

**Representing the Transurbanized Subject in
Popular Cinema:
MIB: Men in Black and *Suwarouteiru (Swallowtail
Butterfly)****

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ABSTRACT

This paper addresses representations of migrants of the global city in two films, Barry Sonnenfeld's *MIB: Men in Black* (1997), and Iwai Shunji's *Swallowtail Butterfly* (1996). I conduct a content analysis, with a particular emphasis on the ideological implications of the mixed genres found in both films. Produced in the mid-90s, coeval with transurbanization, a trend of networked cities campaigned for by neoliberal developmentalism, these two films continue the sci-fi tradition, projecting the transnational subjects onto a framework of fantasy and rework conventions of ghetto action films to figure emerging subjects of networked cities. Comparatively speaking, the subject of the future in *MIB* is a weak version of such a subject position, heavily mediated through the consumerist logic of visual cuteness. The subject in *Swallowtail Butterfly* is a stronger version, a speaking subject claiming to have rights to the city to compensate for the severely insufficient cultural protection by the nation state. Both representations are intermediary attempts to account for the still inchoate patterns of immense urbanization as the global future.

KEY WORDS

transurbanization, *MIB*, *Swallowtail Butterfly*, genre mixing, migrant, urban action genre, sci-fi genre, subject, crisis of representation



This paper addresses representations of migrants of the global city in two films, Barry Sonnenfeld's *MIB: Men in Black* (1997), and Iwai Shunji's *Swallowtail Butterfly* (1996). I will conduct a content analysis, with a particular emphasis on the ideological implications of the mixed genres found in both films. These two films continue the sci-fi tradition, projecting the transnational subjects onto a framework of fantasy and rework conventions of ghetto action films to figure emerging subjects of networked cities.

The narratives in these two films allow one to imagine global historical fiction in a broad sense. I am mindful of the criticism that it is absurd to accept historical narratives in popular cinema without any critical distance, since very often they appear as intellectual baby food for mass consumption. Having said this, I hasten to add the undeniable significance of recognizing popular imagination of the global scale. If this is true, cinema is one of the media likely to reach globally popular imagination and, equally important, the ideological consequences of cinematic imagination would therefore be of global relevance. It has been an accepted argument that popular imagination forged by novels is vital for ideological dissemination of national imaginaries.¹ That is, historical narratives in narrative films are more than heuristic; they serve important reference points in mapping a globalized world.

To be specific, I hope to explore how one imagines the impending future of the subjects of the mega-city in concrete popular forms. Examining cinema in transnational contexts, as I try to do here, proceeds without a strong support of established studies. Meaghan Morris, in her pioneering exposition of global imaginaries of Kung Fu films, describes this pressing methodological problem: "Too often, we

simply do not *know* enough to discuss cinema historically in a transnational register, even on a regional scale—as distinct from talking with cultural compatriots ‘about’ transnational cinema” (183; italics original). I will contextualize the two films in discussion, although geographically wide apart in its production, with an awareness of the world to be dominated by connections of cities. By doing so, I would also like to register a twofold interpretation of these two films. On the one hand, I find it indispensable to appreciate representations in popular cinema as the imagination that would lead to cosmopolitanism. On the other hand, I would also like to regard popular cinema at the conjunction of representation of social reality and reproduction of stock images. Therefore, critical intervention is required for exposing ideological agenda of accepted filmic languages and cultural assumptions.

MIB: Men in Black is a Hollywood comedy geared toward entertainment and *Swallowtail Butterfly* an independent feature film. Although they are quite different in tone, both films inquire into the consequences of massive urbanization, no matter how facetious the answers might appear. These two films attempt to find ways to represent what is not allowed to be articulated in terms of political representation in the nation-state to speak to the emerging social order of a global scale. It is arguable that they present a specific kind of transnational subject which, for lack of a ready expression, could be called figuratively “children of the global city,” the second generation of either the transnational elites or the underprivileged migrants in the metropolis. In a fundamental sense, the second-generation migrants in these films serve as a subject position of the transnational context. The children of the global city in these two films then work as the vanishing point of a perspective drawing, if you will, to establish the historical depth of the cinematic narratives.² In contrast with the first generation, subjects of this kind are much less confined by the teleology of origin and return or the assimilationist politics of the host nations, and more immersed in the experience of disembeddedness and displacement.

Transurbanization and the Crisis of Representation

Let me first explain what I mean by the context of networked cities from two perspectives, and I will use the term transurbanization to refer to this emergent environment. First, one could have a microscopic view, examining the city from inside out. In a recent book entitled *Transurbanism* architect Arjen Mulder points out that “[c]ities are growing increasingly complex, increasingly rich in internal and external *linkages*, increasingly comprehensive and concentrated, increasingly transparent yet incomprehensible” (7; italics mine). This remark is typical in explaining how in the context of city linkages the immediate urban experiences are so complex that one has greater and greater difficulty rendering them intelligible. Second, one could have a macro view of the city to find what Saskia Sassen, Manuel Castells, Allen J. Scott, Peter Hall, and Jonathan Friedman have been trying to maintain, the world is now more and more pervasively organized by complex networks of global scales, with cities as major nodal points. One important assumption for all these theorists is that the electronic and capital flows, such as real-time inventory, real-time trading through internet or satellite communications, are the necessary infrastructure for the networking of cities. One way to conceptualize globalization of today then is to construe it as the far side of urbanization, and the ascending order rises out of inter-city connections more than inter-state systems.

Although sociological studies have advanced a profound understanding of the enveloping influences of global urban linkages on everyday life, one would be hard pressed to find adequate representation of this change in daily languages. Indeed, transurbanization already prompts social scientists to go beyond existing models of representation. Evaluating the methodology of urban studies, Saskia Sassen warns that in representation one is no longer limited to topography. A two-dimensional morphology of the city itself could not suffice when electronic flows and the geographical materiality of commanding cities work in tandem to shape the urban

life (Sassen 1998).³ Transurbanization similarly provokes a crisis of representation in popular imagination in both how inhabitants of the city imagine the immediate environments and how the border-crossing subjects (not yet fully represented in the laws of the nation state) claim their identities. It is not hard to understand such a difficulty. Rephrasing Anthony Giddens' globalization, Roland Robertson maintains that "[g]lobalisation concerns the intersection of presence and absence, the interlacing of social events and social relations 'at distance with local contextualities'" ("Glocalization" 26–7). The social relation cannot be defined simply in terms of territorial boundaries but rather the distanced links of various kinds across geographical distances and temporal differences. Robertson's definition of globalization helps one realize why "cognitive mapping" in the city becomes one of the most challenging tasks in the global age.

Surprising to say, we can turn to popular cinema, with proper interpretation, and find representation of transurbanization. I argue that films are cultural texts that provide a language in which they articulate such transnational subjects as children of the global city at a time when such familiar tropes as travelers and diasporans seem to be insufficient to account for the new cultural encounters in the hyper-linked global era.

Genre Mixing and Cultural Globalization in *MIB* and *Swallowtail Butterfly*

The two films are significantly dated. Produced in the mid–90s, these cinematic works are situated at the point between the neo-liberal campaign of large-scale removal of national barriers for financial investment and the widespread, still-to-come impacts of such rescaling of global finance flows. Bill Clinton signed the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) in 1994 and managed an effective control of the Mexican economic crisis that ensued. The implementation of NAFTA intensifies controversies of Mexican laborers' migration, which is the immediate context of *MIB*. While conservative attacks against illegal immigrants, verbal or legal, abounded in this period,

New York City, where the story of the film takes place, enjoyed economic prosperity under the banner of economic *laissez-faire*. As for the context of *Swallowtail Butterfly*, the geopolitical reorganization of East Asia prompted the prospect of a rising China. Japan started to witness immigrants from China flowing into major Japanese cities as a direct consequence of China's open-door policy. Still in the euphoria of their bubble economy, the Japanese did not sustain acute economic blows until the Asian crisis of 1997. At the moment of the film production, Japan figures prominently as the future city, as one can see in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*.

Both films imagine the global city when worldwide urbanization is happening as a palpable experience. They also share a similar language of representation, deriving their forms from sedimentary composites of earlier generic layers, including science fiction and urban action. Even though science fiction films already show strong action elements, as one can find in the cyberpunk inflected example *Matrix*, I contend that these two films cannot squarely fit into this genre. Rather, it would be worthwhile to consider the mixing of two genres, namely sci-fi and urban action, in these two films to explain how filmic representations sit at the cusp of both reproduction of stereotypes and representation of emergent awareness of the changing world. As film genres are undeclared contracts among industry producers, content creators and receivers of cultural production, a genre analysis leads one to the complex linkages of cultural practices, histories of cultural categories and uneven deployment of social relationships. As Jason Mittelman justly insists, among the jobs to be done by a genre analyst, "discursing genealogies," the placement of a cultural product "within a larger systems of cultural hierarchies and power relations" are indispensable (17; 18). In this vein of reading, I will show how the composite of genres in these two films entails a growing realization that the city of excluded ghettos is becoming a city of inclusive neighborhoods.

We could trace this seemingly innocent act of genre mixing to attempts at articulating experiences of transurbanization. Though produced in different cultural contexts (New York City and Tokyo

respectively), these two cinematic representations now go back from the sociology of urban pathology to the filmic tradition established by Fritz Lang's *Metropolis* to re-articulate the city. In short, the blending of forms, found in the movies, results from the cliché of the city under the pressure of transurbanization and in so doing represents indirectly or directly what is absent from the popular imagination, the citizens of the global city. Let us remember transurbanization means locally rooted global flows. If one compares these two films with, for instance, Sakia Sassen's account of the global city as the convergence of the local and global, the sci-fi fantasy of alternative universes and the indispensable urban setting of the adventure/action film would respectively correspond to the electronic flows and material situatedness.

It is arguable that the urban action film has won global acceptance as a viable popular form that tells local stories of the city. The tradition of the "hood" films, for example, is a well-known instance of the popular imagination of the urban conditions. One way to understand such a genre is to see it as popularized urban realism, full of nitty-gritty details of the streets and under classes. The meandering routes and pockets of store interiors index mysteries of dangerous proximity to be explored. In this important sense, urban action film suggests rootedness in the urban locality, however conventional and stereotypical they sometimes can be.

If action films already establish themselves as decoders of the maze of urban space, the sci-fi element in these two films redirects the imagination to a space in which *deus ex machina* is a given to understand the effects of distanced links of the city.⁴ The futuristic genres that validate alternative universes are pregnant with the imaginary of space unrepresentable in the gadget-filled *mise-en-scene*. Specifically, the sci-fi element here introduces aliens (immigrants). Vivian Sobchak defines science fiction film as "a film genre which emphasizes actual, extrapolative, or speculative science and the empirical method, interacting in a social context with the lesser emphasized, but still present, transcendentalism of magic and religion, in an attempt to reconcile man with the unknown" (63). The unknown

of the sci-fi in these two films in discussion is the city as “networked digital humachines” in Mark Poster’s sense, a synthetic combination of machines and human bodily interventions. Poster correctly maintains the materiality of the digital media that are supposed to weave the movement of capital and goods into transparent flows: “If ‘high tech machine’ refers to the Internet, then its material structure is not at all virtual, consisting of a quite material myriad wires, cables, satellites connected to millions of computers, each of which is indeed locatable in space” (324).

What motivates the blending of sci-fi and urban action elements is not just the shock that the future as imagined in many previous romances of technotopia is no longer a fantasy but a tangible reality. Furthermore, one could find a structural arrangement available in contemporary globalization in imagining the present of the city, in which individuals of different ethnicities commingle: the city as the heartland of the nation transforms into a site where those excluded by the nation gather and thus upset the inside and outside binary of a national identity. The strategy of representation is in line with a long-standing practice of highlighting the phenomenon that cultures of other ethnicities now exist within the bounds of the metropolis. We could review Terry Eagleton’s suggestive glossary of the multiple meanings of culture to understand how filmic representations are also situated in a larger-than-itself context of Western modernity. Eagleton rightly maintains that, as well as the meanings of plant growing, civilization, aesthetic cultivation, culture has another origin: culture as conceived in nineteenth-century anthropology. In this sense, “[c]ulture, in short, is other people. As Fredric Jameson has argued, culture is always ‘an idea of the Other (even when I [Jameson] reassume it for myself)’” (Eagleton 26). I take a step further and argue that the strategy of representing a metropolis is to show it as the site where one starts to use the anthropological idea of culture to represent urban experiences and the result is a relativized view of unfamiliar cultures at the heart of the metropolis. This representation strategy is by no means unprecedented. In the Victorian culture, one also finds that social reformers reversed the thrust of Evangelical rhetoric to paint London as

the heart of darkness. One recognized example would be William Booth's *In Darkest England, and the Way Out* (1890), in which the author renders the metropolitan imagination in a gothic form by casting onto London the cultural imagination specific to colonies: "But this book is no mere lamentation of despair. For Darkest England, as for Darkest Africa, there is a light beyond" (Chapter 1). We will see how extensive these two films build on this representation strategy and how aesthetic elements are marshaled to soften gothic associations to make the metropolis of migrants welcome. The representation of the immigrant subjects lies precisely in the suture of this grafting of urban action onto a sci-fi framework to represent alien cultures and migrants. In so doing, these two films represent qualitative changes in the near expected future when the world is organized towards the matrix of urban networks, or in geographers' terms, "city links" or "city-regions."⁵

MIB: Men in Black

The plot of the film is simple and straightforward. An ominous expectation of a star war among unknown alien species looms large, damaging the peaceful equilibrium between the human beings and the aliens on the earth. The secret command center that oversees the peaceful cohabitation of different species in New York City recruits a seasoned cop Agent Jay (Will Smith) in this crisis to partner with Agent Kay (Tommy Lee Jones). Rather than going between the warring aliens as the Star War fantasy would do, the security force only goes after the undocumented aliens that run amuck in the city.

Representation comes in different forms and in *MIB* the representation of globalization takes shape in the classical sense of displacement. *MIB* distinguishes itself by merging the sci-fi fantasy of alien invasion with the discourse of metropolitan migrants. On the surface, the film seems to mobilize tropes of international migration to narrate a sci-fi fantasy of inter-galaxy journeys. However, a closer look at the film reveals how it also works the other way around. By reworking the migration discourse into a cinematic fiction, the movie

also confirms how such a discourse could be flexibly reused in presumably incompatible contexts. In other words, the remaking of transnational migrants into transglobal aliens exposes the semantic potentials of the discourse of metropolitan migration. Such a representation would not be fundamentally different from the kind developed by the hermeneutic operation of Sigmund Freud: Interpreting how parts and fragments of one's psychological concerns reappear in a seemingly different form during the dreaming process would amount to a critical awareness of the said concerns. In this sense, in the film the imaginary of transurbanization slightly masquerades as a drama of interplanetary traveling aliens.

The movie *MIB* apparently grows out of a fusion of two genres: urban action drama such as *NYPD Blues* and sci-fi films like *Aliens* (1986). Genre revisionism by modifying established patterns is a regular practice of Hollywood production. Yet embedding urban action onto a sci-fi plot goes beyond a usual practice of genre revisionism. The city as the site of horror in either kind of movies now becomes the ground of fun chasing. Specifically, the variant of the urban action used in this film is the cop action film, a genre with some highly recognizable elements associated with American city police, in which the drama unfolds differences and clashes of two policemen on duty. The main setting is in downtown Manhattan, crowded with shops of nebulous interior spaces, such as a pawn shop and a Chinese restaurant. A NYPD viewpoint in a drama of initiation used to urge the audience to look into the pathogenic ghettos of the city in the 1970s and 1980s, but *MIB* turns the city into a site of encounters with aliens. According to the director, Agent Jay, a former NY cop, is supposed to be the audience's viewpoint rather than Agent Kay. Through Agent Jay's gradual acceptance of a different way of looking at New York, the audience also relishes the likelihood of reimagining the city as the downtown spotted with racial ghettos in the outer space. The immediate environment adjacent to this New York look-alike is the outer space rather than any other place on the geographical earth. In simple terms, this generic change means a shift from xenophobia to a celebration of networked cities.

In the process of recasting New York into a space capital, the film changes racial hybridity into a gaudy exhibition of commodities. We see in this film the streetwise New York policeman played by Will Smith, whose Afro-American presence immediately evokes the difficult racial history of New York and the pathology of the inner city.⁶ However, the change of the racial identity into an agent of a black outfit, a transformation amounting to an act of passing, quickly erases these historical suggestions. What are in place instead are splendid displays of glittering gizmos. In this way this film implicitly affirms the effects of the neoliberal ideology that the trade of the global scale promises an ever widening space of possibilities for equal participation. It is no wonder that the setting of the last battle is staged in Flushing's Meadows Park, the site where New York World's Fair, a typical activity for promoting free trade, took place between 1964 and 1965.

This film encourages the imagination of technological non-place of flows, first and foremost through its depiction of "the space port," which marks the city as the center of receiving species of unexpected kinds. This port depends heavily on recognizable conventions for intelligibility. Like the layered city in *Metropolis*, the commanding port is located at the basement of the city, unknown to all other city dwellers, but moves the city around. The futuristic setting turns out to be thinly disguised. The space port of *MIB* in this sense evokes a resemblance to the real TWA terminal at New York is JFK International Airport, architecture built in the late 50s, designed by Eero Saarinen, whose design is full of curves and cantilevered forms to create lightness even out of concrete buildings. The director confirms in the DVD commentary that the style of the space port resembles much Saarinen's. In addition to the retro style of the fifties, the spatial arrangement of the "port" in the movie is worthy of some notes, especially the spaciousness of the setting. The high ceiling reminds the audience of a typical elevated terminal structure. Furthermore, the spaciousness derives its import mainly from the distinctive *mise-en-scene* of object accumulation: every element in the official process of migration conceivable is piled up in one huge room, including administration clerks, passengers waiting in line, commanders of the terminal, and the

central command console. The huge fancy-looking monitor in the middle and various small screens contribute to squeezing into the scene such elements as navigation charts, surveillance graphs and the personnel files.

To accentuate the idea of New York as a node of exchanges, the film crew added in the middle of production process a scene, in which Agent Jay carelessly sets loose a flying and sparking ball, which in turn wrecks damage to facilities in the port. It is a festival of flows; the flying itself symbolizes powers of flows and connectedness, invisible to the public but at work. Agent Kay catches the ball in the midst of great confusion and explains that this little object caused a power outage in the past. The conspiracy now makes it clear that this is the place where the agents can contain the mechanism of flows to avoid any wildcard consequences.

The film also figures corporate elites and undocumented terrorists. The DVD commentary refers twice to a fundamental change of how to create the plot of aliens at war during the production. Originally, the director planned to dramatize a trio of warring extraterrestrials. In the middle of shooting this film, the crew decided to reduce the kinds of warring aliens into two sides, the good and the bad. This production change makes sense in streamlining the plot, but there is another reason that motivates such a decision. The binary of the good and the bad smacks much of a well known opposition of the transnational elites versus global terrorists in a metropolis like New York. The anxiety of distinguishing these two categories appears all the more virulent in the United States after the 911 tragedy.

The film recalls the memory of the Jewish immigrants with some of its cliché implications to represent the “good” aliens. The powerful figure from the outer space has elements that resemble in appearance and behavior a rich Jewish jewelry dealer in real life. In such a move, the film goes back to the poignant moment when diasporic Jews arrive in abundance. Yet the Jewish identity is just an appearance. The well-dressed businessman is far from a migrant from the past. The autopsy of this alien in the morgue reveals him to be a tiny alien in control of a relatively huge machine that looks like a human being. This

comical scene suggests one way to imagine the powerful transnational elites who are marked by paradoxical presence: their absence of physical bodies and their presence in electronic forms (text messages, faxes, financial data, email commands, etc.).

On the other hand, the characters of bad aliens call to mind the omnipresence of global terror. The undocumented and unnamed come in the unsuspected disguises of an upper state farmer and two businessmen. Behind the laughter of this cinematic comedy resides the anxiety of policing foreigners. The language of space encounters allows the film to imagine what it is like to live with strangers that are not necessarily powerless in economic and social ranks and to rehearse the old shocking experience of coexisting in close proximity even with much intensity.

To elaborate on the encounter with the unnamed stranger, I would analyze a seemingly minor detail of the story, the appearance of a just born alien. Although the birth scene appears to be external to the main plot of chasing after the outer-space bug in New York City, it dramatically substantiates the context of this police narrative by invoking an imagination of a huge urban population of aliens in generations, not represented via the story of warring aliens. The subject position constructed in the audience's gazing at the newborn alien typifies a major strategy of representing flows of people in contemporary globalization, which comprises two aspects, including forgetfulness of cultural differences and fetishization of the other into an object of nostalgic longings. The subject position, according to Louis Althusser's classical definition, is established through interpellation, an interaction of a hailing and an unthinking response to it. Althusser's definition is effective in grasping the two dimensions of the subject position in this film. The fantasy creature's interpellation of the audience in effect displaces the demographic fact that some migrants in the metropolis, like it or not, give birth to new generations, the children of the global city. The film maintains a distance toward the new baby by making its bodily shape cartoonishly cute. With its tiny body and big blinking eyes, the squid-shaped baby alien immediately impresses the young agent as an innocent one. First and foremost, the

cuteness of the new-born squid disarms the audience of the social fears such as miscegenation, cohabitation, and genocide. In this sense, the cuteness of the squid baby resonates with the dominant theme of the film, a blasé attitude toward strangeness, differences and cultural diversity embodied in the encounter experiences in the city. In a strong sense, this birth scene represses the horror of a future of miscegenation. Cuteness, despite dangers posed by immigration, is an invisible interface ameliorating the shocks of confronting aliens (ethnically or culturally different migrants) to produce the effect of being normal, secure and the same. The amnesia effect enacted by this cute creature, interestingly, is similar to the assumed effect of the flashy gadget, a so-called “neutralizer” that the policing agents wield in the face of commoners to wipe out any memory of encountering aliens (non-human beings).

Cuteness, as a register of visual styles, not only displaces complex urban settings but invites a preferable kind of response to it. It redirects the encounter with a foreigner via affect, “the emotional repercussions of an experience” which transports the audience into a fantasy of pastoral nostalgia.⁷ Commenting on the cultural semiotics of cuteness in Japanese consumerism, Anne Allison observes that “ambiguity, in the sense of a murkiness that blurs borders rather than gets contained by them (good/bad, real/fantasy, animal/human), is a central part of cuteness as generated by the cute business in Japan” (386). She stresses that the significance of cuteness originates from its cultivating a nostalgia for pre-industrial innocence. Gazing at this cute baby, the audience may not find an (undocumented and unnamed) alien; instead, they can settle in a romanticized longing for pastoral harmony with the surroundings. The idyllic longing is reinforced by the *mise-en-scene*. Interestingly, born to two alien parents, this new baby comes into the world without the city crowd. The backdrop of the scene is a green park. In spite of the background of the Twin Towers of the World Trade Center, nothing beyond the greenness of the park lawn suggests the presence of urban crowds. The physical isolation of the scene triggers a hackneyed daydream of the metropolis: one could still escape the city in this green corner of the city which approximates nature.

Above all, cuteness should be read as artificial, and by so doing we understand that the newborn alien is merely a mediation of urban experiences. Cuteness is a product premised on “affective labor.” As Negri and Hardt maintain, affective labor is in great need, in place of the disruption caused by massive global flows of ideologies, capital and people: “Affective labor, then, is labor that produces or manipulates affects such as a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, or passion” (*Multitude* 108). How one is shielded from everyday changes of globalization depends much on the invisible operation of affective labor. The theory of affective labor explains the active role of mediation in sociality of people beyond national laws and national imaginaries.⁸

Swallowtail Butterfly

Swallowtail Butterfly is scripted and directed by Japanese *auteur* Iwai Shunji. Iwai started his career in 1988 as a director of music videos and soon established himself as a style innovator, sometimes hailed as the Wong Kar-Wai of Japan. His first feature film *Love Letter* was released in 1995 and enjoyed an immediate success. *Swallowtail Butterfly*'s epic scope stands out oddly in his corpus marked by the subject matter of adolescent love in an electronic age. Unlike the displacement of the global city found in *MIB*, *Swallowtail Butterfly* represents the presence of the global city mainly via the unmooring effects of the migrants' violent displacement. It is obvious in its task of representing the second generation of migrants in the context of mega-cities.

The film opens with a panoramic view of a futuristic metropolis called Yentown, implicitly standing for Japan's capital Tokyo. The multi-plot of three characters Glico, Ageha and Fei-hong plays out extensively the close homonym of Yentown in Japanese as both capital of money and theft of money. As the voiceover at the beginning of the film says, Yentown refers to “both the city and the outcasts.”⁹ The underlings of the city, composed of undocumented immigrants, are called Yentowns, stealers of money. Among the Yentowns, Glico

(Chara) is a prostitute. Ageha (Ayumi Ito), a teenage daughter of an already dead Chinese prostitute, does not have a name until incidentally taken under Glico's wing. Her Japanese name, given by Glico, means a swallowtail butterfly. Fei-hong (Hiroshi Mikami) survives by scavenging at the city margin. Glico and Fei-hong together seek to achieve business prosperity in the city by taking advantage of a money counterfeiting technology, coded in a cassette tape of Frank Sinatra's "My Way," which fortuitously falls into their hands. Glico then rises to be a sensation pop star while Fei-hong is forced to dissociate himself from Glico to hide her identity as an undocumented immigrant and prostitute. The scheme of using fake money quickly pushes these immigrants into a corner because both the police and the gangsters are after them for the digital original of the counterfeit print. Fei-hong dies tragically due to police brutality. Glico and Ageha have a narrow escape from the gangsters. Ageha has on her chest a tattooed swallowtail butterfly, symbolic of her new identity in the city.

This film has been a great commercial success, having grossed 1.6 billion yens (Kuwabara Konosuke, qtd. in Lori Hitchcock's "Third Culture Kids").¹⁰ This popular success has also provoked scholars into a serious debate of whether this film does justice to the multiculturalism of Japan. Critics of this film tend to recognize the director's attempt in representing ethnic others, but they often aver that Iwai's film is so trapped within artificial filming styles as to leave a much desired challenge to the migrant policies of Japan. A telling example would be Aaron Gerow's disapproval of the exhibition of racial and cultural stereotypes: "Even if Iwai's decision to have his Japanese cast speak foreign languages presents the image of a multicultural Japan, in the end, the 'otherness' that the actors assume is more posture than reality" (9). In examining the filmic language of Iwai, Eric Cazdyn also criticizes Iwai's over-aestheticization of filming techniques: "These gratuitous aesthetic gestures [in filming and editing techniques], together with a cloying soundtrack, make it difficult to think through (at any time during the two-and-a-half hours film) the issues of foreign labor and the effects of Japan's bubble economy" (*The Flash of Capital* 161).

My analysis of this film corroborates Gerow's and Caydzn's judgment that the film falls short of fundamentally challenging the exclusion of migrants in Japan; however, I think the merit of this film lies elsewhere. In fact, another question takes precedence over a direct naming of the enemies: When the migrant policies remain unchallenged, effectively denying illegal immigrants fundamental legal representation in the state, how do immigrants survive in this near vacuum of political representation? I will argue that, in using cinematic language to represent the migrant population not yet visible in political representation, Iwai shows how claiming the place is necessary for one to survive before a negotiation with the reality takes place.

To clarify the focus of *Swallowtail Butterfly*, I would first like to briefly touch on the crisis of representation in the aspect of illegal immigrants in the city even though I have no intention of exhausting the complexity of this issue in such a limited space. In a way, one could describe contemporary cities as the conjunctures where the rigid exclusion on the basis of legal citizenship clashes with unmanaged inclusion of a large migrant population. This urban contradiction leads to the exposure of a large number of the migrant population to a lack of representation in the state institutions. Hence, it also contributes to a fundamental questioning of the distinction of a right of visit¹¹ and that of residence, a normative distinction upheld by Emmanuel Kant. In "Towards a Perpetual Peace" and "The Metaphysics of Morals," Kant asserts that a right of residence comes with the citizen of the state and a non-citizen can only enjoy a right of visit (Kant 105–6; 172).¹² This distinction is fundamental to the sociality of the world society composed of states, allowing travels but regulating the movement of people only in terms of state sovereignty. Thus, Kant uses state laws as the foundation of cosmopolitan laws and sets universal hospitality as the content of the cosmopolitan right. This distinction, upon which modern civil states are built, is fraught with ambiguity. One source of the ambiguity is that the visitor's right "occupies that space between human rights and civil rights" (Behabib 27). Another source lies in one assumption of Kant's cosmopolitical order that in addition to a claim to a common possession of the earth, the right of visit is also a convenient

policy, which predates a world organized completely into a confederation. In the prospect of transurbanization, immigrants often claim a right of residence instead of that of visitation, a limited set of rights without a claim to the attachment to a place. Such a clash then is more than one of individuals versus states; rather, it is a future of linked cities versus a cosmopolitical order of nation-states. Politically, illegal immigrants “represent” the emerging order of linked cities where no sufficient institutional mechanisms are yet established so as to protect them from the exclusion carried out by the political body of the nation state.

This crisis of representation is intense, especially in a city like Tokyo. One could find in this city one of the most serious collisions between the nation-state and migrants. Tokyo is pulling in foreign migrants quickly as a global city. On the other hand, Japan is a country where the access of foreigners to citizenship is one of the most restricted. Foreigners are given participation opportunities in the labor market but allowed little access to the state protections in social welfare and political rights of participation. Even though Hideki Tarumoto emphasizes, in a UNESCO journal article on multiculturalism in Japan, that Japan is working to accommodate ethnically different migrants, at the same time he notes that the drive toward change is not from the demands of migrants, but from pressure of other nation states, and the response rate is quite slow (94).

Iwai Shunji brings together two genres, sci-fi and urban action, to represent, respectively, the coming together and violent cohabitation of the two aforementioned forces, the exclusion of citizenship and the swarming in of undocumented migrants. To begin with, Iwai borrows the sci-fi elements to situate the film in a dystopian city of exclusion. Sci-fi has a tradition of representing the not yet fully comprehensible or fully controlled technological advancements and further enabling critiques of them. Thus, it is not surprising in terms of the history of genres that this film starts with a sci-fi frame to portray the imposing experience of globalizing capital. *Swallowtail Butterfly* starts and ends with an aerial survey of a sepia-toned industrial city with Ageha's voiceover: “Once upon a time, when the Japanese yen was the strongest

force in the world” The mythology of the future city that Tokyo enjoys is firmly assumed rather than flaunted in this sci-fi setting. Later, the dividing of the city into the glamorous downtown and industrial wasteland at the city margin harks back to the urban topography in the sci-fi critique of industrialization as seen in *Metropolis*. Yet it is important to note that the stock dystopian images in this film do not invite the audience back to the Victorian moment; instead, they are stereotypes culturally available as social critique, now used to indicate the capital (the commanding city) as the site of concentrated capital (money). As the center of capital concentration, the film foregrounds flows of capital and attendant issues of social justice by expounding the paradox of Yentown as the capital of dollars and the capital of thieves. As Iwabuchi Koichi describes with clarity, “‘Yen’ [in *Swallowtail Butterfly*] symbolizes the uneven and destructive forces of globalized capitalism that intensify the widening gap between haves and have-nots, the violence among migrants, Japanese discrimination against them, and the immigrants’ growing sense of despair” (553).

The overlooking view of the city suggests a double move of the film: it is both a representation of transurbanization and a critique of its exclusion of migrants. Iwai further depicts the foreignness of undocumented migrants via the use of the urban action genre, especially the Hong Kong gangster genre. Since the lack of legal representation of migrants in Japan could result in the paucity of corresponding representations of migrants and their cultures in non-legal activities, John Woo’s aesthetics of violence fills in this void of cultural representation and becomes a form of imagining Chinese immigrants in a technologically advanced city. Iwai fluently reproduces the style of violence in the gangster plot. The Chinese mafia is after the tape in which the counterfeit print is transcoded. The gangsters led by Reikei (Nene Ohtsuka) first tortures and slaughters with fanfare another mafia leader, suspected of stealing the tape and failing to deliver it as promised. The director manages on a small budget to use the hand-held camera to produce a car chase scene and a gory killing scene between the gangsters and Fei-hong. One cannot deny the obvious fact that John Woo’s style is already trite and Chinese

migrants so rendered would be equally formulaic. Iwai cannot register otherness without being conventional and stereotypical, but we would have to attribute the limitation to a much larger context in which few forms of popular imagination are available in Japan to readily communicate the foreignness without calling for unwanted prejudices. At least, Woo's style of violence, as a form that draws attention to the spectacle itself rather than the moral motivation, is useful for Iwai to parade the brutal confrontations among gangsters and migrants, yet without necessarily associating these characters' violence with moral depravity.

Both the sci-fi and gangster genre elements in this film might lead the audience to wonder whether the director displays fantasy for its own sake in this film. Nonetheless, I argue that Iwai depends on these generic elements also for the potentials of social critique. Though by no means realistic in portraying the complex conditions of undocumented migrants in Japanese cities, the fusion of sci-fi and urban action makes it possible to understand the unsettling everyday life condition of transurbanization. This is obviously so when one examines how Iwai deploys fantasy heroes. Superman-like heroes who constantly appear in popular sci-fi fantasy and urban action could allow the film to construct for the audience a position of comprehending totality, otherwise hard to maintain in everyday life. This partly explains why the wasteland outside the downtown in this film has the cult value of being a space not irrevocably immersed in the ruthless logic of capitalism and hence suggests an alternative sphere from which a detached view of the city is possible. For example, unlike other characters, Ran (Atsuro Watabe) seems to take the city margin as his permanent habitat, and has no intention of moving to the downtown for a prosperous life. His guerilla-like outfit and behavior are congenial to sci-fi outlaws or hackers often found in cyberpunk fiction. Another character Reikei, the head of gangsters, acts as a Good Samaritan, coming from nowhere, to save Ageha from opium overdose. Again, the crisis of representation motivates Robin-Hood-like Ran and Reikei since they embody the utopian hope of impossible alternatives. *Swallow Butterfly* does not go so far as to advocate a change of the political future by a transnational

hero.¹³ As a minor character and one equipped with excessive and somewhat ridiculous weaponry, Ran's status as a fantasy hero is self-evident. Placing the outlaws in the realm of fantasy, this film does not reveal a strong urge toward changing the status quo but still puts the audience in an imaginary position to critique Japan's exclusion of foreign migrants.

Indeed, the academic criticism is mostly valid that the film's fantasy element often renders the representation of migrants' otherness artificial. Nevertheless, it is more fruitful, as I have argued, to find both disarticulations and articulations of transurbanization in this film. Although these stereotyping works may look artificial to the critics mentioned above, for better or for worse, they are a strategy of representation that allows to be "entertained" (conceived as possible) in an entertainment piece both what can not be easily articulated in the normative language of the states, and what follows inevitably, the undesirable experiences of displacement. Less analytical than fantastic, *Swallowtail Butterfly's* depiction of the couple Glico and Fei-hong illustrates how undocumented migrants settle in the city that constantly attempts to stomp them out.

As described, this film locates the urban socio-historical condition that brings about the crisis of representation by juxtaposing sci-fi and urban action; furthermore, it presents the direct effects of the crisis of representation and seeks to address this issue. How to dramatize the migrants' condition of insufficient political representation lies at the heart of many projects of filmic representation of transurbanized subjects that have not been recognized legally. In various ways, silence and aphasia of migrants, resulting from repression, have been represented. A realistic story that dramatizes absence of representation can focus on a character's silence or metaphorical aphasia. Luc and Jean-Pierre Dardenne's *La Promesse* (1996) is a good example. In this film the victim cannot voice the injustice done in the name of citizenship exclusion except through a folk practice of speaking for the dead through a spiritual medium. Another canonical example is Lars von Trier's *Dancer in the Dark* (2000), in which the director addresses the problem of representation

by constantly juxtaposing the musical form of psychological fantasies with the realist plot of victimization. In fact, Iwai is one of the directors that narrate the deadening silence falling upon illegal migrants. Like these two examples, *Swallowtail Butterfly* represents silence and aphasia of illegal migrants, mostly through a morgue scene and the story of Fei-hong. Right after the framing shot, the film shows a supposedly undocumented prostitute, maybe of Chinese origin, murdered and abandoned in the grass on the outskirts of the city. In the morgue, a small group of women gather around the dead but no one dares to claim the body. The identity of the corpse remains unknown. Two Japanese policemen brutally stop an attempt at a minimal funeral service by the surrounding crying women. In the middle of the chaos, the piece of cloth over the dead woman is snatched off, and the pallid naked body of the woman is revealed. The cold corpse is equivalent to aphasia, symptomatic of the deprivation of cultural representation and the inability to speak out against injustice. The male protagonist Fei-hong is told not to divulge his romantic connection with Glico or their background of illegal identities. He later also falls victim to police violence and dies from torture. In a sense, Fei-hong is a double of the dead prostitute, whose life story reveals typically how the subject is physically trapped in the city, deprived of a collective culture, and rendered silent and aphasiac.

On the subject matter of representing illegal immigrants, I argue that *Swallowtail Butterfly* is strikingly more advanced than *La Promesse* and *Dancer in the Dark*. For one thing, the film allows Ageha, a second-generation migrant, to assume an active role in constructing an identity in the dislocating city and thus shows the strong potentiality of a transurbanized subject. Ageha's story lies at the center of the film to describe how one should break the spell of aphasia and survive the trauma of a cultural void. She seeks to speak out about who she is by having a name representing herself. She receives her name from Glico. In a room Glico draws a caterpillar on Ageha's chest, partly for fun, to correspond to a swallowtail butterfly tattoo on Glico's own chest. The swallowtail butterfly has great significance. It is an identity passed on to a girl who has been raised without a societal network. If it is a name

to be used against all odds, the naming itself is not enough. She must remember that no one dared name her mother in the morgue. Toward the end of the film, Ageha tries to have a swallowtail butterfly tattooed on her chest as Glico has done. The tattoo is another illustration of her feeble effort to cope with the dislodging city. Witnessing how her surrogate family of Glico and Fei-hong breaks down when both the policemen and the gangsters try desperately to locate the lost tape, she makes an effort to turn back the clock by buying back Fei-hong and Glico's business, but to no avail. Money cannot reverse the fortune that has been turned against the star-crossed lovers. If both Glico and Fei-hong pass away, no one will know her as Ageha. At this point, she can only inscribe her identity on her own body to fight, even beyond life, against the legal and cultural vacuum imposed on her. In this sense, the bodily inscription ironically reveals the lack of a cultural milieu for Ageha.

We would need to scrutinize the tattoo episode to discover how Iwai represents a transurbanized subject. Ageha's visit to the quack doctor for a tattoo turns out to be a popular replication of a psychological therapy to overcome the trauma of cultural vacuum for Ageha. Even though the practice of the quack doctor is in a stereotypical Chinese opium street, the film interestingly casts a Westerner-like actor to play this doctor. The therapy seems to occur inadvertently but the outward appearance of the room and its spatial arrangements both strongly suggest a session between a psychoanalyst and his client. The editing and shooting style invite the audience to go through the recalling process with Ageha. The movement of the camera simulates a butterfly's unsteady flying. A succession of fragmentary shots organized by jump cuts acquired from a handheld camera zigzags across a waterway. The oscillating movement of the butterfly acknowledges the difficulty of Ageha's task and the disorienting shots symbolize the damages done by the dislocating effects of the global flows of capital in Yentown. The awakened memory is of a little girl, hiding herself in a squalid restroom while her prostitute mother is having sex with a client. "If that is my memory, I want that," says Ageha in a firm tone.

The subject position that the butterfly's flying movement constructs would be an attachment to a place marked by an extreme form of miscegenation. First of all, Ageha's attempt amounts to a claim to the city as a place of attachment, a symbolic gesture whose importance cannot be overemphasized. Ageha's retrieval of urban memory in a sense is a radical unsettling of the enlightenment philosophy of rights, espoused by Kant. Although the romantic association that a swallowtail butterfly exists in ecological harmony with the environment appears preposterous in the setting of a city, Ageha would like to have the city as her only habitat, however unsettling the city is for her. Unlike Glico's brother, who once dreamed about returning to Shanghai, Ageha, as a representative of second-generation migrants, a point of origin outside of the city is unthinkable. The un-remembering of the origin and the insistence on the attachment to the immediate geography upset the distinction between the visitation right versus the residence right. The city should not be merely a site of offering hospitality to visitors, but also an environment that allows the imagined ecological harmony to grow. Second, by making the memory of her mother's business as a prostitute a primal scene for Ageha, Iwai makes transurbanization an object to be gazed at by substantiating the imagination of city links with a figure of an extreme form of linkage, that of exchanging bodily fluids.

Let me add one final point. *Swallowtail Butterfly* makes the urgent task of the moment a work of compensation rather than a frontal attack on exclusion of migrants. In this attempt we have a glimpse of the transurbanized subject as a cosmopolitan subject, but one should mark the limit of this movie by making it clear that Iwai's Ageha is a character of survival rather than triumph over the urban vicissitudes. Ageha's construction of identity is a long way from, for example, an unconditional law of hospitality advocated by Jacques Derrida. Derrida maintains that, as a consequence of Kant's theory of cosmopolitan right, the police of the state remain the unsupervised regulator of the undocumented migrants. He urges that one should go back to the figure of the city of refuge taken from the Hebraic tradition, to invoke the conception of a place where migrants can unconditionally call one's

own residence home.¹⁴

Conclusion

Produced in the mid–90s, *MIB* and *Swallowtail Butterfly* are coeval with transurbanization, a trend of networked cities campaigned for by neoliberal developmentalism. I argue that we find historical fiction of globalization in these two popular films by locating the emerging generation represented in them. Even in sociological studies, one can start to find research on migrant children as indicators of the future. As Paula S. Fass argues in her sociological study of migration and children, “. . . it is not helpful to imagine that children, especially older children, are either helpless or passive in the process of change that defines today’s world, and the migrations that are part of it” (949). If Benedict Anderson maintains that the novel “provided the technical means for ‘re-presenting’ the kind of imagined community that is nation” (25), I show that popular cinema also gives glimpses of the transurbanized subject of the future and in this way draws historical trajectories from the past to the future. Comparatively speaking, the subject of the future in *MIB* is a weak version of such a subject position, heavily mediated through the consumerist logic of visual cuteness. The subject in *Swallowtail Butterfly* is a stronger version, a speaking subject claiming to have rights to the city to compensate for the severely insufficient cultural protection by the nation state. Neither of these two representations, however, are paradigms to be followed mandatorily; instead, they are intermediary attempts to account for the still inchoate patterns of immense urbanization as the global future.

By this project I seek to contribute to defining a position in which we could critically understand extensive urbanization in the realm of everyday life today via cinema. One major assumption of the discussion is that a juxtaposition of theorization of globalization and its representation in popular cinema would enable historical perspectives that could go beyond the flattening effect of spatialized views of globalization. Scholars often refer to cinema as a capturing device that kaleidoscopically represents the city life. In contrast with abundant

discussions on spatial characteristics of cinematic images, the capacity of historicizing cinematic narrative is not sufficiently foregrounded. Even if attention turns to the syntagmatic analysis in popular narrative film, simple narrative structures could be lost in the preference of the fragmentary cutting sequence. This would certainly be an option to operate within the intellectual tradition bequeathed by high modernism and postmodernism, but I choose to concentrate on the alluring power in bits of narrative in popular narrative film.¹⁵ This approach not only leads one to affirm the popular appeals but also lends them under a critical examination for ideological implications.

NOTES

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¹ For example, Sir Walter Scott's historical novel *The Heart of Midlothian*, in which the journey of young Jeanie Deans to London places England in an imaginary unity. For an updated discussion, please read Patrick Parrinder's *Nation & Novel: The English Novel from Its Origins to the Present Day*.

² I draw on Michel Foucault's *The Order of Things* to understand how the complex pairings of looking and being looked at construct the representation work.

³ Saskia Sassen explains how electronic space changes the way of mapping by city users:

City users have often reconstituted strategic spaces of the city in their image: emblematic is the so-called hyper-space of international business, with its airports built by famous architects, world class office buildings and hotels, state of the art telematic infrastructure, and private security forces. They contribute to change the social morphology of the city and to constitute what Martinotti (1993) calls the metropolis of second generation, the city of late modernism. (Mega-city Lecture)

⁴ One could explain the propensity to using technological setups in terms of its production process:

The tendency of recent Hollywood cinema to abandon location shooting in favor of incorporating more computer-generated imagery (CGI) denies the arbitrariness and unpredictability—the specific—of place (the urban location) by submitting every potentially chance element to the predestination of advance technological control. (Tony Fitzmaurice 23)

Yet this production preference itself can not account for the choice of the sci-fi since the production technique CGI is quite capable of producing naturalizing effects and sci-fi is able to do otherwise.

⁵ See Allen J. Scott, ed. *Global City-Regions: Trends, Theory, Policy* and Saskia Sassen, *Global Network, Linked Cities*.

⁶ See James Berger's "Ghosts of Liberalism" for a detailed description of how Daniel Patrick Moynihan uses the rhetoric of urban pathology in the influential "Moynihan Report of 1965. For a copy of the report, you may visit the website: <http://dol.gov/oasam/programs/history/webid-meynihan.htm>.

⁷ The concept of affect is necessary to understand how one would respond to an act of interpellation. Affect, as defined in *The Language of Psycho-Analysis*, means "the emotional repercussions of an experience." Affect, seemingly derivative from experiences, would accumulate in an unwitting way into a structure of feeling about the society.

⁸ Anthony Giddens acknowledges disrupting effects of globalization by the concept of "risk", but he also offers the concept of trust to explain some social equilibrium in current globalization (*Consequences* 29–36). Yet this theory of risk and trust proves insufficient in explaining how trust is produced. By using the concept of affective labor or immaterial labor, Negri and Hardt point our attention to the emotional aspect of experience and to the potentials of modifying affects as a central project in consumerism.

⁹ The ambivalence of this word derives from a confluence of Japanese, Chinese and English. The word town in English refers to the city, but its Japanese pronunciation evokes the Chinese character of theft.

¹⁰ The Japanese film community also rewarded the main actress Chara, a popular pop singer, Best Actress in Japan Academy in 1997. Iwai Shunji

received the Best Asian Film Award in Fant-Asia Film Festival of 1998.

¹¹ It is a right of resort in Reiss' translation; I am using the term a right of visit from the English translation of Jacque Derrida's use.

¹² In "Toward Perpetual Peace," Kant maintains a limited cosmopolitan right: "He may only claim a right of resort, for all men are entitled to present themselves in the society of theirs by virtue of their right to communal possession of the earth's surface" (106). In "The Metaphysics of Morals," he contends similarly: "they [abuses by colonization] do not deprive the world's citizens of the right to attempt to enter into a community with everyone else and to *visit* all regions of the earth with this intention. This does not, however, amount to a right to *settle* on another nation's territory (*ius incolatus*), for the latter would require a special contract" (172; italics original).

¹³ We should also note that the representations of the outlaws in this film suggest no possibility of Bonapartism, an early nineteenth-century French historical counterpart of folk outlaw fiction. According to Karatani Kojin, the legal system of parliamentary representation was challenged severely by such groups of unrepresented people as farmers and workers, and Bonapartism, worship of a hero of a similar social class, emerges as a solution to address the breakdown of political representation (qtd. in Eric Cadzyn's "Representation, Reality Culture and Global Capitalism in Japan" 922–923).

¹⁴ Please read Jacque Derrida's "On Cosmopolitanism." He contends,

[h]ospitality is culture itself and not simply one ethics amongst others. Insofar as it has to do with the ethos, that is, the residence, one's home, the familiar place of dwelling, inasmuch as it is a manner of being there, the manner in which we relate to ourselves and to others, to others as our own or as foreigners, *ethics is hospitality*; ethics is so thoroughly coextensive with the experience of hospitality. (16–17)

At the end of this essay Derrida urges this task of reversing Kantian ideology of limited rights of migrants to accommodate growing numbers of migrants in the metropolitan areas: "—If it has (*indeed*) arrived . . . / — . . . then, one has perhaps not yet recognized it" (23; dashes, italics and abbreviation marks all original).

¹⁵ Here I am in agreement with film scholar David Bordwell about this

point. As he maintains,

[n]arratives are built not upon philosophy or physics but folk psychology, the ordinary processes we use to make sense of the world. Often, particularly in media like film, perceptual skills we've developed to give us reliable information about the world are deployed no less commandingly in following stories. These skills sometimes fail the most stringent deductive tests, as experiments in everyday rationality suggest. Yet the shortcuts, stereotypes, faulty inferences, and erroneous conclusions to which we are prone play a central role in narrative comprehension. ("Film Futures" 90)

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