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In this issue:

H.G. Adler
Leora Auslander
Patty Chang
Robert Finn
Kenneth Gross
Lawrence F. Kaplan
Lawrence Lessig
Daniel Mendelsohn
Sam Nunn
Adam Posen
Dennis Ross
David Warren Sabean
Volker Schlöndorff





FROM TOUCH WOULD—THE PRODUCT LOVE, OR DIE WAHRE LIEBE, 2008

TOUCH WOULD

A 1928 homonym spurs cinematic reinterpretations

By Patty Chang

SOUND FILM WAS INVENTED in the 1920s. It became a sensation with the 1928 Warner Brother's hit, *The Jazz Singer*. But new sound technology posed a problem for studios' international distribution in the new global marketplace: while language could easily be changed in silent films by splicing in new inter-titles, it was not as simple for sound film. It would be years before sound dubbing was perfected.

In the interim, studios had to find a way to stay on top of the international film market: they made Multiple Language Version (MLV) films. For these, directors re-shot the same film narrative in different languages. If actors were multilingual, they would star in the different versions of

the films. And in 1930, Chinese-American actress Anna May Wong starred in an English version of the film *The Flame of Love* with an English-speaking leading man, a German version with a German leading man, and a French version with a French leading man.

I imagine the three films being projected simultaneously side-by-side in a cinema, the three versions being repetitions, but not precisely so. What is lost between the different languages in the films? Does the dialogue fall into synchronicity? Or is there an annoying repetition or uncannily déjà vu? Does the actress move differently as a French speaker? It fascinates me that in each film she performs the other for that

culture, but as a trilogy she is the center. There is a wavering energy in being ambiguously both.

For a variety of reasons, I could only locate the English version of the film. So to pass the time, I researched. And in one biography, I came across some quotations by Walter Benjamin.

In 1928 the two had actually met: Benjamin interviewed Anna May Wong—at the time a film starlet playing popular melodrama—for the German literary magazine *Die Literarische Welt*.

In the article, which details their meeting, Benjamin asks Wong, "With what form of representation would you express yourself, if film was not available to you?"



FROM *TOUCH WOULD—THE PRODUCT LOVE, OR DIE WAHRE LIEBE*, 2008

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

I IMAGINE THE THREE FILMS BEING PROJECTED SIMULTANEOUSLY SIDE-BY-SIDE IN A CINEMA, THE THREE VERSIONS BEING REPETITIONS, BUT NOT PRECISELY SO. WHAT IS LOST BETWEEN THE DIFFERENT LANGUAGES IN THE FILMS?

She answers with the expression “touch wood,” as in the superstitious expression “knock on wood,” to prevent an unwanted event from occurring. In the original text, though, “touch wood” is printed in English as “touch would.”

What are the chances Walter Benjamin actually believed that Anna May Wong meant to say touch would become her form of expression if film were not available to her? Moreover, why would Benjamin, whose work has had enormous influence on film theory and contemporary culture, write about an Asian-American film starlet working in Berlin?

In my 2006 video *A Chinoiserie Out of the Old West*, I had three scholars translate

this Benjamin article; they all translate this “touch” part differently. One of them has Wong saying that if film were not available to her, touch would become her form of expression.

In wordplay, Freud speaks of the breakdown of meaning to be a relief of the conscious mind and a subverting of the rules of language and meaning. He theorizes that “the unconscious takes the opportunity of a word or phrase to intrude a meaning that has been repressed.” This slip interrupts our everyday reality and opens imagination to a whole other world existing simultaneously.

After considering all the possible meanings of touch wood/would, the tone of the

text changes. A break is created. I become confused and unsure of the intentions of the article. I become more conscious of being deceived by the meaning presented. I, too, question if Anna May Wong really did mean to say “touch would.” Perhaps she was purposefully enjoying the mischievous distortion of her speech because it played with the ironic inversion of the cultural critic as witness to her otherness. Or maybe Benjamin did it on purpose to spite her. Having been known not to put up with intellectual inferiors, perhaps he was having a jab at her self-importance of being a movie star by implying that the film star is only a prostitute. My response is a physical suspicion, as confusion is

often physical. Like film, the conscious and the unconscious cohabitate, waver back and forth, intentions unclear.

The meeting of Wong and Benjamin and their point of contact as a Freudian slip makes tenuous and wavering the relationship of theory over medium, intentions over coincidences, conscious over subconscious. Another narrative is forever hovering, even if it is not visible, as a simultaneous and alternative narrative.

In the *Chinoiserie* video, the translators' confusion of touching as a form of expression brings to my mind the idea of sex workers' roles as "professional touchers." It also problematically frames Benjamin's Freudian slip as a subconscious desire for Wong, or more generally, the West's subconscious desire for the East. In this context, the use of "professional touchers" in the form of sex workers could be stand-ins for Wong, and the use of translators could be stand-ins for Benjamin. Marx claimed that "prostitution is only a specific expression of the general prostitution of the laborer." From Brecht to Godard to Leftist Chinese cinema, the prostitute has been used as a symbol of the problems of ailing modern society.

Touch Would: The Product Love, or Die Wahre Liebe is my attempt at making a pornographic film starring the characters Wong and Benjamin, in China. *Die Wahre Liebe* was a working title of Bertoldt Brecht's play *The Good Person of Szechuan* (1943). In this play, three gods come to earth to find out if there are any good persons left. They meet a prostitute who is good, and they give

society"). The actress who plays Wong in *Touch Would* is a restaurant owner in her non-acting life. She juggles, on the one hand, her ultimate desire in life to be an actor, with being a business owner within the changing economic landscape of China. Both the characters of Wong and Benjamin are played by Chinese television actors. By requiring Chinese actors to perform both

BY REQUIRING CHINESE ACTORS TO PERFORM BOTH THE ROLES OF ANNA MAY WONG AND BENJAMIN, THE VIDEO REVERSES THE COMMON PRACTICE IN EARLY HOLLYWOOD OF HAVING ALL-WHITE CASTS PORTRAY ASIAN CHARACTERS IN "YELLOWFACE."

her a gift of money in order to continue her good deeds. With this money, she opens a shop and immediately discovers the difficulties that come with continuing her generosity while being a business owner. To solve this problem, she creates a male-cousin character who arrives to do any bad deeds she, as a good person, cannot imagine doing – becoming, in effect, two people.

An ethical question behind *The Good Person of Szechuan* is how a person could stay "good" in a capitalist society (or, as they prefer to say in China, "market-driven

the roles of Anna May Wong and Benjamin, the video reverses the common practice in early Hollywood of having all-white casts portray Asian characters in "yellowface." It also situates the making of a pornographic film and soap opera within Wong's authentic culture, thereby translating it from a *Chinoiserie* into a Western. ☞

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