The Mediated Metropolis:
Anthropological Issues in Cities and Mass Communication

Cinema, radio, television, video, the Internet, and other visual mass media have found niches in the dense creativity of twentieth-century urban life, altering social practices and cultural encounters worldwide. Yet, without cities where producers and audiences have congregated, mass production, texts, distribution, and reception lack human foundations. This symbiosis demands careful ethnographic analysis of media within concrete urban histories. We illustrate this approach from work with film and viewership in two cities. Hong Kong has gained global fame for its films, often scrutinized for clues to its identity; we examine how moviegoing itself and the contexts of transnational spectatorship define a changing city. Philadelphia, by contrast, has rarely controlled its film images; here, it is useful to contrast the production and reading of visual images about the city with images produced through narrowcast media that speak to urban social issues. In both cases, urban visual cultures highlight contestation and creativity in local and global frameworks. [film, grassroots media, urban imagery, Hong Kong, Philadelphia]

The visual culture of cities, whether mediated through mass production of film and television or embodied in vernacular structures of architecture and murals, represents a central formative feature of the lives and identities of contemporary citizens. While questions of film and the city have come to be associated with communication and cultural studies (Clarke 1992; Donald 1999; Gandini 1994; Lamster 2000), they also are central to anthropological inquiry. In fact, as Sara Dickey has noted in her 1997 review of anthropology and mass media, such analyses often demand ethnographic fieldwork and cultural analysis as fundamental aspects of communications research (see Spitulnik 1993). As we argue here, such interdisciplinary studies also illuminate contemporary urban life, divisions, and futures in both local and global dimensions.

Consider the early cinematic memories of Yuen-ling, born in the late 1950s in the fishing village of Shau Kei Wan (an area now fully incorporated into metropolitan Hong Kong):

I saw movies ever since I can remember. I guess I started when I was two years old or 2½. In Shau Kei Wan, there were three movie houses. . . . Besides the good movies there were all the tear-jerking Cantonese operas.

And of course the food—all those exotic foods like water cockroaches (long su), squid and char siu. I enjoyed my lunch in the movie house. Before my pre-school time, my mommy took me to movies. . . . In Primary I, everyday after morning school, my mommy would bring me to buy some char siu and we would go to see tear-jerking movies . . . heroic women movies . . .

In Shau Kei Wan, the movie house was all wooden with lots of sut (fleas). Wong Fei Hong was playing always, and lots of Fan Bo Bo. The second one was Golden Star. It sometimes had foreign language films. Help. I saw Disney there. [interview 1997]

Hong Kong cinema, especially since the 1980s, has become known worldwide for its rapid choreography of action and imagery, its visions of a city of frantic energy and towering verticality, and its relation to a city caught between colonialism and return to China. This recurrent style and urbanity has led filmmakers, critics, and citizens to search for metaphoric meanings in films from Tsui Hark’s Wicked City (1992) or Ann Hui’s Song of Exile (1990) to Fruit Chan’s The Longest Summer (2000). Yet, such films never constituted the entire cinematographic universe of Hong Kong citizens nor were they isolated from social experiences of viewing and choice. For Yuen-ling, going to
the movies was a significant and frequent event, mingling films, foods, and community. This experience, in turn, reinforced family and identity: "going to the movies" was a central social and cultural practice of post–World War II Hong Kong. Highly local images and familiar actors and plots (the endless swordsman sequels of Wong Fei Hung or the heritage of Cantonese operas) contrasted with Hollywood’s alternative fantasies and the glamour of first-run movie palaces. Local and global intersections became clearer as Yuen-ling grew up, choosing first-run Hollywood theaters in the entertainment center of Causeway Bay, art films in small houses or film festivals, and productions that she has seen while living abroad. Meanwhile, theaters in Shau Kei Wan slowly have closed down. In Hong Kong, films not only evoke questions of postmodern style (Teo 1997) and disappearance (Abbas 1997), but also participate in worlds of reception and appropriation defined by intersections between Chinese and colonials, neighborhood and urban development, martial arts and Disney. Together, these reconstitute both visual culture and hybrid urban identities.

Films also convey other urban messages. As we drafted this essay in 1999, for example, The Sixth Sense, which offered many scenes of Philadelphia, became the highest-grossing movie in release worldwide, the number one box office draw in Spain, France, and the United Kingdom as well as an Oscar-contender in the United States. While critics more often discussed its evocative story or turn to the supernatural than the setting, for those in Greater Philadelphia, viewing also was accompanied by a sense of recognition, of seeing local sites and citizens on the screen. While some local critics lamented that the film looks like it was produced in collaboration with the tourist board, other viewers identified with "our streets," “our supermarket,” or the historical lessons of the city’s past that haunt the film. This impact also played out on a wider screen. Kevin Feeley, spokesman for mayor Ed Rendell, noted, “Philadelphia is photographed so beautifully and with so many people coming to see the movie it can’t help but help us” (Brown 1999). Another newspaper quoted a “new” out-of-town visitor as testimony to changing images and commercial impacts: “I always thought Philadelphia was a crime-ridden, rat-infested, mayor-torching-a-neighborhood hellhole. But when you see a movie like The Sixth Sense with its cosmopolitan settings, your image of Philadelphia changes. . . . Oh, I’ve seen Rocky, I’ve seen Trading Places, I’ve seen Witness,” he says. ‘But I was never motivated to come to Philadelphia until I saw The Sixth Sense’" (Rickey 1999: F1).

At the same time, the commitment of the local writer/director, M. Night Shyamalan, to continue producing films in the area bolsters an urban cultural industry that has brought in $168 million dollars since 1992. Like other cities worldwide, Philadelphia’s film office works with producers to make the city an accessible setting whether the result is a touristic panorama, a post-apocalyptic vision (Twelve Monkeys, 1995), or the city disguised as Cincinnati (Beloved, 1998). The goal is continuing visibility. Indeed, in late 2000, the Philadelphia Inquirer proudly reported on a locally born television star, Kim Delaney, slated for an ABC drama set in the city. As producer Steven Bochco explained, “It’s Kim’s hometown. That put it in our heads to begin with. . . . It’s a cool Eastern city. It’s got age. It’s got weather. It’s got everything that’s great about the East except it’s not been overexposed. It’s not New York” (Shister 2000: D8).

Yet mainstream productions, while they broadcast imagery, often overlook images and issues crucial to citizens who find voice in narrowcast productions by public television and community groups. These reframe the city in different imagery, issues, and audience. Such grassroots works may have limited appeal because of genre (nonfiction films) or specificity of issues outside of their city or community, but they underscore the heterogeneous experiences of city and media as producers, text, and audiences.

It may seem perplexing to begin an analysis of mass-mediated urban visual culture with social memories, political economic ramifications, and global/local choices rather than images themselves. As ethnographers and students of media, however, we argue that holistic social and cultural interpretation of urban visual cultures represents a central challenge to urban anthropology as well as a key contribution for the discipline to make in interdisciplinary discussions. Visual representations of the city and of conflictive aspects of urban life have existed for millennia: maps, plans, paintings, architecture, ceramics, sculpture, and other arts. They have been showcased in museums, theaters, and public spaces or in events, parades, and rituals. In fact, these have already become standard subjects for anthropological and social historical investigation. In this article, our primary concerns lie with mass and popular visual media, including film, television, video, and news that expand audiences, images, and interpretations—the city observed, the city moving, the city seen synchronically across space, the interactive city of websites and multimedia. Here, the discipline stands near the threshold of new analytic ventures and new contributions to urban studies.

To explore this topic, we juxtapose work in two cities with different experiences of both media and urbanism. Although neither has the centrality of Hollywood or New York as global media producers, Hong Kong has been a capital for film production intertwined with a strong local image that has developed within a framework of limited self-determination. As a colonial and postcolonial city that nonetheless became an economic powerhouse in production, exchange, and consumption, its mass media offer shimmering visions of a hybrid society, as Turner and Ngan have underscored in Hong Kong 60s/90s: Designing
Identity (1996). Philadelphia, once a global industrial powerhouse, has declined in the late twentieth century. It also participates in a nation-state and a national market (with global reverberations) where production decisions have been shaped by a New York–Hollywood axis. No one in Philadelphia—auteur, production company, film office, or distribution chain—can claim to control the city’s film image in the same way that Hong Kong producers and distributors do for that city. Hong Kong has a more distinct local identity, expressed in films primarily produced for local and regional Asian audiences; Philadelphia is one point in a larger market of signs, products, and audiences. Yet their experiences allow us to discuss a range of intersections of cinema and city while recognizing other perspectives yet to be explored.1

While other cities might have been chosen to illustrate the same processes, these are also cities where we have lived, worked, researched, and participated in the production and reception of images with an intimacy that allows us to explore both film and the city in holistic terms. We do not force parallel studies but, rather, use these cases to compare cities in terms of creation and spectatorship as primary experiences of mass mediation. Both examples, moreover, share transnational connections through media and citizens. That is, Philadelphians have envisioned Hong Kong through global mass media (although we only touch on American visions in our reference to more general readings of The World of Suzie Wong [see McDonogh and Wong in press]). Philadelphia Chinese, meanwhile, have used visual media to construct both a Hong Kong identity abroad and American identities, often intersecting in the same media (see Wong 1999b). These connections remind us that mass media represent a realm in which local and global are constantly renegotiated, sometimes with popcorn.

Visual Culture and Urban Experience

Urban visual culture includes production, images, and experiences that build upon each other as complex intertexts. The iconic meanings of the Eiffel Tower for Paris or Independence Hall in Philadelphia, for example, were constructed by travelers, critics, architects, and historians before they became embedded as a mythic shorthand for place in films from Hollywood to Bollywood. Today, like Hong Kong’s new monumental Bank of China and Hong Kong and Shanghai Bank towers (Williams 1989), these emblems can be used to defend local identity, sell development sites, comment ironically on local transformations, or simply situate a plot development in films. Through texts like Jack Barth’s Roadside Hollywood, subtitled The Movie Lover’s State-by-State Guide to Film Locations, Celebrity Hangouts, Celluloid Tourist Attractions, and More (1991), spectators can map out a cinematic nation from Seattle, Washington (It Happened at the World’s Fair, 1963; The Parallax View, 1974; Streetwise, 1984; The Fabulous Baker Boys, 1989; etc.) to Baltimore (films of Barry Levinson and John Waters, among others; see Barth 1991: 25–28, 221–232). The meanings of films and cities nonetheless diverge between citizens who live with and re-create these cityscapes daily and those who see them reproduced across national and global screens.

Different meanings also reverberate through urban visual culture at the local level. Watching the evening news, or reading the newspaper through shorthand photographic images of “bad” or “elite” neighborhoods, how do we know our own city? A friend born and raised in Philadelphia, for example, insisted that Trading Places was his favorite movie for the city—that anyone would know those houses are on the Main Line.” While the film identifies Philadelphia, this observation of universality is more a statement of local citizenship than global spectatorship—which nonetheless makes it important. Yet, what does that knowledge mean, among and within cities? Here, we must be aware of what Stephen Fore (applying Joseph Straubhaar to Hong Kong) has labeled “cultural proximity.” That is, for a star like Jackie Chan breaking into the U.S. market, stardom in Hong Kong evokes a distinct context:

In East Asia, where Chan is already a major star, the “Chineseness” of his persona is, of course, more closely aligned with the cultural heritage and life of the average moviegoer, whether at a primary level of cultural proximity (for audiences in Hong Kong, Taiwan and the PRC), or at a secondary level (for non-Chinese audiences in Asian countries where Hong Kong movies are widely distributed). In the United States, though, where the level of Chan’s Chineseness is low, New Line found itself faced with a double dilemma. [Fore 1996:247]

As Stephen Teo adds, “As Jackie Chan increasingly trains his eyes on the international market, his personality becomes more pliable, more rubbery. This makes Chan’s characters in his international films less distinctively Chinese, or even distinctively Hong Kong” (2000:6).

Beyond the cinema, of course, urban visual culture includes responses as local as graffiti sprayed over urban murals (or vice versa), as personal as critical readings of global cinema or expatriate nostalgia and as widespread as social rejection of a work as unreal, foreign, or dangerous, or the lionization of native daughters and sons. Through all of these, film and other mass media become incorporated into debates over urban identities amid local diversity and on world media stages in events and readings that are often intertwined. Philadelphia, for example, celebrated the year 2000 with a mass run up the steps of the Art Museum (including then-mayor Ed Rendell), imitating a well-known scene from Rocky (1976). On almost any visit to the museum area, one sees tourists and residents imitating this cinematic image of resilience against a post-industrial cityscape. Yet, local debate has raged for decades over whether or not this site is an appropriate place for a statue.
of Rocky. Moreover, this image does not always coincide with elite strategies to sell the city via high culture, history, opportunity, or even as the "place that loves you back."

At a more intimate level, the institutions and "places" of mass visual culture thus create experiences of urban citizenship and public spheres beyond elite norms. Miriam Hansen has eloquently argued this with regard to spectatorship, class, and gender in the nickelodeons of New York City:

The nickelodeon was a real place, located in the center or the margin of the immigrants’ world, ordinary and easily accessible. At the same time, it opened up into a fantastic space, giving pleasure in the juxtaposition of diverse, often incompatible, and at times impossible sites and sights—in the very principle of disjunction that informed the variety format. . . . The aesthetics of disjunction not only contested the presumed homogeneity of the dominant culture and society in the name of which immigrants were marginalized and alienated, more importantly, it lent the experience of disorientation and displacement the objectivity of collective expression. It is in this sense that the notion of the cinema as heterotopia converges with the concept of an alternative public sphere—as a medium that allows people to organize their experiences on the basis of their own context of living, of specific needs, conflicts and anxieties. [1992:108].

Certainly, we must be careful to distinguish among media and experiences in the construction and reading of urban visual culture. Some visual media prove local in their own way: architecture is simply not easily transferable but takes on new meanings within mass media, as cities like Barcelona and Bilbao have discovered in the 1990s. Television is both national and local. While some radio and television networks or station groups send pre-packaged formats and programs all over the country, many local stations need to attract local audiences with programming on mundane, yet popular issues like the weather and sports. They may serve as vehicles for discussion of the city although they often risk becoming the purveyors of dark myths to suburban consumers. The Internet is global, local, and individualistic, with different points of production, distribution, and reception. Even so, while Amazon.com may seem virtual, its warehouses are real and huge. All these media demand local centers for global production—magazines, film, and television that shape their presence and reception. Hence, Los Angeles figures prominently in "Hollywood" because it includes Hollywood and offers a convenient shooting stage albeit one open to multiple interpretations (see Davis 1998). No matter how fast information and images can override the restraints of time and space, human beings live in real spaces, or places, and time even as they see through mediated images.

Elements of urban mass visual culture also underpin competition among cities. Hence, Hong Kong celebrated its 1997 handover from Britain to China with 100 Days of Cinema, its best known multimedia product, and its Film-Mart, which sought to sell those products abroad. Global film star Jackie Chan has featured prominently in the Hong Kong Tourist Association website. Other cities jockey to gain such exposure (and profits). The Chicago Film Office (http://www.ci.chi.il.us/SpecialEvents/FilmsOffice/About.html), for example, reports on its website that 300 productions have left $730 million in the city, while "Chicago is showcased in film and television productions seen by millions all over the world. This high-profile exposure helps to establish new impressions of the city and increase global awareness.” In an era of mobile capital and information flows, the image of the city that mass media use, create, and extend translates into choices of residence, production, and development. Even small cities like Ocala, Florida, proclaim that they are “camera-ready.” At the same time, critics worry that administrators like Ed Rendell, concerned with post-industrial imagery and marketing, may have been transforming Philadelphia and other cities into the “City as Disney extravaganza with floats lit up by a thousand points of light, the City increasingly fashioned and designed not for those who live within it but for those who never will” (Bissinger 1997:371).

Within this global media web, however, not all cities prove equal in salience, construction, or meanings. Some have been home to production as well as distribution: Hong Kong, Los Angeles, Bombay, New York, and Paris are global movie capitals. Others, while offering a variety of audiences and spaces, are generally background rather than homes to producers who will interpret them anew. In these second cities, in fact, we must also pay attention to different roles within the process of creating film. Baltimore, for example, while a smaller city than Philadelphia, has been lovingly chronicled by two native sons—Barry Levinson and John Waters—whose films differ in memory and evocation from the use of the city as scenario in Hollywood films. We must also note a range of broadcast and more narrow cast productions in which television and video expand the world of urban images, creating meanings less uniform than those of cultural industries, especially as we probe diverse readings in everyday life. Even so, we can scarcely touch upon the issues raised by Néstor García Canclini for cities inundated with foreign images of urbanity and modernity (1999).

In the end, mass media and visual culture thus force us to think about relations of power and resistance. Who produces images? Who distributes them and through what network? Who reads them and under what constraints? Who understands and interprets omissions? The Sixth Sense, for example, lacks major speaking roles for African Americans although they constitute a sizeable proportion of Philadelphia’s residents. How is this absence read in a local African American neighborhood theater? At the same time, films focused on gang violence among African Americans, like Boyz N the Hood (1991) or New Jack City
confirm stereotypes among suburban white readers and led mall theater owners to avoid bookings because of the actions they feared from their audiences, reaffirming the construction of urban African American youth as a disruptive force (Baker 1999).

This meshing of experience and imagery also forces us to reconsider the complexity and contradictions of urban symbolism. While the Eiffel Tower may “stand for” Paris, especially in Hollywood films, it omits many elements of Parisian society and struggle. Even Jacques Tati in his masterful Playtime (1967) evoked it as an elusive image that tourists only glimpse on posters or in reflections (Barthes and Martin 1964; Ockman 2000). As Ien Ang has shown, readings of the same text differ according to the cultural and social formation of audiences (1985). With regard to Hong Kong, for example, we have argued that The World of Suzie Wong (1961) conjures very different meanings and associations outside the city, and within Hong Kong among expatriates as opposed to Chinese citizens. While from the outside Suzie Wong fit popular Orientalist images of an exotic female, subordinated to a white knight, Chinese people in Hong Kong contested its linguistic and racial verisimilitude during production and ignored the film subsequently. As Hong Kong became a major financial power internationally, Suzie Wong became increasingly irrelevant to locals. Nonetheless, the Tourist Association still markets Hong Kong as Suzie Wong’s abode to outsiders (McDonogh and Wong in press).

Previous anthropological studies have already raised important questions about mass media, including pioneering work by Hortense Powdermaker (1950) on Hollywood and Ian Jarvie on Hong Kong (1978). More recently, the cinemas of South Asia have been the subject of model investigations of mass media and urban culture, including the work of Sara Dickey (1993, 1997), Carol Breenckenridge (1995), Purmima Mankekar (1999), and Tejaswani Ganti (in press). Susan Ossman has proposed a more holistic sense of urban visual culture in her Picturing Casablanca (1994); Ron Burnett (1993), Jeffrey Himpele (1996), Mark Liechty (1996), Arjun Appadurai (1996), and Brian Larkin (1997) all have raised compelling questions of ethnographic and transnational urban readings. While not urban in focus, Eric Michaels’s sensitive analyses of the interactions of culture and video among Australian aborigines (1992) also have been models in our work. At the same time, we realize that the study of urban visual culture is an interdisciplinary field in which anthropological methods and theories must share. Here, for example, film theorists and historians offer ethnographic insights including those of Miriam Hansen (1992) on silent film and the creation of new urban public spheres; David Clarke (1992) and Mark Lamster’s (2000) collections on film and urban form; Turner and Ngan (1996), Law Kar and Stephen Teo (1997), Law Kar (1999), Li Cheuk-To (1996, 1997), Linda Lai (1997), Stephen Teo (1997, 2000), David Bordwell (2000), Stephen Fore (1996, 1999), and others on Hong Kong film; and David Docherty, David Morrison, and Michael Tracey (1987), David Morley (1996), Judith Mayne (1993), Graeme Turner (1997), and many others on spectators. Our interest here, however, is not to review volumes of general studies with which we feel urban anthropology intersects, but to underscore the contributions of anthropology to this established debate. Hence we turn to our own materials.

The Electric City:
Experiencing Films in Hong Kong

Hong Kong filmmaking and viewing emerged with the earliest days of cinematographic innovation worldwide (Hong Kong Film Archives 1997). After the Chinese Revolution of 1949, Hong Kong filmmaking, like other industries, was infused with capital, expertise, and personnel from Shanghai and from other Chinese who fled the Communist regime. The presence of Chinese from different regions, speaking different Chinese tongues, contributed to the growth of a multilingual Chinese film industry based in the territory whose productions reached a peak of 676 films and videos in 1996 (Hong Kong Reports 1997:319; Teo 1997). While this is an extraordinary level of production for a territory of 6.5 million inhabitants, the industry fed an East Asian market as well as an international market of Chinese diaspora. Hong Kong kung-fu films also found cross-cultural marketing success from Nepal to Africa to the Americas. Mark Liechty, for example, refers to the importance of “English” films among urban youths in Kathmandu, citing pictures by Bruce Lee (1996:123).

This power of cinema did not escape the attention of the colonial government, which took films by truck to refugee settlements in the 1950s and built cinemas in large-scale public housing estates even as they exercised censorship and other controls on local distribution. Hong Kong also became the first British colony to receive television via cable in 1957, creating another venue for negotiating image and control.

By the 1980s and 1990s, “Hong Kong Style” even changed Hollywood action flicks. Directors and stars have been recruited for big budget productions in the United States from John Woo’s Face-Off (1998) to Chow Yun-Fat’s starring role in Anna and the King (1999) on a stage set in Malaysia (another visual-spatial displacement). Meanwhile, Hong Kong faced its own transition from British colony to autonomous region within the Chinese state.

Hong Kong moviegoing as social appropriation of movies also has changed in recent decades of economic development and hybridization of global consumption patterns. Those from whom we collected stories about neighborhood theaters and family picnics in cinemas of the 1960s were more likely to go as adults in the 1990s to sleek multiplexes associated with commercial centers throughout the
city, symbols of the new and successful Hong Kong and its consumption (Turner and Ngan 1996). These same years have witnessed increasing concerns about local audiences. While more Hong Kong theaters are built each year, audiences dropped from 98 million in 1967 (for a population of 3.7 million) to 20 million in 1999 (for 6.9 million). The markets for Cantonese films, highly audience-driven commodities, have especially suffered. Competition from video, laser disc, VCD, and DVD as well as television represents a long-standing concern, but sagging quality in local productions also has been blamed for lower box office revenues. Film producers have adapted their product to perceived consumption, distributors have slashed prices, and theaters have created discount days to ameliorate this crisis.

These experiences are hardly unique to postcolonial Hong Kong. Indeed, while the models for contemporary cineplexes, their concessions, and their Hollywood tie-ins betray American marketing, similar consumption is shared in Buenos Aires, Barcelona, and Philadelphia. Yet an ethnography of moviegoing as urban experience illuminates distinctions and contradictions in Hong Kong visual culture and everyday consumption. Local and global meanings of the cinema beyond the screen—including architecture, ambience, prestige and choice of product, shared clientele and experiences, and even food—also have shaped Hong Kong movies since their first public performances. As we have noted in ethnohistorical research since 1996, the choice of site, company, images, and experience also have reconstructed divisions within metropolitan society. These include colonial caste and ethnicity, divisions of class and mobility, and other constructions of age, gender, cultural capital, and the city itself. While the image of the city is compelling in Hong Kong films, so is the experience of that image and its alternatives and their incorporation into everyday life and identity.

Even after colonial rule ended in 1997, long-standing divisions between an English-speaking audience (British, American, and other expatriates and Chinese bilinguals) and Chinese speakers, who make up 98% of the population, remain clear in the territory’s more than 60 daily newspapers. English-language newspaper advertisements list less than half of the screenings in the territory advertised in the Chinese press. English-language advertisements have focussed on first-run theaters with comfortable decor, easy parking, and affiliation with local chains and international distribution. These theaters have also tended to be associated with business/entertainment centers: no cinemas emerged in areas identified with colonial residential districts like the Peak or Stanley. First-run theater palaces also have relied on Chinese patrons and advertise in Chinese dailies as well. Some English-speaking patrons, meanwhile, go to predominantly Chinese theaters for Hong Kong movies. Yet the contrast in publicity shows the divisions of imagined and communicative communities still perceived to exist (drawing on Anderson 1991).

The intermediary populations of colonial society, meanwhile, developed other viewing habits. With its economic boom, for example, Hong Kong has become home to 170,000 contracted domestic workers, 80% of whom are from the Philippines and primarily females who reside in the homes of their employers (Hong Kong Report 1998: 122; Constable 1997). According to those with whom we talked, they generally did not go to movies unless shepherding their employer’s children: cinema was expensive by contrast to Filipino prices and maids lacked free time. On the other hand, businesses and informal arrangements catered to Filipinos who gathered downtown on their day off with a lively trade in Filipino videos. By the late 1990s, Filipino cable stations were also available for home consumption: hence, an expatriate visual culture relinking immigrants to the Philippines emerged in cultural distinction to both Hong Kong and Hollywood.

The longer established and more integrated South Asian population attended both English and Chinese cinemas as well as maintaining specialized video outlets for Hindi and other films. An informant also reported that they rented halls for special showings of Indian cinema that also served multiple community functions:

South Asian Movies are screened in the HK Convention Centre at least once a month for about $100-150 HK ($13–20 US). I personally have never been to one because you can get the same movie a week later on tape for $10 HK. Most of these movies are commercial films not even documentaries or Satyajit Ray movies which is a real shame because Ray’s movies are excellent. Moreover, these film screenings are another form of social gatherings—“Oh, look who she is with, a new man?”

Cinemas in Hong Kong also must be differentiated in terms of genre, with concomitant implications of class and other divisions attached to the textual imagery on screen and some implications for the space of spectators. Apart from the first-run theaters, cinemas outside the mainstream also specialize in art films and pornography. The domestication of children’s cinema, in turn, underscores sociocultural changes in the urban filmgoing experience over time.

Art cinemas, in fact, share many characteristics across cultures that we know as filmgoers. Hong Kong’s Broadway Cinematheque, in its name, expresso bar, intensive verbal materials on current offerings, and other features, would not be unfamiliar in Philadelphia or Buenos Aires. In fact, art cinemas in Hong Kong tend to offer the same global programming found elsewhere to a self-selected cosmopolitan clientele defined by “tastes” that roam far outside Hong Kong. Cultural proximity is relative, however. The intellectual works of Wong Kar-Wai are regarded as difficult in Hong Kong, but they play in mainstream theaters rather than being relegated to art houses by the equation.
of art = foreign that dominates in the United States (Fore 1996). “Serious” films, including local documentaries and community-based works, are also treated as civic goods, screened in cultural centers, museums, and the Hong Kong International Film Festival. In fact, art cinema, worldwide, evokes a strategy of hypermodernity whose manifestations in cinemas and festivals merit more attention (see Wong and McDonogh in press on the Film Festival).

Pornographic cinema also evokes seemingly “universal” characterizations of theater and audience. In many cities, these theaters demarcate districts whose character reverberates with the perceived immorality of the product and experience. In Hong Kong, this programming has tended to represent the last phase of decaying neighborhood cinemas. Some other “neighborhood” cinemas also run special 10 a.m. showings of Hong Kong, Japanese, European, and American pornography before their more family-oriented evening screenings. The social construction of watching pornography made this screening vulnerable to competition from videos and other forms of more private spectatorship.

Children’s cinema per se lacks specific venues in the city. Chinese cinemagoing in the 1950s and 1960s was strongly associated with family involvement in Hong Kong films rather than catering to specific pre-adolescent audiences; Hong Kong studios, in fact, have rarely produced specialized children’s films in the sense of Disney, Dreamworks, or the Japanese Totorro or Pokémon. In the 1990s, we observed a continual disjuncture between two kinds of children’s cinematic participation. On the one hand, films such as Disney’s Hercules (1997) and Tarzan (1999) have become consumption events at multiplexes that offer Cantonese and English versions on multiple screens and lead easily to a Happy Meal with relevant toys at a nearby McDonald’s amid further synergistic purchases (games, dolls, CD-ROM, etc.). On the other, video, DVD, and video compact disc (VCD) have also created a separate, familiar sense of children’s viewing in the home, alone or with friends. Yet, these changes also suggest changes in relation of family and public sphere that may become evident in the next generation (see Leung 1990 on family and the public sphere).

Despite the formative impact of social categories and genres, the primary division in space and experience in Hong Kong moviegoing since its inception cuts across these categories as it re-creates them. This is the division between the older cinema palace (and, since the 1970s, the multiplex) and the neighborhood theater as Chinese popular cinema centers.

The film palace often modeled modernity on the image of the West in architecture and services. The Lee Theater, for example, was copied from London’s Haymarket Theater. The downtown King’s Theater, opened in 1931, boasted not only its constant supply of Hollywood features in its inaugural pamphlet but also its decor and technology. This technology included not only projection developments but also air-conditioning to set the experience apart from steamy streets (and neighborhood theaters). Finally, the pamphlet also noted that the interior was designed by the same firm that had decorated the governor’s mansion (King’s Cinema 1931). A later bilingual folio for the 1952 opening of Kowloon’s Princess Theater underscored a similar conjunction of “the splendour of its exterior structure and the beautiful fountain in the lobby,” a car park, “scientifically-tested chairs,” and “only select and first-rate productions of major studios throughout the world, especially those of R.K.O. Radio Pictures, Paramount Films, Columbia Films, etc” (1952[?]:n.p.).

These grandiose edifices did not, however, limit themselves to “English” audiences, although their higher prices and demands of dress and decorum selected for attendance in terms of class and urbanity. Older Chinese with whom we spoke, including Wong’s parents, remembered them as sites for dating and special occasions. Instead, the colonizers found themselves in gilded monolingual cages without the easy experience of a range of Chinese-language alternatives in movies and venues.

Most of these cinemas have now disappeared, although this does not indicate a sociocultural revolution in Hong Kong classes or tastes. Instead, their claims on space proved too expensive in the booming property market of the city. Already, in 1978, Jarvie noted a shift in cinematic space:

Within the cities, the cinemas concentrated themselves around the twin entertainment centres: Causeway Bay on the Island and Nathan Road in Kowloon. The numbers in outlying areas like Aberdeen, Western District and North Point have been steadily shrinking. Several theatres were closed and demolished during my five months’ field trip in 1973, including the Princess, in Nathan Road, the Hong Kong Grand, in Queen’s Road East, and the delightful little Ray, in Third Street near the University. But on the other hand, new theatres and even new theatre concepts were abuilding. [1978:61–62]

As real estate boomed in Central, and then, in the 1970s and 1980s, in Wanchai and Causeway Bay, older theaters became liabilities, dismantled, and only occasionally reconstructed in pieces on multiple floors within a new skyscraper like the Lee Theatre. Indeed, the cinema may be remembered only in a vague allusion, like the Entertainment (Lo Yuk) Building, which replaced the historic King’s Theatre.

The 1983 Hong Kong Annual Report noted that “Although a number of cinemas closed down during the year a new trend of mini-cinemas started with the opening of a three-in-one mini-cinema complex” (p. 194). In advertisements, these emerged as identifiable features in the late 1980s and early 1990s, with the initial consolidation of the United Artists (UA) chain. By 1990, for example, links among cinemas in various parts of Greater Hong Kong
appeared in newspaper advertisements and film distribution. This trend again parallels development in the United States and Europe, marking a suburbanization of theaters, which, while not necessarily eliminating an urban core, offered similar services at more convenient central points. Both Hollywood and Cantonese offerings now respond to the decentralization of population within new towns like Sha Tin and Tuen Mun. At the same time, multiplexes have moved to consumption centers, amid stores and fast food services like McDonald’s (see Watson 1997) or the local fast food of Café de Coral.

This shift to multiplexes coincided in interesting ways with growing strength in Hong Kong filmmaking during the boom of the 1970s and 1980s, the era of the New Wave (Law 1999). Hong Kong films regained box office primacy domestically and expanded in overseas markets through strategic interventions including participation in film festival and artist circuits as well as major commercial circuits (Leung and Chan 1997:146; Li 1996). Major works by Tsui Hark, John Woo, and Ringo Lam built continuing reputations alongside the more artistic careers of Wong Kar-Wai and Ann Hui. New patterns of exhibition spaces and distribution meant that Hong Kong and Hollywood films are screened side by side in new worlds of choice, which may even have sustained some Hong Kong projects or allowed them a wider audience.

What have all these changes meant for the consumer’s experience of cinema? New multiplexes offer more amenities of consumption—ranging from better sound and seats (without elaborate decor) to choice among multiple movies at the same site. They may also imply more uniformity albeit wider distribution of limited offerings. An alarmed comment from the French Cahiers du Cinema, for example, warns that “the multiplex—mega complexes of movie houses near commercial centers—are flourishing everywhere in France near large centers, tending to make cinema a banal product for consumption” (Pardo 1997:60, our translation). Movies, to such a critic, become not an experience in themselves but another choice in the mall.

Data on the experience of cinema since the 1980s provide us with interesting support for this view. A Hong Kong University student who recalled localism and family in her childhood memories, when asked about places she regularly went in the 1990s, quickly replied: “UA Times Square or Queensway. Because they’re newer. Newer. And they show the kind of movies I want to see. And my friends go there.” Another student also denigrated the experience of Chinese movie theaters: “They show Chinese movies so I am dealing with the same reality. And then the sound effects and the image effects are not so good as UA.” Still another spontaneously valued the consumption features of the multiplex: “There are six movies to choose from . . . and it’s comfortable.” With a dramatic drop in spectatorship, the flexibility of many smaller theaters became a strategy for owners as well as consumers (Ming Pao, July 13, 1997). Yet, these cinemas also respond, on the whole, to more narrowly targeted constructions of the typical viewer and product. As affluence, maturity, and education became more widespread by the 1990s, this facilitated new dimensions and choices in movie consumption. Perhaps nowhere is this relationship between the affluent consumer and the multiplex model laid out better than in The Place magazine (1991–1994), published by the Swire Company to sell its investment in the upscale Pacific Place mall. Here, amid ads for glamorous multinational merchandisers like Seibu, Montblanc, Gianni Versace, and Hermès, were interviews with cinema personalities or features detailing Hong Kong links with Hollywood, accompanied by previews for the mall’s UA multiplex. Shopping for movies looks more and more like shopping for any other goods.

The primary alternative to cinema palaces for many Hong Kong Chinese filmgoers of the postwar period were cheaper, local structures like those described by Yuen-ling. Theaters throughout the older Chinese settlements of Hong Kong once offered not only a continually changing round of second- and third-run movies, but also escape from the cramped and crowded conditions of postwar housing. In both product and experience, they reaffirmed the identities of smaller communities. Neighborhood cinemas were familiar; moreover, they had other attributes, as a Hong Kong University student recalled: “There were a lot of hawks in the theatre hall. We’d buy a lot of things and go into the movie. In fact, it was the most interesting thing, the most attractive thing for me in going to movies. Because as a child you don’t understand the movie that much.” Yet by 1978 comments, these theaters were suffering the fate of central palaces, reducing Hong Kong’s total theaters to 79. Again, this has resulted from many factors including neighborhood redevelopment, family mobility, new housing, and competition from multiplexes and alternate media.

The disappearance of neighborhood/working-class theaters has not marked the end of Hong Kong Chinese cinema. When we asked friends and movie specialists for the most “authentic” Hong Kong viewing experience in the 1990s, we were directed to late night showings for young audiences at large popular houses in the urban entertainment centers. In Kowloon, for example, the Chinachem in the popular nightlife area of Tsim Sha Tsui East offers a lively mixture of Chinese and Western movies with shows running continually throughout the night to lively crowds.

While these and similar theaters had characteristic food, ambience, and noise levels, they are not unlike showings that appealed to similar age groups in the United States: one might consider the ambience and myth of drive-in culture as a comparison. The impact of the youthful consumer has been reinforced by fan magazines like Milky Way Journal (Ngan Hau Wah Pao) since the 1950s. Young stars
today seek multiple exposure across Asia in rock concerts, television, and commercials as well as movie events; their photos are for sale and their lives and loves fill fan magazines. As in the United States and Europe, this audience, its enthusiasm, and its buying power have spurred market-driven productions like the young gang movies of the later 1990s, which Hong Kong producers speedily reproduced. To cash in on the success of *Young and Dangerous* (Gu Wak Jai, 1996), for example, *Young and Dangerous II* and *III* were shot and released in the same year, with another sequel following in 1997 (Li 1997).

Although generally in dense Chinese urban districts like Mongkok or Wanchai rather than malls, these large, divided theatres seemed to overlap with both neighborhood theatres and new chains. In none of our visits, moreover, did audiences show the legendary spirit for which they are famous in Hong Kong—talking back to the screen or throwing things at it, apart from some illegal smoking and louder conversation than would be permitted in a multiplex. Marketing campaigns like the reduced tickets for teen movies or the two-for-one lovers tickets that were attempted at various points reminded us in fact that these were audiences for whom Chinese theatres competed with more glamorous chains. While these theaters might share action pictures or high-profile stars and directors with multiplexes, however, they also retained possession of several intensely local genres including romances and comedies, which, as Lai (1997) argues, often perform an extremely local identity unlikely to pull in crossover or foreign audiences.

Obviously, this story of film as experience might be elaborated through analyses of the roles we have mentioned for television and for home-viewing devices, including VCRs, DVDs, and VCDs, which make cheap pirate copies of currently playing films available almost instantly, again complicating the economics of citizenship. Moreover, we might talk in more detail about changes in image and content (see Wong and McDonogh in press). Yet, at the same time, the urban visual culture of Hong Kong should also be seen beyond the city and territory. Film in Hong Kong has always been a global phenomenon. As such, in the Chinese diaspora, film and its reproductions and commentary have complemented other familiar institutions of urban identity ranging from food stores, churches, and restaurants to regional associations to foreign-language newspapers. Globalism also creates new localisms. Movies, videos, and television provide Chinese and others with connections to their homeland and places of identity in their new urban worlds. Hong Kong videos provide familiar experiences, whether or not immigrants came from Hong Kong.

In Philadelphia, for example, Chinese movies were shown theatrically in the 1990s only at midnight on Saturdays in an outlet mall multiplex (they moved in 2000 to another theater in Northeast Philadelphia). Xeroxed announcements are plastered on Chinatown walls; only recently have they been added to the general movie listings of local alternative papers. Depending on the popularity of the film and its stars, attendance ranges from about 40 to 1,000; some films (like those of Jackie Chan) also show up in competing mainstream venues. This screening has become a center not only for Chinese but also for other Asian and Asian American adolescents.

This dearth of targeted theatrical screenings, however, does not reflect Asian-American consumption. Video stores dot the streets of Chinatown; smaller rental collections are jammed into the crannies of food and stationary shops. Most serve a predominantly Chinese clientele: many programs are available only in Chinese, while clients and clerks generally are more fluent in Chinese than English. Hong Kong videos are also available in other Asian ethnic video stores: thus, Cambodian and Vietnamese immigrants in Philadelphia rent dubbed Hong Kong videos from their own neighborhood stores. In this sense, again, Hong Kong movie and cassette distribution already has become Americanized (see Wong 1999b).

Technology changes time as well as space; television programs as well as feature films travel from Hong Kong to America in a matter of days, whether theatrical hits or events like the Miss Hong Kong pageant. Movies become available as soon as videodiscs are sold in Hong Kong, dubbed into NTSC/VHS tapes. According to storeowners, however, immigrants prefer television programs packaged as cassettes to feature movies. The most popular tapes are those of soap operas, historical romances, and action series. These productions, if successful, run for a year or more in Hong Kong (e.g., the recent Genuine Feelings [*Jun Ching*]). The latest addition to Hong Kong transnational visual culture is satellite, which allows the household to receive programming from Taiwan, Mainland China, and TVB Jade, the major Hong Kong Chinese television channel. Not only is this a familiar experience of watching well-known shows in a familiar language, but it also reinforces cultural proximity: as one friend said, “when I see the fire in Lai Chee Kwok, I called my friends and relatives right away.” Yet new connections are stressed: “My father comes to my house more often now, he likes to watch satellite programs, and my kids’ Chinese is getting better.”

Middle-class families who have installed this dish rarely rent videos anymore. However, except for news programs, Jade does not permit direct, instantaneous transmission from Hong Kong, trying to control a rental market challenged by those who tape from satellite broadcasts and exchange the products among friends, reconstructing a virtual “neighborhood” of viewing and commentary.

In these ways, Hong Kong films and television go beyond entertainment to reconstitute an urban immigrant visual culture. These audiences have the cultural competence to read these texts, both in language and in intertextual
references that are very culturally bounded. This desire for
cconnectedness with a homeland is also marketed success-
fully by TVB, who controls the largest Chinese-language
television programming in the world. Immigrants learn
about show business news from ethnic newspapers and
glossy magazines and rent the videos to see the latest hot
stars or society events. They also exchange tapes among
themselves and construct conversations around these fa-
miliar topics, and they transmit contemporary Chinese
popular culture to the younger, oftentimes American-born
second generation. Yet these consumers of Hong Kong
film and video are no less cosmopolitan than their Hong
Kong counterparts. Indeed, although there is no way to
gather concrete data, discussions with friends in the Phila-
delphia Chinese community suggest that Titanic or The
Sixth Sense was just as popular with Chinese here as with
other Americans. The difference in audience then, in both
areas, is not so much in what they choose to see or how
they evaluate it but in the array of meanings they construct,
and intertexts they use, in which Hong Kong media and
American productions are both components. This symbi-
sis, in fact, underpins Hong Kong cinema and audiences,
at home and in diaspora, although the context of mobility and
quests for cultural identity change the meanings of view-
ings in each case as well as across other media channels
like radio and telephone.

Eclectic City:
Creating and Reading Images in Philadelphia

In contrast to Hong Kong, Philadelphia has not been a
center for film production in the United States, despite the
pioneering work of Sigmund Lubin, self-styled King of
the Movies who established his Lubinville studios in North
Philadelphia (Eckhardt 1997). Yet over time, the city was
certainly a center in other ways for images. With Curtis
Publishing selling the Saturday Evening Post with its Norm-
man Rockwell covers, Philadelphia shaped a global image
of American life (Friedrich 1970; Hennessey and Knutson
1999). World’s Fairs and other events brought recurrent at-
tention to the city. Indeed, patriotic history impressed upon
American schoolchildren and visitors from abroad the im-
ages of Independence Hall and the Liberty Bell as symbols
of a city and the nation, albeit one trapped in and by its
past. Philadelphia, moreover, remains the fifth largest na-
tional television market and an important point on national
film distribution. Yet, how does a city without Hong
Kong’s market position in the production of urban filmic
images negotiate these images to its own diverse residents
as well as to those who live outside the metropolitan area?
We approach this by looking at textual images of the city in
mainstream films in relation to local experience and nar-
rowcast media that construct the visual city, not only as im-
ages, but also as places where producers and audience live.

As a large city with an identifiable name, Philadelphia
has taken on a protagonist role in repeated movies, espe-
cially with regard to space and class. The Philadelphia
Story (1940), for example, frankly ignored the city to focus
on the affluent suburban Main Line in a story patterned
on the actual life of a local socialite. These images of class and
conflict have a longer history in Philadelphia and its repre-
sentations include the melodramatic Kitty Foyle (novel by
Christopher Morley; movie 1940); The Young Philadel-
phians (1959), which again pits the hidden histories of
Main Line elites against the virility of the working-class
city; or Hitchcock’s Marnie (1964), which plays out class
issues between the Main Line (perhaps) and working-class
Baltimore. Trading Places (1983) recasts class and race in
a rare comic portrait, while the disappointing Downtown
(1990) brings a Main Line policeman into the hardscrabble
city. Tom Hanks, in Philadelphia (1993), plays a lawyer
who grew up in the Main Line, has a gay relationship in the
city where he works, and is redeemed by an African
American attorney from the urban elite’s prejudice against
AIDS. Even Citizen Kane (1941) uses Philadelphia as a
site for the library of the stodgy lawyer who controlled
Kane’s inheritance.

Class, ethnicity, and space also permeate one of the most
successful and emblematic Philadelphia movies, in terms of
box office receipts and impact: Rocky (1976), whose re-
lation to the city is as complex as that of The World of Suzie
Wong to Hong Kong. In this movie and its sequels, South
Philadelphia, a working-class, Italian American neighbor-
hood (now increasingly populated by Southeast Asians),
and other sections were brought home to other parts of the
United States and the world as symbols of personal resi-
lence. This geography has permeated other films as well:
Two Bits (1996) romanticized South Philadelphia in the
Depression, while The Sixth Sense contrasted a homey
South Philadelphia with the cultured Society Hill and
Center City. Twelve Monkeys (1995), meanwhile, used
Kensington, another working-class neighborhood facing
devastating transformations, to present a near-apocalyptic
world not unlike a stereotypical local news report on the
“Badlands,” a familiar urban cliché of decay, racism, and
despair. Local documentaries like Poverty Outlaw (1998),
in fact, directly contest this image of Kensington.

These movies create powerful intertexts for the city as a
setting, partly for its shortcut identification of some form of
class, racial, or ethnic identifications for Hollywood. Other
issues also arise repeatedly within these films, including a
vague sense of a historic city haunted by past sins. While
vivid in the contemporary The Sixth Sense, one might also
recall the voice-over first lines of The Young Philadel-
phians: “A man’s life, they say, is the sum of all his ac-
tions. But the actions are sometimes the results of the
hopes, dreams, and desires of those who came before him.
In that sense, my life began even before I was born. . . ."
This foreshadows the web of impotence, illegitimacy, and concealment unraveled later in the movie. Yet memory and corruption are equally present in Terry Gilliam's adaptation of La Jetée to a Philadelphia setting for Twelve Monkeys and Marnie—a mythic theme that raises the question of cinema as the creator of moral as well as visual landscapes.

While one may argue for a Hollywood-created myth of the city, as distinct from cosmopolitan New York, political Washington, or the decadence of the South (McDonough and Wong 1993), others choose Philadelphia for other more pragmatic reasons. The Sixth Sense's writer-director M. Night Shyamalan, for example, was born and raised in the Main Line, and one newspaper reports:

The suburban Philadelphia Catholic school he attended—and its groomed lawns and historic stone buildings—was the site of his second movie. The downtown train station that he walks through regularly on the way to New York will be a central part of his upcoming film. And a little known South Philadelphia street showcasing the close proximity of neighborhood rowhouses opens his current blockbuster, The Sixth Sense.

"I live here, my experiences come from here, so I make movies that are set here," said M. Night Shyamalan, who jokes about his obsession for filming in Philadelphia. "I was in talks to write 'Planet of the Apes' the remake for Fox and I was like, 'How can I place this in Philadelphia?'" [Brown 1999]

To the world outside of Philadelphia, the setting seldom has the prominence that local readers accord it, as is evident in the lack of analysis by film critics. For example, when reviewing The Sixth Sense, critics mentioned Philadelphia in passing or neglect it altogether. Another reviewer in Tucson placed Two Bits in Chicago. Outside of the United States, less critical readers identify the city with America, without seeking local or national distinctions, in the same way Hong Kong films become Chinese or Asian despite their preponderant urban industry and local flavor (Fore 1996; Wong 1999b).

These issues of themes, whether complimentary or negative, used or rejected in the city, illuminate a not insignificant issue of what it means for citizens and officials to deal with mass image. In Hong Kong, this emerges through a conjunction of shared culture, shared experiences, and shared resources in filmmaking rather than through any government intervention. In Philadelphia, without the same localization of production, finance, and significant audience, other questions emerge. The local film office does not have the resources to sell a particular image of the city; instead, it works to attract filmmakers by the ease with which they may work around permits, police, settings, etc. The only reticence the office noted, in fact, involved portrayals of the police, who have had a controversial urban history and seriously negative mass media portrayals, fictional and nonfictional. Local filmmakers like Shyamalan (or Woody Allen in New York or Barry Levinson in Baltimore) create auteurs' visions of cities and may attract loyal fan bases as well. City officials and businessmen also have been concerned with imagery, turning the city itself into an off-Broadway stage for the 2000 Republican National Convention (Roberts 1997; Von Bergen 1999). Ironically, one of the most effective controls on imagery may be the sheer weight of repetition and intertext—one cannot suddenly re-present Philadelphia as a city of sexual intrigue or global espionage because the stage has not been set in previous movies. In this sense, cities and culture interact over time: the image of Rocky has a profound impact on both the future city and future films. Hence, a feature in the Holland Sentinel (Michigan) melded public efforts toward change and past media imagery in the headline "Philadelphia shedding 'Rocky's' hometown image" (1998).

Here, hegemonic issues, both local and global, have tended to homogenize imagery and voice, whatever the impacts on the city. Yet Philadelphia remains a complex and conflictive city whose diversity also erupts into metropolitan visual culture. Local voices and local diversity gain limited screenings through public events like the Philadelphia Film Festival, the International House, and public television stations that have not only screened but also produced films. These provide varied and illuminating commentary on a floating world of Hollywood imagery.

Public television station WHYY's nostalgic video of Philadelphia's past, Things That Aren't There Anymore (1993), and its sequel, for example, stress the lost monuments and experiences of the city, from Connie Mack Baseball Stadium to downtown movie palaces and nightclubs. When used as fund-raising tools, announcers stressed the importance of the history that the city had lost. In an ironic recognition of demographic decline, they suggested using the videos as gifts for Philadelphians who had moved elsewhere so that they could relive their past in the city. This evokes intriguing intersections with issues of memory that haunt some Hollywood productions on the city.

Philadelphia Diaries (1999), another WHYY production, recast some of the terms and geography of Hollywood imagery by focusing on racially charged issues in North and West Philadelphia. It drew on cityscapes and community efforts like the extensive mural program that has emerged especially in blighted neighborhoods. In addition to broadcast linkages, this production also incorporated an Internet production diary that reads as a chronicle of interaction with the city over the weeks of production.

Other documentary productions have taken polemic stances on urban issues. Frederick Wiseman's High School pointed out the problems of North East Philadelphia High School. Squatters: The Other Philadelphia Story (1980) (whose title clearly refers back to a class icon of "Hollywood" Philadelphia) chronicled the efforts of ACORN to reclaim abandoned housing, while the Kensington Welfare
Rights Union has also produced a feature-length documentary on the housing struggle, *Poverty Outlaw* (1998), which brings voices of women from Kensington caught in postindustrial welfare to the screen. While some productions illuminate sometimes wry visions of the city, like the 2000 *Gay Bingo*, others are caught up in ongoing issues of race, class, and conflict. *Bombing on Osage Avenue* (1986), for example, dealt with a controversial city attack on the radical activist group MOVE, which continues to have repercussions in both the neighborhood and the city.

The last film, produced by Toni Cade Bambara and Louis Massiah, also spurred an ongoing project to promote community activism through video that re-poses issues of urban imagination and control. Scribe Video Center, founded in 1982, has acted as a clearinghouse for videographers and filmmakers engaged in various urban projects, from personal studies to documentation of changing street life. Among their interests, the Community Visions Project, initiated in 1990, has sought to train local groups to use videos as part of their organization. Scribe provides advice and training in scripting, camera, and editing as well as professional facilitators who work with organizational teams. Finally, Scribe schedules the work’s premiere at the (local) International House; many films are also screened on local public television. Subject matter, form, and distribution/use are chosen by the group itself.

This project, now responsible for 36 films, has produced a wide variety of works within its definition of underserved communities. These include many works based in Kensington and working with local community groups, such as Kensington Action Now’s *We Hope the Message is Getting Through* (1991). Other groups and videos include Community Mental Health, Mental Retardation Services’ *We are All in This Together* (1993); *We the People’s New Faces of AIDS* (1994), and the Anna Crusis Women’s Choir’s *When Speech Flows to Music* (1995). The form of the videos includes polemic pieces as well as those by younger activists that often echo music videos.

Distribution and use, as Wong has found (1997), represent the most variable features of such grassroots videos. Some are used in training and fund-raising, with active commentary from organizational representatives. Some have been shared with members but have had little more dissemination. Some were abandoned because of changes in program, internal conflicts, or disappearance of the organization itself. Few organizations have repeated their productions, given the efforts catalyzed by the initial video and turnover of interested associates, among other reasons.

A closer reading of one such video, *Face to Face: It’s Not What You Think* (1997), on which Wong worked as facilitator, indicates the processes by which urban visual culture is created and shared at the grassroots level. This video was created by ten youths working with Asian Americans United. It focuses on their experiences and anti-Asian prejudice in the city and ends poignantly with personal recognitions of family and a dedication to one videographer’s sister, who was killed in a video store incident in South Philadelphia while the video was being made.

When making *Face to Face*, the problem of Asian American representation was discussed at length by the eight Cambodian Americans and two Chinese Americans who constituted the core group as well as their Korean American and Chinese advisors. Yet, while the work is alternative, both in form and content, the producers themselves were not die-hard community/media activists. The youths got together for the video primarily to find a channel to express their concerns. They were also consumers of mainstream American media culture, with some exception via programming from their native countries as well as Hong Kong. Hence, while these producers were transnational, their media literacy was derived mainly from the hegemonic discourse. This explains the more MTV style seen at the tape’s opening and later parodic kung-fu sequences, as well as the youths’ familiarity with Hollywood movies like *Sixteen Candles* (1984).

These videographers put many of their concerns on the tape—schools, stereotypes, gangs, ethnic identities. However, they also omitted themes central to their societies and cultures, such as families and generational conflicts. During the four to five months when the youths met every Saturday at Asian American United to discuss the tape, many were concerned with their relationships with their parents. They would say that their parents still think that this is Cambodia, rather than America. They were expected to be good children, who do well in schools, dress appropriately, and stay home at the right time. This subject was never brought up on tape, however, because the youths do not want to offend their parents. Furthermore, they know that they want to make a tape reaching non-Asians, the main message of which should be the problem of racism that all shared rather than points of difference (the home).

As producers, though, neither these kids nor AAU thought clearly about audience. Yet the video has received relatively wide distribution and reaction. It has been shown in different schools and festivals and is now distributed by National Asian American Telecommunication Association (NAATA). Generally, it was well received by educators and fellow Asian Americans, who have expressed community through comments at the Q & A sessions. Others, especially white Americans, are simply not aware of anti-Asian racism and find the tape educational. However, African American audiences, especially youths, have been divided: some have noted shared styles uniting them to the “model minority,” while others have been critical of the film because of the complex urban racial relations between the two groups it depicts.

The video is powerful in its own reflections on media and identity. Yet as both agents and texts, process and
product create and re-create Asian American identities as global consumers in urban contexts. They incorporate a range of influences and experiences of American society and culture to be read differently by subsequent groups. *Face to Face* is a powerful as well as an intriguing statement to be read in many ways—personal, ethnic, urban, and even global, based in the divided citizenship of Philadelphia.

These linkages of product, production, and audience in narrowcast mass media and their echoes in other processes of limited screening in Philadelphia raise very different questions about urban visual culture, control, and use of the city. In the Community Visions Project, class and ethnicity are not metaphors or key scenarios, but grounds of struggle. Memories and injustice may still be haunting, but these are not motifs in a plot but causes to be righted. Moreover, since audiences often know producers and share their urban milieu, texts become interwoven with the production and reproduction of urban community and conflict. More than cultural proximity, then, we deal with cultural production, within a framework that recognizes the styles, themes, and even prejudices of mass media depictions of the city and grows from that knowledge in new visual media and cultural interpretations.

**Conclusions**

Over two decades ago, Ian Jarvie called our attention to many facets of film and mass media as experiences in order to open a window on the complex world of Hong Kong:

We tend to take the mundane cinema for granted; it is the least glamorous part of the film industry. Yet it is the heart of it too. Production would cease altogether and the cinemas of the world could go on forever showing and re-showing the immense accumulation of old movies—as happened in Russia after the 1917 revolution and in Hong Kong after the Japanese conquest. . . Hong Kong’s cinemas are not as exotic or quirky as those of some lands, despite snacks of dried beef, melon seeds, soybean milk, babies in slings on backs. The Chinese do not, as the Japanese do, hiss in quiet appreciation of strongly erotic scenes; they do not treat the auditorium as a socializing extension of their living room, as in Israel; they do not go in for the loud put-down remark in a tense moment, as in the English speaking world; they do not treat the cinema as a cultural event, as in France; they do try, like the British, to sit apart from strangers. Still, the cinemas and what they show—as also what they do not show—are a vital part of social life. [1978:71]

By responding to his challenge and comparing Hong Kong’s urban visual experiences with those of another city, albeit one linked through Hong Kong transnationalism, we have also sought to recapture these vital parts of social life, as tools and insights and even shapers of the city. The examination of film within the visual culture of two contemporary cities only allows us to sketch some of the implications of more systematic study, using anthropological tools of ethnographic observation, ideological analysis, and theories of space and place, through which we may further illuminate modern/postmodern cities and their transformations. In so doing, we wish to underscore links between the shape and experience of cities and the meanings that their citizens read off screens into their own lives.

At the same time, we must remain open to creative ways in which these readings can reshape local identities and meanings, whether with broadcast or narrowcast films. In late November 2000, for example, an editorial in the *Philadelphia Weekly* challenged an *Inquirer* critic who, responding to M. Night Shyamalan’s *Unbreakable* (2000), had decried the grim portrayal of the city that seems to run through Philadelphia films. Instead, the editorial proudly proclaimed:

We’re not a city predisposed to brightness and affirmation. Attempts to feign that we are, particularly for the sake of commerce, fail miserably.

Instead we are a city filled with mystery and magic; a city where the unexplained and the inexplicable find safe haven, where storytellers with refined acumen—like Edgar Allen Poe and M. Night Shyamalan—can sense the secrecy in our moods and create stories built around our wonder.

Look around. You can see it. You can feel it.

We should feel proud when a camera catches it. [Whitaker 2000]

Those of us who work in cities around the world all have witnessed intense mass-mediated transformation in our lives or in the field—if not in movies, in television or the Internet. Often, however, we take visual culture as the framework for everyday changes and normality. In the future, urban anthropology must recognize more not only mass media but urban visual expression, distribution, spectatorship, and active readings as vital and powerful components of urban life. With these tools, then, we can increase and enrich our understandings of contemporary cities, their citizens, and their destinies.

**Notes**

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1. A more detailed account of these ethnographic data on Hong Kong and their implications will appear in Wong and McDonogh (in press); Wong (1997, 1999a) provides a more detailed discussion of Scribe Video.
2. While these studies are situated primarily within film, others have also worked in television, photography, advertising, and the Internet but are too numerous to review here. Dickey (1997) offers an excellent review.

3. We are leaving aside some issues of continuing television portrayals, which include a more middle-class vision ("thirtysomething," ABC 1987–1991), an attempt at gritty urban realism and the promise of Bochco’s new work. Other cities have developed strong televusional images—Chicago and hospital dramas, Providence and melodrama (NBC 1999–present), or Baltimore and crime shows like “Homicide: Life on the Street” (NBC 1993–1999), yet this remains a distinct and complicated issue. In Philadelphia, such portraits should be contrasted with the role of public and independent stations, below.

4. This film, like other Wiseman works, has had complex local repercussions; for legal reasons, it remains unavailable for purchase or exhibition in the Greater Philadelphia region.

5. The present Asian American population in the United States and Philadelphia has been shaped by the 1965 immigration act in which national quotas were eliminated, after which family chain migration became easier. This contributed to a dramatic increase of this population and a wider non-Asian awareness of them. Still, these Asians came from different parts of Asia, at different periods, and can be enemies of another group in their home countries, like the Vietnamese and the Cambodians. Even within the same ethnic group, for example, a recent Hong Kong immigrant like Wong is very different from the people who jumped off the Golden Voyager or a third-generation Chinese American Republican accountant in terms of class, history, religion, language, and region. In reading the film, we must see this as a strategic label, on the one hand, imposed by mainstream America, while simultaneously manipulated by people who consider themselves Asian in America. Very often, this category includes most non-white, non-black, non-Latino, non-Native American, and, sometimes, non-Arabs or non-South Asians. Relations with African Americans are especially critical in this film.

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