



Film and Enigmatization : Nostalgia, Nonsense, and Remembering

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Overview

Author(s)

[Linda Chiu-han Lai](#)



Related Research Unit(s)

[School of Creative Media](#)

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Esther C.M. Yau

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Abstract

Taking up the widely discussed topic of nostalgia, in "Film and Enigmatization: Nostalgia, Nonsense, and Remembering," Linda Lai sees nostalgia mingled with a sense of local community and faith in modern progress. Collective memories of history and everyday experiences become intertwined with the history of popular culture in a process Lai calls "enigmatization."

"Enigmatization" in this sense means reorganizing existing pop culture images to select the local audience as a distinct, privileged interpretative community. Understanding this imagery distinguishes those within from those "outside" by marking as special those viewers who share a similar pop culture history. Lai uses "enigmatization" as a theoretical trope to examine the phenomenon of how Hong Kong cinema deals with identity. She draws on two films in particular as examples— Peter Chan's *He Ain't Heavv. He's Mv Father!* (1993). Derek Yee's

C'est la vie, mon cheri (1993), and Clifton Ko's I Will Wait for You (1994) —and also on the work of Stephen Chiau. In preserving a textual domain where local expressions, memories and contentions find articulation, Hong Kong cinema takes up those themes conjured up by enigmatization at a time when regional identities are undergoing tremendous reconfiguration.

The general purpose of Lai's project is to identify the films that cites and re-encode popular Cantonese and Mandarin film conventions. Stephen Chow's nonsense comedies, which are directed against norms of social propriety and hence against what is being upheld in the official public domain, privilege local viewers with their wordplay, Cantonese slang, folk and burlesque humor, mischievous characters, and obsession with oral pleasures. In films such as Fight Back to School (1992), Justice, My Foot (1992), From Beijing With Love (1994), and Forbidden City Cop (1996), Lai identifies a "rhetoric of subversion."

While they give voice to subterranean, everyday local culture and practices, the nostalgic film and nonsense comedy also turn the former into material for mass consumption. Collective memories of history and everyday experiences are intertwined with the history of popular culture — with the idioms and icons of old television programs, forgotten or half-forgotten movies, headline news items, old songs, and popular music.

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