

## Sino-Brazilian Cinematic Connections: Yu Lik-wai's *Plastic City*

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**Abstract:** This article positions Lik-wai's 2008 Sino-Brazilian film *Plastic City* as a precursor of BRICS cinema and, through a close textual analysis demonstrates how it critically engages Sino-Brazilian relations, flows of capital, commodities, immigration and culture, as well as environmental issues in a matrix of globalization from an emerging economy perspective. *Plastic City* is intertextually linked to Chinese, Brazilian and world cinema, illuminating its connections to past and present film movements and how it mobilizes their poetics and politics.

**Keywords:** Sino-Brazilian film. Gangster film. Globalization. Environmental noir. Asian-Brazilians. BRICS cinema. Piracy. *Plastic City*.

## Conexões Cinematográficas Sino-Brasileiras: *Plastic City* de Yu Lik-wai

**Resumo:** Este artigo analisa o filme Sino-brasileiro *Plastic City/Cidade Plástica* de Yu Lik-wai de 2008 como um precursor do cinema BRICS e, através de uma análise textual, demonstra como o filme criticamente negocia as relações sino-brasileiras, fluxos de capital, commodities, imigração e cultura, assim como questões ambientais em uma matriz de globalização a partir de uma perspectiva das economias emergentes. *Plastic City* está intertextualmente ligada ao cinema chinês, brasileiro e mundial, iluminando suas conexões com movimentos de filmes do passado e do presente, e como mobiliza suas estéticas e políticas.

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**Palavras-chave:** Cinema sino-brasileiro. Filme de gangster. Globalização. Noir ambiental. Asiático-brasileiros. Cinema BRICS. Pirataria. *Plastic City*.

## **Conexiones cinematográficas sino-brasileñas: *La Ciudad De Plástico* de Yu Lik-wai**

**Resumen:** Este artículo posiciona la película chino-brasileña 2008 de Yu Lik-wai *Plastic City* como un precursor del cine BRICS y, a través de un análisis textual detallado, demuestra cómo la película críticamente negocia las relaciones chino-brasileñas, flujos de capital, productos básicos, inmigración y cultura, así como los problemas ambientales, en una matriz de globalización desde una perspectiva de las economías emergentes. *Plastic City* está intertextualmente ligada al cine chino, brasileño y mundial, iluminando sus conexiones con movimientos cinematográficos del pasado y del presente, y cómo mobiliza su estética y política.

**Palabras clave:** Cine sino-brasileño. Película de gangsters. Globalización. Medio ambiente noir. Asiático-brasileños. Cine BRICS. Piratería. *Plastic City*.

### **Introduction**

Debates on the global economy and globalization have focused on the new economic, political and cultural power of the so-called emerging economies and their potential challenge to Euro-American hegemony. Now, like in 2001 when the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa added to the quartet in 2010) acronym was coined, discourse around Brazil and China and the other BRICS countries still seems to oscillate between, on the one hand their growing geopolitical power, economic development and an increasing middle class with economic affluence and business opportunity and, on the other hand, the problems of economic inequality, corruption, environmental degradation, a lack of human rights, immigration and migration, poverty, violence and crime. Whatever the problems, these debates have signalled a clear theoretical shift from earlier arguments revolving around post-colonialism and Western capitalist hegemony towards a more uncertain and multi-centred world. *Plastic City* (2008) is an Sino-Brazilian film that focuses on the negative pole of these changes in global political economy.

This article demonstrates that the traditions of the art-house film and the gangster genre, which has interrogated urban modernity and capitalism and the dreams associated to them, *Plastic City* raises a dark mirror towards the effects of globalization. This article scrutinises several broad as well as interrelated fields of forces that are seen to propel geopolitical change and globalization and how *Plastic City* engages them. In their study of the intellectual history of the study of globalization, Coleman and Sajed name five interrelated domains as central in studies of globalization: capitalism, new technologies, the environment, culture and identity, and governance (with the rise of supranational organizations such as the WTO etc.).(COLEMAN & SAJED, 2103 p.2) This article tackles more or less all of these domains but particularly concentrates on the cinematic representation of capitalism in particular its neoliberal variant, new technologies and mediated culture and environmental concerns. Governance is accounted for in a study of the representation of the state and its organs. I argue that the film is a counter narrative to global politics that ties all the aforementioned spheres together in its critical stance emphasizing problems from a particularly emerging or 'middle-economy' standpoint.

In the sphere of global culture the article particularly draws connections both to Greater Chinese and Brazilian as well as global screen culture. Cinematic and other intertextual connections mesh as part of a postmodern media marketplace, but, more importantly, they link current films to earlier and ongoing political movements and unsettled social problems and contradictions. Through intertextual analysis the article demonstrates that this film and the hybrid Brazil it depicts is not only a place and image(s) but also an assemblage of quotations used to engage with and criticize the global political economy and film aesthetics. (for a more comprehensive study with this premise of films about China see MARCHETTI, 2018) These connections are drawn and politics keyed out with a close textual analysis that attests *Plastic City* is symptomatic of, and engages critically with the ethical dilemmas caused by neoliberalist policy and global capitalism that are felt with greater gravity in a recently liberalized emerging economy.

Set in the neighbourhood of Liberdade, the favelas of São Paulo and the Amazon rainforest, *Plastic City* is the story of Sino-Brazilian man called Yuda (HK actor Anthony Wong), who runs a knock-off merchandise empire, and his adopted son and business accomplice Kirin (Japanese actor Joe Odagiri). The film follows how the men are drawn into a power struggle over markets with other politically connected illegal entrepreneurs who conspire against them. The ruthless competition combined with international pressure to combat piracy becomes the protagonists downfall.

*Plastic City* is a Brazilian-Chinese-Japanese-Hong Kong co-production directed by Yu Lik-wai, a Hong Konger best known for being Jia Zhangke's long-time cinematographer. Yu was educated in Belgium's INSAS and like fellow cinephile Jia, is a film school graduate with a broad knowledge of world cinema. *Plastic City* can be seen as natural evolution for Yu who has moved from depictions of domestic migration in the PRC and Greater China to transpacific international immigration with the film. Before *Plastic City* he directed several critically acclaimed films, such as the 1999 documentary *Neon Goddesses*, about three migrant women working in the nightclubs of Beijing. His feature films include *Love Will Tear Us Apart* (1999), about mainland immigrants in HK, and the dystopian sci-fi *All Tomorrow's Parties* (2002) both screened at Cannes in different categories. He formed the production company Xstream Pictures with Jia that also co-produced *Plastic City*, the other production companies being Novo filmes and Gullane Films (based in São Paulo) and Sundream Motion Pictures (HK), with Bitters End (Japan) and Paris Filmes (Brazil) distributing.

### **BRICS film and Sino-Brazilian connections**

The Chinese leader Xi Jinping initially suggested the idea of BRICS joint film productions at the 8th BRICS Summit (Goa, 2016). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the China Film Administration initiated the Cooperation Program of Directors from BRICS countries in 2017 and the first co-directed film, *Where Has Time Gone?*, came out in October 2017. The film project was produced

and the Chinese segment of the anthology film directed by Jia Zhangke. The plan is that one such co-production would be made annually till 2021. In 2018 Jia announced that the second official film co-production project, with women's stories at its centre. The title of the film is *Half the Sky* – echoing Mao's maxim on the importance of women's part in society. The film has been shown at several festivals and opened in China in May 10th 2019, it features shorts by five BRICS woman directors, Jia executive producing.

The Brazilian Walter Salles directed *When the Earth Trembles*, the concluding segment of *Where Has Time Gone* set around the events of 2015 Bento Rodrigues dam disaster in Minas Gerais. Owned by mining company Samarco, the Bento Rodrigues dam collapsed, flooding the town with toxic waste and causing a mudslide that killed hundreds of people. The short narrates the recovery of a schoolteacher and her son who lose their husband and father in the flood. Jia's chapter of the anthology film, *Revive*, is about a migrant worker couple in the creative industries who rekindle their love. The short moves between Shanxi and Beijing and comments on China's one child policy. Now, as the policy is being partially lifted, economic reasons instead of policy stand in the way of the couple's dreams of another child. Another Sino-Brazilian cinematic connection is Walter Salles' documentary about Jia, *A Guy From Fenyang* (2015) (Fenyang being Jia's hometown in Shanxi province), a critical appraisal of the director's work that contains several clips from his films and interviews with Jia and his close accomplices, such as his wife, the actress Zhao Tao and Yu Lik-wai.

Delhi held the first BRICS film festival in 2016, part of different cultural events connected with India hosting the BRICS summit in 2016. The apparent brainchild of Prime Minister Narendra Modi, the festival is now a yearly event. *Plastic City*, made almost a decade before these official efforts stands as an early precursor of BRICS film-making.

## Global Underdogs

*Plastic City*, set on a Sino-Brazilian axis, emblemizes the new politico-economic changes of the last decades, not only in these countries, but also in the new shift in economic power towards Asia and the Pacific, as well as the rise of the BRICS. However the film chooses to look at the downsides of this new order, focusing on informal entrepreneurs operating on the margins of the global economy. The character of Yuda is based on the real-life character of Hong Kong immigrant Law Kin chong who ran an army of street vendors and shopping malls selling pirated product in São Paulo, and was arrested due to the government's anti-piracy drive. (for more on the case, Law's racist treatment in the media, and how *Plastic City* represents social class in the field of Latin American cinema see VÁZQUEZ VÁZQUEZ, 2018 pp. 126-127) Yuda's corporation and shopping mall in São Paulo are called *Novo Mundo* (New World) and have a logo of the planet. The idea of the globe, often used as the insignia of media conglomerates (such as Universal Pictures or Brazil's powerful Rede Globo), creates an illusion of both the world at one's fingertips and of control, visualizing dreams associated with globalization and new technologies. However, the film progressively shows that behind these images and dreams huge problems arise and older ones persist. Yuda's precarious position is somewhat akin to that of emerging economies, a in-between, semi-peripheral (to use the world systems analysis term) position. Caught culturally and economically between China and Brazil, he is in centre field with a successful businesses in São Paulo and political connections but yet he is marginalized through the informal nature of his business and ethnicity. Yuda's business rests on manufacturing in China, a container ship he uses to transports fake goods, and the distribution systems in the informal markets of Brazil. The nature of his business is symbolic of the developments in the world economy such as economic growth in China because of export manufacturing and Brazil due to commodity exports. At the time of the production of the film the so-called Rise of China was well

on its way (economically liberalized China's GDP having grown in leaps for two decades at that point), and it is still seen as the global factory floor, regardless of the move of manufacturing to even cheaper locations. During this time Brazil's economy grew and, even though it has had its ups and downs, it is seen as an emerging economy with an expanding and consuming middle class. More importantly, the paths of commodities and capital no longer go through or are controlled by the US and the West. In 2009 China became Brazil's largest trading partner and the biggest investor in its economy, with Brazilian producers slaking the thirst for the commodities that China's growing economy craves. The situation has changed dramatically from the times of the military dictatorship, when in 1964 nine Chinese men sent to further trade between the countries were tortured and thrown in jail for a year. At that time the dictatorship viewed the PRC as a communist backwood insignificant in world trade. (MANNER & TEIVAINEN, 2016 p.128) Even though now the treatment of Chinese trade delegations has turned on its head, this trade is not only seen a boon, it also raises some concern. Larry Rohter notes:

Doubt and discontent are starting to arise in some quarters of Brazil, especially among the business leaders in São Paulo. In colonial times, Brazil's natural riches maintained the prosperity of the Portuguese empire without benefiting Brazilians, and in the nineteenth century, those resources were essential to Great Britain and the United States in their drives to industrialize. Brazilians are very much aware of that pattern. The last thing they want in the twenty-first century is to again be cast in the role of the supplier to an emerging industrial giant, forced to content themselves with crumbs. As a result, demands that China process some of its products in Brazil, thereby creating added value for both sides, are growing. So are complaints about the Chinese export juggernaut, which threatens to wipe out Brazilian domestic industry in such traditional areas as footwear and textiles. (ROHTER, 2011 p.159)

The world system has changed. Brazilian capitalists now fear Chinese manufacturing power instead of US hegemony, worrying about whether their post-colonial position of commodity producer will continue. Shifts in global economics and manufacturing and the anxieties they set forth, such as xenophobia, act as the backdrop for *Plastic City*.

The main protagonists, Yuda and Kirin, are Asian immigrants. However their marginalization is not only linked to the newer economic threats posed by Chinese economic power or immigration, but also Brazil's historically problematic race relations. Brazil likes to see itself as a tropical multicultural society where all the different races live happily together, but this is not the case: in Brazil, race is of importance. In Brazilian society Asians have traditionally been looked upon quite well, even though the more recently arrived Chinese and Koreans (the Japanese have been there since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, when they immigrated there to work on the coffee plantations in São Paulo) are thought to be connected with contraband trade as well as taking local's jobs. In this sense the film first follows a stereotype of Asians working in the knock-off market, but then it progressively problematizes this position by centering the marginalized in the narrative and presenting them as complex characters caught in a Byzantine economic and bureaucratic network that extends beyond the national. In Brazil, race and social class are known to correlate. The protagonists' minority position, alluded to in several racist epithets in the film, tie them to an underclass position. They work on the boundaries of the business system, making money from counterfeit goods in the grey market. In this sense, Yuda is not so different from a *mingong* migrant worker or the "lower strata" in the big cities in China that so many of Jia's or Yu's earlier films are about. Even though Yuda is a crime boss, his precarious position is, in some ways, still comparable to that of the small-time hustlers that populate the films of Jia and the PRC's Sixth Generation or Urban Generation of filmmakers, the business this time being knock-off goods instead of, for example, prostitution, the protection racket, ticket touting or pickpocketing to name but a few of the precarious



livelihoods of Jia's and Yu's protagonists from earlier films. Also Yuda's unstable position as a business owner reflects the politics of ownership in emerging economies in general, which is more based on control and the ability to extract profit, a sort of fief, instead of actual ownership. Also, another reading could see the protagonists as emblematic of the swelling middle classes of the emerging economies: precarious but developing, prosperous but boxed in. The characters are not the wealthy who, with their assets, can provide themselves with the "flexible citizenship" that Aihwa Ong studied among the HK elite (ONG, 1999) or what Zygmunt Bauman called "Nomadic" or "Extraterritorial elites" (BAUMAN, 2000 pp. 198-199).

In the film the ethnic protagonists form links with other people who scramble next to paths of capital; Kirin's girlfriend Rita (Brazilian actress Tainá Müller) is an exotic dancer and a prostitute who, not unlike similar female characters of many Sixth Generation films, has a child to support. The ever-present prostitute is not the only theme the film shares with Yu's or Jia's other work and indeed, more generally with recent art-house cinema from China and Brazil. Themes such as illegality, immigration and migration, a world in motion and transport are manifested in the *mise-en-scène* of the film in which the characters still find themselves in an ineluctable position, the malfunction or total absence of state institutions, particularly the rule of law and the mediatization of society, connect *Plastic City* to the two directors earlier and later work.

## Global Gangsters

*Plastic City* straddles the slippery ground between art and commerce. The film, even though being of the art-house/festival film type, can be categorized as being part of the gangster genre. The genre has its roots well beyond its 1930s Hollywood classic era and is very complex and varied, not only throughout its history in Hollywood but also in its manifestations in world cinema. When looking at Greater Chinese and Brazilian film history and the

transnational appeal of the gangster genre, it is no surprise that the producers of *Plastic City* chose to make a film in the realm of the underworld. Gangster films have been tremendously popular in recent years, not only in Greater China and Brazil, but also the other BRICS as well.

Crime and illegality have a well-established presence in the history of Brazilian film, almost from its inception. Italo-Brazilian film pioneer Affonso Segreto already reconstructed famous crime cases in film in the first decade of the 20<sup>st</sup> century, in the golden age, or *Bela Epoca*, of Brazilian film that lasted from around 1900 to about 1912, during which time local film dominated the domestic market. Brazil's first feature *Os estranguladores / The Stranglers*, by Antônio Leal, came out in 1908 and was a sensational re-enactment of an actual crime (LOPEZ, 2003, p. 111). The rural *cangaceiro* bandits adventured on screen in the productions of the high-end Vera Cruz studios, in *cinema novo* films and *chanchada* musical comedies. In recent decades the a majority of the greatest international successes in Brazilian film have been in the crime genre, such as *City of God* (2002) or the *Elite Squad* (2007–2010) series.

Gangster film is a strong genre in Greater Chinese cinema and particularly in HK where the industry is noted for its reinvention and mastering of the genre. Directors such as John Woo – whose “heroic bloodshed” triad films redefined action film aesthetics – or the *Infernal Affairs* series directed by Andrew Lau and Alan Mak (2002–2003) that was remade into *The Departed* (2006) by Martin Scorsese, are perhaps the most internationally known HK gangster films. In Greater China the gangster film is almost like the *wuxia* martial arts epic in that many of the prolific directors – such as Zhang Yimou (People's Republic of China [PRC]), Wong Kar-wai (HK) and Hou Hsiao-Hsien (Taiwan), who are all associated with art-house fare – have tried their hand at it. The PRC is a special case as gangsterism is censored by the SARFT (State Association for Radio Film and Television). However, gangster films and series are made, often set in the politically safer era before the founding of the PRC (1949). Jia's films on contemporary China, like Yu's, have featured if not cinematic gangsters then at least

petty criminals, starting from Jia's aptly named first feature, *Xiao Wu / Pickpocket* (1990). *Plastic City's* title in Chinese *Dang kou* (荡寇) means *Outlaws* which evokes *The Water Margin* also known as *Outlaws*, that is considered one of the Great Four Classical Novels of Chinese Literature made into a film by Chang Cheh at the Shaw Brother Studio in HK in 1972. Chinese popular culture is infused with stories from *The Water Margin* and their dramatization for example in Beijing opera, quoted in Jia's *A Touch of Sin* (2013). The *wuxia* heroes like the outlaws of *The Water Margin* have a tradition of rising against corrupt officials and governments. Yuda and Kirin continue on this trajectory in their code of honour amongst thieves and struggles against corrupt politicians and their criminal partners.

The gangster genre is markedly not only transnational but also highly social as noted by a variety of critics. Economic reasons often propel the narrative for example in the subgenre of the rise-and-fall epic (which is often associated with immigrants in both world and HK cinema). The breakdown of community, often symbolized by the crime family, through the deterritorializing powers of the market is another popular narrative. *Plastic City* manifests both of these social themes of the genre as it follows the ruin of the immigrant Yuda's criminal business. In a particularly transpacific intertextual connection it has references to the HK "heroic bloodshed" films set in the Triads and the *yakuza eiga*, the Japanese gangster film. These films often mourn the loss of traditional values in modern society, such as community and loyalty. This theme is replicated as the characters in *Plastic City* lose their positions and their crime family is wiped out in an ever more cabalistic and global economy.

*Plastic City*, as crime films often, manifests components of both the *film noir* style the conspiracy film. The characters are drawn deeper in a turf war in a setting of treachery and paranoia and there seems to be no escape except for prison or death, which both come to the main protagonists. Here *Plastic City* corresponds to Fredric Jameson's ideas of conspiracy films as allegories for the totality of late capitalism (Ernst Mandel) and the individual's

role in it. In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic* Jameson reads the prolific conspiracy film production of the US in the 1970s and 1980s to show how these films articulate a nightmare vision of how we as individuals feel within the emergent world system in which multinational corporations hold sway. Postmodern texts tend to favour allegory as the multinational economy we live in is well-near impossible to represent. As Jameson postulated the social totality that he tries to grasp in cultural texts cannot be seen as such and can only be: “tracked like a crime whose clues we accumulate, not knowing we are parts and organs of this obscenely moving and stirring zoological monstrosity”(JAMESON, 1994 p. 117.). This sort of detective position is not unlike that of Yuda and Kirin who suddenly lose their bearings as their business comes under attack by businesses and organizations that reach way beyond national borders not to mention their local domain. The conspiracy film posits the protagonists to be a cog in the wheel or a node in a network, in other words someone caught in mechanisms – be they bureaucratic, economic or institutional – that are out of their control, this theme being one of the main themes of the noir style that often goes hand in hand with the crime film and also pervades *Plastic City*.

These allegories as Jameson notes, always include a mediatized or communicational third dimension which is both a “representational solution and representational problem” (JAMESON, 1992, p. 10) of these cultural texts. The mediatized and communicational dimension of *Plastic City* is emphasized in its metacinematic or self-referential form, as well as its mise-en-scène and narrative. New technologies, principally those of telecommunications, are highlighted. The cellphone, the advent of which to Bauman is the symbolic last blow to spatial or territorial power opposed to the new mobile and instantaneous exertion of control (BAUMAN, 2000, p.11) has replaced traditional gangster film iconography like the car in and *Plastic City* with its ubiquitous telephony a example of this. For example, Yuda’s street hawker army is controlled by prepaid cellphones, distributed to them before going to work. In another scene Kirin smuggles a cellular

to Yuda in prison, symbolically subverting state-controlled areas with new technologies. Screens within the screen are abundant and television often carries the plot forward, for example in the scenes where Kirin learns of Yuda's arrest and fake death on TV. Shots from a CCTV camera that records the Novo Mundo shopping mall raising noir spectres of a surveillance society tied to capitalism.

Like so many HK crime films – such as Johnnie To's "Kowloon noir" crime films or his recent HK/PRC co-production *Drug War* (2012) and Brazilian films (for example *Man of the Year*, *Alemão*, *Elite Squad* and *Neighboring Sounds*) – *Plastic City* is shot through with film noir qualities, such as the feel of paranoia and a dreamlike surreal aesthetic, sometimes induced by drugs in the narrative. The locations are typical noir public spaces – such as bars and nightclubs, restaurants and other heterotopic locations – instead of the home, which (if depicted) is shown as uncanny and porous, particularly to media. The setting is made unreal and oneiric, for example through hazy, layered, super-imposed images of the jungle and still photograph-like images of the city with expressionistic colours. Like Sergio Bianchi's gritty *The Tenants*, another *paulistano* film, it adds to the noir segment of the varied cinematic portrayals of São Paulo, a city whose cinematic profile has not been as well defined as that of Rio. Both films focus on the grey economy and crime with an acid critique of the system. *The Tenants* and *Plastic City* both, arguably unlike many of their contemporary films about crime, do not employ the "cosmetics of hunger" (BENTES, 2003, pp. 121–137), a concept that critic Ivana Bentes' used to mock the spectacularization of Brazil's social ills in a slick commercial form that mimics Hollywood fare. Rather, in their thriftiness, audacious film form, and focus on the marginalized, they follow the PRC Sixth Generation, as well as Brazilian independent film, and share qualities with the Cinema Novo tradition, that Bentes eulogized for its revolutionary qualities. In other words, the mythic or romanticizing aspects of gangster films or spectacular action sequences, popular in the action oriented crime films of the mainstream of both Greater China and Brazil, do not trump the socio-political critique of *The Tenants* and *Plastic City*.

*Plastic City* can be seen as a sort of postmodern, late-capitalist illegitimate child of the revolutionary tricontinental cinema that Glauber Rocha called for (Rocha, 1995 pp. 77–80). While the films of Yu Lik-wai and Jia Zhangke have moved in a Greater Chinese cinematic topography – even while keeping a keen eye on the effects of globalization in this territory – *Plastic City* crosses continental borders and brings Brazil into this orbit. However instead of the third worldist connections Rocha called for, now the connection in the world system is between two semi-peripheral/emerging powers and things are not as black and white.

As said Yu like Jia, a graduate of film studies from the Beijing Film Academy, draws from and cites from a variety of film movements and styles from world cinema. Like Yu's films, Jia's have had a youthful enthusiasm, a fresh expression and coarseness that diverge from the highly aestheticized and high-end works of the PRC Fifth Generation or HK commercial film. A lot of ink has been spilled accounting for Jia's influences, so I will here only draw connections to Brazil, such as the Cinema Novo movement. Jia's films have an aesthetic of austerity and grittiness that they share with the works of the likes of Glauber Rocha, who was influenced by neo-realism and the new wave like Jia and, as Stam and Johnson argue, by the Soviet avant-garde, who also theorized their cinematic practice (JOHNSON AND STAM, 1995, p. 55). Perhaps even more importantly, Cinema Novo and the work of Yu and Jia share nomadic narratives and aesthetics that Teshomi Gabriel located in Third World Cinema, such as the works of Rocha (GABRIEL, 1990). Just as Cinema Novo dealt with the migration from the impoverished north-eastern Brazil countryside to industrial centres in the south, with the narratives of colonization, imperialism and the trans-Atlantic slave trade as a structured absence, now Jia as well as Yu in *Plastic City* and his preceding work deal with structural changes associated with globalization such as the impoverishment and emptying of the countryside, urbanization and its "unintended city" in the PRC with the same avant-garde and art-house aesthetics, making intertextual connections to former political film movements and social issues.

São Paulo is known as the business hub of Brazil, so it is natural that the market-centred *Plastic City* is set there. The other reason is that the city boasts Brazil's largest and most prolific Asian city district, Liberdade (also now known as Japão-Liberdade), which has the largest concentration of Japanese people outside of Japan. Rio's instantly recognizable cityscape and natural beauty would perhaps not be a good setting for this noir film – the endless, often mundane metropolis of São Paulo, that is shown through aerial shots in the beginning, complements the film's supranational aesthetic and narrative. Still, between settings of mundane global spaces – such as ports, offices, restaurants and shopping malls – the film showcases São Paulo landmarks such as Ibirapuera Park, the well-known architectural feats of Oscar Niemeyer and cityscapes from Liberdade, such as its *torii* gates and signature oriental streetlamps. The aesthetic of the setting ricochets between the universal and local, and certainly over the national.

The cultural hybridity of *Plastic City* is not confined to its narrative and settings – the soundtrack features Brazilian heavyweight musician Tim Maia, who himself mixed a variety of musical styles, such as rock and funk, into local styles. More vernacular Brazilian music, like *forró*, appears side to side with Chinese songs and popular music features on the diegetic soundtrack. At one point there is a disconnected scene of parkour – the flowing urban sport that originated from the suburbs of Paris, known originally as *l'art du déplacement* ('the art of movement') – that challenges its practitioner to think through her or his environment in a new way. At one point there is an oneiric sequence of a bloody fight that, in its action aesthetics, is clearly influenced by the Chinese *wuxia* (martial arts spectacle) genre and the heroic brotherhood Triad gangster film, as well as the Japanese samurai epic. The crew of Yuda and Kirin is noticeably multi-ethnic. Inacio, Yuda's bodyguard, is a *negao* (big black man) and Kirin's top lieutenant has a Japanese name, Tetsuo, even though he is a *pardo* Brazilian. Noticeably, the high-level crooks are white, such as the corrupt politician Coelho, with the exception of Chinese Mr. Taiwan who, in collusion with local elites, muscles in

on Yuda's territory with better business models and ruthlessness. The racial make-up of the powerful characters in the film could be seen as correlating to the ethnic composition of the Brazilian social hierarchy; however, perhaps more important here is that the upper echelons of the villains are impersonal business types and politicians, and throughout the film the criminal conspiracy progressively resembles a corporate industrial-political structure. The new crook on the block, Mr. Taiwan and his never seen masters are a sign of a new era and way of doing business. The origin of the commodity becomes even more obfuscated in Mr. Taiwan's operations in which the illegal products are no longer fake but surplus, made in the same factory as the originals; this practice not uncommon in the manufacturing systems of the PRC. Black collar and white collar business is mixed, as are business and politics. This obfuscation between the private and public propels an expression of an uncertain neoliberal world and underscores the individual's limitations and awe when he glimpses, or tries to make sense of, the world system.

The film's hybrid quality is embodied by star Anthony Wong who plays Yuda. Wong is of mixed race, born in HK to a British father and Chinese mother, and has been known to criticize HK society for being discriminatory against people of mixed ethnicity, a stigma that followed him into his acting career that has often seen him cast as a gangster, but also as a policeman (for example in *Infernal Affairs*). This sort of dual casting, in which actors play cops and crooks in different films (even though in these narratives they are often on both sides of the law), is common in both HK and Brazil. Brazilian examples include Wagner Moura or Milhem Cortaz, who plays the role of a thug in *Plastic City* and recently played a compromised policeman in the *Elite Squad* films as well as *Alemão*, which could be seen as a Brazilian version of HK film *Infernal Affairs* – a film about police moles trapped in the favela in a morally ambient noir atmosphere.



## Environmental Dimensions

*Plastic City* starts out in 1984 in the Oiapoque region of the Amazon, that an opening title describes as being a “gold mining region notorious for land disputes”. The film opens *in medias res*, Yuda, with five-year-old Kirin, is being hunted by gunmen, the identity of whom (border guards or gold prospectors?) is never told. A shot of the rainforest with the colour adjusted to red initiates the film, leading into a montage featuring shots of the jungle, a littoral, gold, cash and the Brazilian flag. The scene soon cuts to a border sign saying “Brazil begins here”, underscoring the boundary-crossing narrative and paralleling the transnational nature of the film itself. After the above-mentioned opening sequence in the tropical forest, the visuals cut to aerial shots of the huge urban sprawl of contemporary São Paulo, as if to underscore the upheavals of human development and urbanization that occurred in Brazil, or in China for that matter (with Deng’s economic reforms), during the set timeframe: 1984–2008. The film explicitly noting that the control of the land of the Amazon area has been controversial could be seen to reflect a larger critical view of history harking back to colonialism, particularly as the film features a tribe of natives of the Amazon, to whom Yuda returns at the end of the film. From the point of view of the indigenous people of the Americas, the whole nation of Brazil and the colonisation of the Americans could be seen as a ‘land dispute’. Struggles over land in Brazil are a perennial problem, particularly in the rural areas and the unintended city of the favela, two of the main settings of the film, are hotspots for these clashes. In the Oiapoque area land disputes continue as multinational oil companies want to drill off the coast and soy producers muscle in in order to get land from earlier settlers (VIDAL, 2017). The film is situated in perhaps the most famous ecosystem under threat: the Amazon, and the rain forest sequences that bookend this film about a turf war of commodity market. Yuda and the indigenous people in the Amazon he goes out to hide and live with are intercepted by criminals seeking natural resources. Even though the crooks are a nondescript band

of armed thugs after gold, the allegory of seeing them as symbolic corporate raiders of the Amazon, connected to the world economy – say like the cattle *coronels* and corporations that cut the forest down for industrial agriculture – is not hard. It should be remembered that China as Brazil's main trading partner, imports commodities like Brazilian beef and soy, the production of which are often detrimental to the Amazon. The Amazon sequences anticipates and close the narrative of predatory business practices as well as brings another layer to the films microcosm of a neoliberally driven polity and world in which resources are fought over in a predatory struggle. With its rainforest component, *Plastic City* ties environmental concerns to other spheres of globalization such as capitalism in its late form, connecting the spectre of environmental collapse to the world system and consumer culture.

Another ecological statement is the reoccurring motif of the white tiger that Yuda encounters in the jungle like a ghost, unconnected to the narrative. The white tiger, an animal popular in mainstream iconography, is seriously under the threat of extinction, be it the white tigers of India or from the Russian Far East that once ranged throughout Asia and now are counted in their hundreds. Some Brazilian viewers expressed dismay with the placing of a tiger in the Amazon, but this anomaly is precisely the point. The creature signifies both an endangered species and displacement, as it is not in its natural habitat, both corresponding to the situation of the main protagonists; this connection is visually made by Yuda having tigers tattooed across his chest. Like in *Jia's Touch of Sin* flora and fauna are focused on in the film: snakes, crocodiles and other animals and lush vegetation are shown, also within the city contributing to the films surreal and *noir* atmosphere.

It could be seen in its form and themes that the film is an example of what could be called *environmental noir*. If traditional film noir is manifested in crime and melodrama, or a mix thereof, creating a general feeling of being caught in mechanisms beyond one's control, environmental noir could be seen to mix environmental themes, often with crime film. Themes of powerlessness which previous noirs connected to the darker

aspects of modernity, are in environmental noir melded to the grand narrative of consumerism and environmental crisis we are now living in.

### Liquid metaphors

A more straightforward ecological commentary is the TV imagery of a flood in the city that the characters watch as if by accident as they are hiding out. These transmedial images of a deluge of biblical proportion (that well relate to the stock images of environmental destruction in Salles' piece in *Where has Time Gone?*) could also be seen to symbolize the upheavals in the lives of Yuda and Kirin as they fall from the pinnacle and take refuge in the favelas. The floods add to other aquatic imagery – such as aerial shots of the Amazon River, a swimming pool, the harbour, and the ocean – prevalent in the film, as if the liquid images stood for the ambivalent position of the film's characters. The flood and a general reoccurring motif of water in the film could also be read in another way: globalization's effects have often been defined in marine terms, such as Arjun Appadurai's *flows*, the *waves* in world cinema suggested by Dudley Andrew or literature (Franco Moretti), a *financial tsunami*, *liquid assets*, *a flood of refugees* and so on. The film's ending coda that begins, "All destinies flow together into an endless river. Every grain of sand is a world", points both to globalization and also to an ecosystem-like idea of connectedness. Perhaps one could also connect this rather generalizing coda to the film's postmodern form (pastiche, incorporating high and low culture, being self-referential, depicting a mediatized consumer society) and the fact that, in a culture in which postmodernity is the dominant cultural form, one should rethink the relations of the universal and the particular in previous societal formations such as the hard modernity that preceded contemporary "liquid modernity" (BAUMAN, 2000). The "high" or "hard modernity" of the city is represented in the film as dilapidated and seedy. Emblematically homeless Kirin lives in a cardboard shack under a Niemeyer designed modernist pentice which teenagers set on fire.

The film also deals with the nautical concept of piracy as the characters business is based on fake goods and pirated media. The rebellious practice of piracy, seen in the market of fake clothes that cause grey hairs for multinational corporation executives for instance, is one of the strategies used in the struggles which determine what sort of media and artistic production gets to be seen and heard. It should be noted that Jia has commended the informal DVD market, for example in *A Guy from Fenyang* and in other instances, as it has been his primary distribution channel in the PRC, where his work has more often than not been censored. So, in dealing with the informal sector of the economy and piracy, the filmmakers make a self-reflexive comment on the state-controlled domestic Chinese film market. In the Sino-Brazilian case of *Plastic City*, they also highlight the Hollywood-dominated world film market and the situation of filmmakers who, like Jia and Yu, work outside of China's state-dominated studio system, as well as the sub-imperial position of a filmmaker operating in an emerging economy such as Brazil. Brazil is rife with media piracy as well, perhaps the best known case being the leaking of *Elite Squad* before its run in theatres. Thus a film about the informal economy (drug trade) was distributed in the grey economy, as noted by Ramon Lobato in his book on cinema piracy (LOBATO, 2012, pp. 49-52). In its narrative and form, *Plastic City* is aligned with Bhaskar Sarkar's idea of the pedagogy of the piratical, used as a method of transnational film study and oppositional media practice. Sarkar opens up the concept of piracy as a problematizing, if not deconstructive, concept:

Piracy opens up a chasm between what is considered legal and what is felt to be legitimate. The piratical is a space that emerges in this gap, marked by motley, opportunistic negotiations between its two poles. But piracy has a longer and broader history. Drawing on Roman law, Daniel Heller-Roazen invokes the littoral space of the seashore: the zone of indeterminacy etched between the shifting line of the land and the sea. As the shoreline moves with the seasons and

the tides, various property lines and notions of sovereignty – dependent on a stable conception of territory – find themselves on uncertain grounds. The confusion is further confounded by the arrival of foreign ships, floating islands of alien jurisdiction, within a country's territorial waters. Piratical activities arise in this liminal zone, this *terra infirma*, that puts to question the validity of laws and the command of authorities. Historically, the confusion between land and sea has been the provenance of exploratory, affiliations, kinships and sexualities. The *littorum* are thus evocative of a range of uncertainties beyond the legal-juridical realm and evoke fluid connections, risky undertakings and deracinated communities. As such, the piratical is best understood as a realm of the creative and the experimental, the disruptive and the entrepreneurial (SARKAR, 2016, pp. 2–3).

The coastline has been evoked in Brazilian film history to question Brazilian myths of a pure or monolithic nation in films such as in the classics *Land in Anguish/ Terra em transe* (1967) and *How Tasty was My Little Frenchman/ Como Era Gostoso o Meu Francês* (1971). *Plastic City* continues this tradition and is a cinematic rumination on the destabilizing idea of piracy outlined in the above quote. The film is bookended by scenes on the coastline and the border as if to underscore this. It is notable that not only the mise-en-scène but also the film form in the surreal opening and closing sequences stress the malleable. Edited in a rapid and fluid fashion, mobile imagery of sea and the jungle are layered and dissolve on one another. In terms of the story, not only is the business described as piratical but Yuda's ship that is used to import contraband is hijacked by a gangster controlling the docks, which propels Yuda to destroy it, hastening his downfall. The pirated product, often associated with the business practices of the "global south" and the narrative of piracy of the film itself symbolize the dissolving of strict borders between the centre and the periphery in the contemporary world system.

## Conclusion: The prison of the market

Duality pervades *Plastic City*; China-Brazil, centre-periphery, genre film-independent cinema, the fake product and so on. The characters serve two lieutenants of the same master, the local (corruption, crony capitalism, associated with developing economies) and the global (global capitalism and consumer culture), which both sideline the state or turn its organs into corporate or clan-like entities. Two sites are foregrounded, primarily the market and secondly the prison, selective freedom and incarceration. Much of the film unfolds in a shopping mall or in the hawker-filled streets of Liberdade. It is safe to say that financialization and the market are seen as a given a fact of life, posited as something almost natural. Now the individual, or *homo economicus* is seen as a sort of entrepreneur, way beyond the realm of the discipline of economics. This outlook is central to the market-led deregulative ideology of neoliberalism that is deemed (in Brazil after the fall of the Washington consensus in Latin America and globally after the financial crisis of 2008) in Neil Smith's words to be "dead but dominant" (SMITH, 2011). *Plastic City* is a microcosm of the "world-as-a-market", a fact underscored by the multi-ethnic composition of the participants as well as by the importation of the goods from overseas. The commodity central to the narrative is the knock off – instead of the usual narcotics of crime films – a fake, hybrid product that melds together the formal and informal market, as Kirin says at one point, "I deal with fake goods and real cash". The inescapable totality of the market and its all-encompassing nature are made evident in the narrative, for example when Kirin comments to a underling: "We can sell these sneakers for ten Reais because two billion Chinese and Vietnamese work like slaves," later adding to this, "we are all slaves, so just be happy." The scene with this dialogue unfolds in Liberdade, an area whose name is derived from it being an execution area for slaves, as their only liberation ('liberdade' in Portuguese) was through death. Kirin's remarks thus refer both to the grim history of the setting and the more oblique modes of power functioning in the world economy today.

The film shows everybody to be in on the market in one way or another, from the low-level knock-off merchants to elected politicians and the law, exemplified by the police that are on the take from the traders or in on the business. Interestingly, a politician who is in on the action tells Yuda and Kirin that “the gringos do not like our business”, as if the Brazilian authorities, like him and the informal sector, had common interests against the US corporations enforcing copyright, suggestive of an emerging economy position. On the politician’s request, Yuda and Kirin organize a mock media event regarding the destruction of counterfeit goods for the benefit of the authorities in order to show they are fighting the knock-off industry. In this sequence, forgery reaches not only production but also the media and politics.

The film is punctuated with the main characters’ incarceration and violence. In the narrative Yuda goes to prison twice and Kirin once. Penitentiary conditions are a persistent problem in Brazil, critically registered by Hector Babenco’s São Paulo set *Carandiru* (2003) or Padilha’s *Elite Squad 2*, but here the prominence of the penal system should be seen as a more allegorical commentary. Neoliberalism postulates the liberation of markets but falls short regarding the liberation of the individual, who after all is under economic coercion in this system. The many scenes set in prison that the main characters go in and out of in *Plastic City* underscore this fact. The dream of the free market houses an utopia of justice and progress. However, the compatibility of crime and capitalism is proven in sociological studies of criminality, particularly in newly liberalized economies, for example by Volkov’s studies of violent entrepreneurs in Russia or Sanchez’s studies in India (VOLKOV, 2002; SANCHEZ, 2016). Recently economically liberalized societies are also prone to corruption (HOLMES, 2006). If Clausewitz denoted war to be a continuation of politics by other means, Bauman paraphrasing him saw contemporary wars as the continuation of global free trade with other means (BAUMAN, 2000 p.12). *Plastic City*, like many of its gangster film compatriots, posits violent crime to be a continuation of capitalism by other means, calling to question the practice of neoliberalism that is intertwined

with domination by force, on the level of the individual and the nation state.

Perhaps due to its 'middle economy' qualities *Plastic City* is and should be categorized as *BRICS Cinema*, as none of the other concepts used to analyze world cinema before describe it more accurately than this term; one can call it *transnational* of course, but that would not help us to understand where the film stands in global cinema much better. If one looks through the prism of developing economies or the BRICS, it emerges that the attraction of the crime and gangster genre in the BRICS (for example the works of Ram Gopal Varma in India or Alexey Balabanov in Russia to bring in some examples from outside of Brazil and China outlined above) is a result of recent upheavals in these countries, and not only due to their insertion into the circulation of global cinema. Specifically the popularity of the crime genre is related to the BRICS position in the world system, the prevalence of corruption, the loss of the prestige of the state to markets, the rise of crime with social disintegration, a disillusionment in capitalism and the films being a reaction to rather recently introduced neoliberalist policy, often implemented under duress. These factors, often pointed to in *Plastic City*, and the need of filmmakers and audiences to negotiate them (often allegorically), are the reasons for the prevalence of the genre, not only the influence of Hollywood and waves of top down cultural globalization.

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