes by the taxi so closely we are able to make out the individual faces of the workers as they gaze impassively at the woman. At another level, however, we are also aware that they are looking in at the camera that films them as they ride along a Beijing street. As with the singer herself a moment later, their direct gaze disrupts our suspension of disbelief and we become, whether or not we are consciously aware of it, the object

of the migrant's gaze. Thus, we are momentarily pulled from our passive, drifting subject position as the film's *flâneur*—drifting through, but never part of, the Beijing crowds that pass before us. As Ning herself explains:

In a film we don't intend to offer solutions. Because we too live in a reality for which there are no ready solutions. Our only hope is that when, at the end of the movie, the young lady looking straight into the camera asks: "Driver, have you ever been unlucky in love?"⁴³, her gaze may move the public to change from a state of passive spectators into that of participants. ("A Dialog" n.p.)

As in the previous scene, the director presents the audience with an intense close-up that places the character directly in the center of the shot. Unlike the previous scene, however, in the film's closing shot the character looks directly at the camera, and, by extension, at us as audience. We are suddenly shifted from *flâneur*—comfortably watching the streets of Beijing drift by our view—to commodity; from desiring subject to anonymous object. Trapped in her gaze, we are suddenly aware of ourselves as the target of her question. Of course, the obvious answer to her question, "Have you ever had your heart broken?" is, for most people, yes. In this moment of becoming the object of her gaze, however, we become aware of the question *beyond* the question: Once you have had your heart broken, what then? How do we move through our lives once we encounter the Real of this pain? And, even more crucially, how have we survived the challenges of moving through a culture—the city—as both desiring subject and objectified other? Put simply, how do we endure the indifference the crowd feels to our pain?

⁴³ Note, the final words of the film are translated differently in the film's English language subtitles and in Ning's "A Dialog with Ackbar Abbas".

~ *Like the Angel* ~

For most of the film we, as audience, are comfortable with our role as drifting *flâneur*. And in our experience of the film we are comfortable as arm-chair *flâneurs*. Motionless in our seats, we watch as Beijing is driven past our gaze. Zhang Yingjin sees Desi's cab as a "drifting vehicle that connects contrasting ethnoscaapes in Beijing" (82). Ning imbues her shots of Beijing with a strong sense of Benjamin's "heightened graphicness" and "assembles large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components" (461 [N2, 6]). We see migrant workers drift in and out of fog-swept forests in the heart of Beijing; we see construction workers balanced above the city, seemingly floating between construction cranes; and everywhere we see the masses of Beijing in motion. And, behind it all, we see the endless landscape of construction and development that is contemporary Beijing.

The director shows us a city both drained and simultaneously fueled by its overwhelming momentum. Everywhere we see the effects of motion: the physical strain on the commuters and workers that populate Beijing's streets; the overwhelming pollution that chokes the city's inhabitants; and the endless cars, trucks, buses, vans, motorcycles, bicycles and other motorized vehicles. Throughout the film, much of the frame is in motion, often in chaotic and contradictory ways. A standard shot Ning uses within the cab is the rear-view mirror, either from the front seat looking back at the passengers, or from the rear, looking forward at Desi. In almost all rear view mirror shots, the mirror is framed by the views outside the car, often views of conflicting motion out both the rear and front windows. The taxi's characters are surrounded by a rushing landscape, moving at once both forward and backward, representing the future and the past of Beijing. This

rhapsody of past and future, of endless movement, recalls Benjamin's conception of history, especially his famous description of the angel of history:

His face is turned towards the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe....The angel would like to stay...and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned...This storm is what we call progress (*Illusions* 257).

At the very end of the movie, we are confronted with the profound stillness of a single young woman whose piercing gaze forces us out of our role as *flâneur*, and asks us how we are able to keep moving: through the city, through our lives. Like the angel, we are propelled into a future to which our back is turned. And, like history, we are both watched and watching.

Conclusion

Everyone struggles with their identity. Writers struggle for an audience as well as for their identity.

—Wang Yuan (*Preface* n.p.)

An unspoken truth running throughout this thesis is precisely articulated by Wang’s quote: everyone struggles with their identity—*authors included*.

As scholars and analysts of cultural/literary texts we cannot deny that we are also *authors of* cultural texts. Our use of theory, from its selection, to its explication and application, becomes a part of our struggle to establish a personally meaningful subject position within our own (scholarly) community. In this sense, theory is always deeply *personal* while simultaneously culturally (and ideologically) coded. To borrow from Marx: Theorists construct their own subject positions, but they do not construct them as they please.⁴⁴ In this thesis I have constructed a subject position based on a configuration of psychoanalytic theory (Lacan and Žižek) commingled with Walter Benjamin’s idiosyncratic Marxism.⁴⁵ It is a subject position that I believe is, at least to a degree, unique—or perhaps more importantly, *useful*. Of course, like

⁴⁴ Here I am repurposing Marx’s famous quote: “Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please; they do not make it under self-selected circumstances, but under circumstances existing already, given and transmitted from the past. The tradition of all dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the brains of the living.” (Marx 5).

⁴⁵ Though some—most notably Arendt—would argue that, at the end of the day, Benjamin is not a Marxist at all. Or, perhaps it would be more accurate to say that some argue that Benjamin’s engagement with Marxism, and its subsequent effects on his thinking, were on balance a negative influence.

Marx's theorist noted above, I construct my own critical identity out of the materials presented to me by the traditions and history of the field upon which I choose to operate: broadly, cultural studies.

As noted in the introduction to this thesis, engaging in both theory and praxis is crucial to my specific goals: I both generate *and* apply cultural theory. There is, perhaps, nothing noteworthy about this statement: Anyone engaged in cultural/textual analysis will need to construct at least a modest theoretical framework, even if that process involves little beyond the absorption of an existing body of theory. In essence, there is no using theory without the generation of a unique conceptual configuration of the theory one wishes to use—sharing one's particular theoretical configuration with one's reader is simply good manners. In other words, I'm rejecting the notion that anyone doing meaningful analysis can simply *take up* a theoretical position developed by someone else, and in doing so adopt what might crudely be described as an *objective* critical position. To do so would be to deny their own struggles with identity.

My own critical subject position, as evidenced by this thesis, contains a strong belief in using an open-ended methodology in reading texts: For me, theory is inseparable from its *practice*. This means that my practice of cultural analysis demands constant questioning, innovation, and evolution: Do our theoretical configurations *work*? Describing utopian writing, Catherine Belsey writes:

The juxtaposition of cultures, values and meanings has the effect of relativizing current arrangements. Our existing social order is differed and distanced, its inadequacies thrown into relief. Utopian writing does not necessarily prescribe, but by presenting options for debate, it sets out to motivate discontent. In addition, it also implies, however

tentatively in some instances, that there is a choice, that things need not be as they are, as we 'know' them. (*Desire* 197).

While my work here does not involve utopian texts, I believe there is an element within Belsey's description that captures what I am hoping to do: My goal in opening up new approaches to the reading of contemporary Chinese cultural texts is to motivate discontent, however slight, with the current limitations of our theoretical approaches. Put simply, I hope it raises more questions than it answers, while still providing a clear direction and making a meaningful contribution to the questions at hand: Namely, how do those of us outside of China better make sense of contemporary Chinese cultural texts? This conclusion, then, is not so much a summary as a re-framing of my core intentions and a restating of my fundamental inquiry: I have endeavored to construct a theoretical framework, and an attendant methodology, with which to explore and analyze the structure of feeling (along with the concomitant subject positions) found within cultural texts produced by inhabitants of the cultural borderlands of contemporary Beijing in order to better understand how contemporary urban Chinese life feels to those who live it. It is in the spirit of *motivating discontent* with the very subject position I have created for myself that I want to look forward, rather than backwards.

Future Directions

One of the clearest future lines of inquiry I see coming out of this work is to explore the role that cultural texts play in the process of subject identity constitution in contemporary China. Building on the conceptions of desire outlined in the first half of this text, I believe it would be worth asking how exactly desire is being used in contemporary China as a mechanism in the advancement of the ideological, economic, cultural and political configurations of China's ruling

elements. In particular, I would be interested to examine how this mechanism is operating within the cultural/textual domain. In other words, how are cultural texts being used in the project the ruling class is engaged in to shape the subject positions of contemporary Chinese individuals? Cultural elements ranging from propaganda, to spectacle, to consumer-based entertainment and advertising are being invoked to configure subjectivities around themes such as nationalism, tradition, and collectivism.

Another line of inquiry suggests itself if we recall that I opened this thesis by describing that many Beijing residents ironically pronounce China as *Chai-na(r)* (拆那), translated as something close to “tear this down”.⁴⁶ The widely acknowledged rapidity of the changes taking place in China’s cities invites an exploration of the way in which cultural texts are generating a collective memory of the ever disappearing elements of the Chinese city. As noted at the beginning of this thesis, Ning Ying has described her idea that there is an actual psychic trauma that the inhabitants of Beijing experience precisely due to the speed at which their city is reconfigured around them. The memories of the city, she claims, are being erased before they can fully form. My work establishing deep connections between psychoanalytic theory, the city and Benjamin’s notions of history and trauma would benefit such an investigation. Further, my theorizing relating to the complex roles played by the cultural texts within contemporary China could also provide an important building block for such a project.

My brief theorizing about the nature of Anzaldúa’s concept of the *borderland*, and its application to an analysis of contemporary Chinese authorship suggests, I believe, another useful line of inquiry based on a surprising cultural reality: China will soon have more English speakers

⁴⁶ One even finds this ironic slogan spray painted on walls in certain more open parts of the city.

than any other country in the world (Gregg n.p.). Anzaldúa's conceptions of language (especially its power to alienate an individual from their native culture) opens up a range of questions about what China might look like if its massive number of English speaking (younger) citizens began to feel a sense of alienation from their own native culture. Could such language students, without ever leaving their homeland, come to occupy a new subject position we might term *expatriate-lite*? Again, the role of cultural texts could be key in understanding the unique structure of feeling, and its concomitant subject positions, inhabited by these young English speaking Chinese. Given that such subjectivities will likely run counter to the ideological and cultural goals of China's dominant power structures, studying them would likely be productive.

Finally, the most straight-forward line of inquiry suggested by my work in this thesis would involve an expansion of the number and scope of the cultural texts analyzed. In other words, a viable follow-up project could consist solely of the careful analysis of a more thorough and methodical selection of cultural texts to better understand the range and scope of their impact on contemporary China, especially in the area of subject identity formation.

* * *

While acknowledging the fallacy of trying to suggest any type of overarching metanarrative for something as chaotically diverse as the lived experiences of 21st century Beijing ren,⁴⁷ it still seems useful to note that there is at least one consequential thread that runs within and between the subjectivities explored in the two cultural texts examined: All the characters examined share a strong sense of dislocation rooted, at least to some degree, in the rapid rate of change—physical, social, cultural, economic—occurring in contemporary China.

⁴⁷ Beijing people, or, Beijingers

Put simply, if there is one theme that underlies the contemporary Chinese urban experience, it may well be the alienation resulting from what Ning Ying calls the “frantic erasure of collective memory” (Ning “Interview”). Indeed, Ning acknowledges that one of the main motivations for much of her film work has been documenting what I would call the rapidly vanishing structure of feeling of contemporary Chinese life. Working as an expatriate, Ning is well positioned to see and record this precise experience, and thus her texts, like Wang’s, are excellent examples of just such a record. My hope is that my work in this thesis has provided a useful theoretical framework and methodology that will, ultimately, assist those of us from outside contemporary Chinese culture in reading and understanding the structure of feeling captured in these works.

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