

## China is Here, Mr. Burton: A Brief Analysis of Carpenter and Weheliye

“Modernity... privileges those who bear witness.” – Alexander Weheliye<sup>1</sup>

Hollywood film is one of the key sites for American conceptions of subjectivity. The average American reads five books or fewer each year<sup>2</sup>, but watches 84 films, most of them American<sup>3</sup>. With the exception of the ever-encroaching television (itself still cinema) Hollywood films are the most common cultural input for everyday Americans.

Almost as common as the ubiquity of film itself is the filmic critique that women, racial and sexual minorities, as well as other marginalized and oppressed peoples are often excluded from film roles, and when they are included, they are regularly relegated to roles that perform harmful stereotypes. This critique is- of course- true and well-warranted, and no racial minority is excluded in quite the same numbers as Asians and those of Asian descent. “Asians represented just 5.1 percent of speaking or named characters across film, television and digital series in 2014, and at least half of those projects featured no such Asian characters at all.”<sup>4</sup>

In this essay, however, I want to look back to 1986, and examine a film that not only flies in the face of representation (even now) but also illustrates Weheliye’s concepts of the flesh, the audiocentric nature of marginalized peoples and a singular, specific imagination of transhumanism. I will be examining John Carpenter’s *Big Trouble in Little China*.

First, however, I must add a brief caveat. This film is a problematic artifact. Much of the Chinese mysticism in the film is not based on any actual history of the people depicted. It is in

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<sup>1</sup> Weheliye, Alexander. "In the Mix: Hearing the Souls of Black Folk." *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 5.4 (2000): 535-54. JSTOR. Web. 18 May 2017. P. 538

<sup>2</sup> Zickuhr, Kathryn, and Lee Rainie. "A Snapshot of Reading in America in 2013." Pew Research Center: Internet, Science & Tech. N.p., 16 Jan. 2014. Web. 18 May 2017.

<sup>3</sup> "Here's how many movies the average American watches in their lifetime." USA Today. Gannett Satellite Information Network, n.d. Web. 18 May 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Ford, Rebecca SunRebecca. "Where Are the Asian-American Movie Stars?" *The Hollywood Reporter*. N.p., 09 May 2016. Web. 18 May 2017.

fact taken from other martial arts films and whatever racist inclinations the writers and director had at time of writing. Similarly, any art not created by the people whose culture it is trying to portray will always have some problematic elements to it. For this case, however, it adds a layer of metatextual analysis that I will discuss later in this essay.

First and foremost, *Big Trouble in Little China* is a film about gaze. To some extent, all films are about gaze, as the very pretense of a film implies its audience, and the camera-to-eye comparisons are too numerous to name, but *Big Trouble in Little China* is about a specific type of gaze: the gaze from power. Specifically, *Big Trouble* is about when someone in power looks upon the culture, lives and struggle of another world (Read: the flesh), and what they do with that information. (Note: I mean world here in the Lugonesian sense to mean a way of living<sup>5</sup>.)

To offer a brief plot synopsis of the film, *Big Trouble in Little China* is ostensibly about a man named Wang Chi who becomes embroiled in a gang war in San Francisco's Chinatown when his fiancé is stolen and sold to an ancient wizard who plans to sacrifice her to break a thousand-year curse. Along for the ride is his trucker friend Jack Burton and attorney Gracie Law. The twist of the film is that the entire thing (with rare exception) is from the perspective of Jack Burton.

This is intentional, director John Carpenter said in an interview, "This is a film where the roles are reversed. Jack Burton is our "hero," but he acts like a sidekick."<sup>6</sup> Wang Chi is the better fighter, he has the personal stakes in the adventure, and the audience enters his world. Jack Burton is merely along for the ride. This observation has been made numerous times in film criticism, but what has gone unexamined is what it means to have a movie where the protagonist

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<sup>5</sup> Lugones, Maria. "Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* Summer 2.2 (1987): 3-19. JSTOR. Web. 18 May 2017. P. 3

<sup>6</sup> Staff. "INTERVIEW: MORIARTY and JOHN CARPENTER Get Into Some BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA!!" *Aint It Cool News*. N.p., 29 Dec. 2012. Web. 18 May 2017.

is not only new to the world, but entirely unable to communicate with it. With the exception of Paul Thomas Anderson's adaptation of Thomas Pynchon's *Inherent Vice*, where the same trick is done with intoxication rather than double consciousness, I don't believe there is another film like that.

Jack Burton's dialogue throughout *Big Trouble* is mostly limited to questions as simple as wondering what is going on. This begins with quotidian inquiries, such as not understanding a funeral procession in the streets, to larger questions betraying his ignorance of the magical mythology that undergirds the plot of the film. Jack is simply unable to understand what is happening around him. This is because he has left his world, and cannot comprehend it. "Those of us who are "world"-travelers have a distinct experience of being in different "worlds" and of having the capacity to remember other "worlds" and ourselves in them.<sup>7</sup>"

This travel is usually not physical, but in personhood. In the film, however, this is represented physically twice. The first is in the second scene, Jack, as a trucker moves from town-to-town hauling goods. He enters San Francisco (a city with a large Asian population), and later reveals he is from Sacramento (a much whiter city). Jack is an outsider both in race and in physical space; he is entering another world.

The second time Jack enters a new world is when he drives into Chinatown the second time. On Jack's first night in town, he stays up all night gambling with Wang Chi. After he wins, he intends to collect his prize, but Wang Chi must first go to the airport to pick up his fiancé, who he has sent for from China. After she's kidnapped by human traffickers, Jack and Wang chase them back into Chinatown, whereupon the mystical dealings begin.

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<sup>7</sup> Lugones, Maria. "Playfulness, "World"-Travelling, and Loving Perception." *Hypatia* Summer 2.2 (1987): 3-19. JSTOR. Web. 18 May 2017. P. 11

At one point during this chase, Jack tries to run over a man with his truck. The man, David Lo Pan, uses magic to make himself intangible. This can be seen to represent not only the destructive nature of oppression, but also the disharmony between the hegemonic world of bodies and the marginalized world of the oppressed, of the flesh. “The flesh is not immobile; it just moves at frequencies that are invisible to the merely human eye (i.e., humanist modernity’s scopic episteme)...”<sup>8</sup>

This quote continues that the flesh is “easily apparent to senses tuned to other registers, such as taste and audition... e.g., the audible rather than the visual spectrum.”<sup>9</sup> Weheliye too believes that “sound is crucial to understanding double consciousness,” and the most common sounds in the film are the dialogue<sup>10</sup>. In addition to not being able to understand any of the plot points of the film, the other characters often speak Chinese right in front of Jack, preventing him from understanding further. Jack often asks for the characters to speak English, but they do not always comply, and any viewer not fluent in Chinese will not understand what is being said.

The true reason Jack cannot understand is because he is not a world-traveler. Jack is the same no matter where he is, so while the Chinese characters are able to communicate with Jack and each other, Jack is only able to communicate with the Chinese characters when they switch to his mode of discourse. The audience understands this is what’s happening due to the three instances that they are not completely dialed into Jack’s perspective.

The first two are the first two scenes. In the opening scene, (chronologically, however, the last scene) Chinese wizard, Egg Shen tries to explain the events of the film to a lawyer, who

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<sup>8</sup> James, Robin. "Notes On Weheliye's Habeas Viscus: or why some posthumanisms are better than others." It's her factory. N.p., 26 Nov. 2014. Web. 18 May 2017.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Weheliye, Alexander. "In the Mix: Hearing the Souls of Black Folk." *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 5.4 (2000): 535-54. JSTOR. Web. 18 May 2017. P. 539

refuses to believe in 'Chinese black magic.' This scene however is from Egg Shen's perspective, as we are privy to his code switching. Egg begins the scene by telling the story verbally, but because the lawyer doesn't believe him, he must enter the oculo-centric world of power and physically show off his magic, whereupon the lawyer completely changes his mind.

The second scene is the scene where Jack drives into town. His first line makes absolutely no sense. Jack, over the CB radio says: "Like I told my last wife, I says, "Honey, I never drive faster than I can see. Besides that, it's all in the reflexes."<sup>11</sup>

Throughout *Big Trouble*, Jack believes himself an action hero, but when not aligned with his perspective, the audience can see how laughable this truly is. He does this again minutes later in the same scene. "When some wild-eyed, eight-foot-tall maniac grabs your neck, taps the back of your favorite head up against the barroom wall, and he looks you crooked in the eye and he asks you if ya paid your dues, you just stare that big sucker right back in the eye, and you remember what ol' Jack Burton always says at a time like that: 'Have ya paid your dues, Jack?' 'Yessir, the check is in the mail'."<sup>12</sup>

He quips throughout the rest of the movie, but they all make sense. All until the last scene where the film once again diverges from his perspective and he says: "Just remember what ol' Jack Burton does when the earth quakes, and the poison arrows fall from the sky, and the pillars of Heaven shake. Yeah, Jack Burton just looks that big ol' storm right square in the eye and he says, 'Give me your best shot, pal. I can take it'."<sup>13</sup> While I admit that it is possible that these are merely badly written one-liners, these three are significantly worse than the others, and show us how the world sees Jack, rather than how he sees himself.

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<sup>11</sup> Big trouble in Little China. Dir. John Carpenter. Perf. Kurt Russel, Dennis Dunn, Kim Cattrall. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 May 2017.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

While Jack never learns to world-travel, he is able to fake it, a little bit, at times. At the beginning of the film, Jack wants to call the cops, and is told by Wang Chi: “Cops got better things to do than get killed”<sup>14</sup>. Then when asked the same question near the end, Jack knows the answer. Towards the end of the film, Jack correctly predicts that Egg Shen has a magic potion for the raiding party of the final battle, but it is likely that the potion had no more than a placebo effect.

Contrasting Jack with the other white character, Gracie Law, is also interesting. While she too is confused by many of the Chinese-specific details of the mythology, she is both more genuinely curious and knowledgeable than Jack. This is because she *is* a world-traveler, having to experience the double consciousness that comes with womanhood. She does display white feminist qualities of the oppressor, however, proclaiming Chinatown “her neighborhood” at one point<sup>15</sup>.

The story doesn't need Jack. As James says “Exclusion constitutes the agency of Man... To be clear: he still goes on existing, he's just not our direct or primary concern,<sup>16</sup>” but Jack refuses to allow himself to be excluded. As a white man, he feels the flimsy pretense (his missing truck and his attraction to Gracie) by which he joins the mission is enough to not only ingratiate him into the group, but call the shots. And again and again he is proven wrong and inferior by his Chinese compatriots.

What *Big Trouble in Little China* illustrates is Weheliye's alternative to man. These Chinese wizards are fully capable of succeeding without the white man, his weapons are ineffective to stop them and with the exception of Gracie, Jack and a journalist named Margot

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<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> James, Robin. "Notes On Weheliye's Habeas Viscus: or why some posthumanisms are better than others." It's her factory. N.p., 26 Nov. 2014. Web. 18 May 2017.

(embodying the Wehiliye point that “subjects cannot see themselves, because white people controlling much of the media and political apparatuses...”)17 there are no white characters in the movie. “Weheliye argues that alternatives to Man already exist—we don’t need to imagine alternatives, we just need to tune into what’s already going on elsewhere, at a slightly different spot on the spatio-temporal dial. And that’s what habeas viscus does—it transports us to other dimensions, to galaxies orbiting around the suns more brilliant than Man’s.”18

*Big Trouble in Little China* illustrates one such alternative to man, a new and more powerful alternative. “When June Tyson repeatedly intones, ‘It’s after the end of the world...Don’t you know that yet?’ at the beginning of the Sun Ra Arkestra’s 1974 film *Space Is the Place*, she directs our attention to the very real likelihood that another world might not only be possible but that this universe may already be here in the NOW.”19 It is the after the end of Jack Burton’s world; he just doesn’t know it. This new world is not hidden from the dominant culture; it is invisible to it. “Rather, from the perspective of liberal humanism, the flesh is inaudible because it vibrates beyond the humanly-accessible spectrum (thus the need to be more than human, to be something like an Afrofuturist alien or robot).”20 Or perhaps a Chinese wizard.

What then are we to make of the film’s villain, David Lo Pan: a man saddled literally with the Curse of No Flesh? David Lo Pan could be a paper all his own, but I’ll limit discussion of him to this paragraph. David Lo Pan was cursed twice, once by the real first emperor of China, Qin Shi Huang and again by the fictional deity Ching Dai, God of the East. Lo Pan’s

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17 Weheliye, Alexander. "In the Mix: Hearing the Souls of Black Folk." *Amerikastudien / American Studies* 5.4 (2000): 535-54. JSTOR. Web. 18 May 2017. P. 541-2

18 James, Robin. "Notes On Weheliye’s Habeas Viscus: or why some posthumanisms are better than others." *It’s her factory*. N.p., 26 Nov. 2014. Web. 18 May 2017.

19 Weheliye, Alexander G. *Habeas viscus: racializing assemblages, biopolitics, and black feminist theories of the human*. Durham: Duke U Press, 2014. Print. P. 131

20 James, Robin. "Notes On Weheliye’s Habeas Viscus: or why some posthumanisms are better than others." *It’s her factory*. N.p., 26 Nov. 2014. Web. 18 May 2017.

curse is to remain in a limbo between death and life. Lo Pan is a representation of Agamben's bare life. Despite (or maybe because of) the fact that he runs an underground criminal organization, which he launders through philanthropy, he is unable to connect to the outside world. Gracie Law even points out that Lo Pan is a recluse, and no one white has ever seen him. David Lo Pan has died a symbolic political death, and represents all of the marginalized people in the film.

Up until this point, I have spent the majority of this paper talking about *Big Trouble in Little China* from a story perspective, mainly how Jack Burton functions within the story. For the duration of the paper, I want to talk about the movie from a filmmaking perspective, and I'd like to begin in the same way that I started this essay, with gaze. Hollywood films often have a point-of-view character to get the audience acclimated to the world of a film. This trope is turned on its head in *Big Trouble*, because since Jack Burton has no idea what's happening, neither does the audience. As David Lo Pan says to Jack, absolutely breaking the fourth wall: "You are not brought upon this world to *get it!*"<sup>21</sup>

The very cuts themselves transition in a nonsensical fashion at times to disallow the audience to divine the layout of Lo Pan's hideout in which much of *Big Trouble* takes place. The Chinese characters, however, are all able to navigate with minimal to no prompting. The music too makes little sense without the interpretation that we are Jack Burton. Carpenter said that he didn't want affect a faux-Asian sound<sup>22</sup>, but instead opts for one of his signature, self-composed, synth-reliant scores. This is not merely the score of the film, this is the soundtrack from the

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<sup>21</sup> Big trouble in Little China. Dir. John Carpenter. Perf. Kurt Russel, Dennis Dunn, Kim Cattrall. N.p., n.d. Web. 17 May 2017.

<sup>22</sup> Staff. "INTERVIEW: MORIARTY and JOHN CARPENTER Get Into Some BIG TROUBLE IN LITTLE CHINA!!" Aint It Cool News. N.p., 29 Dec. 2012. Web. 18 May 2017.

action movie that Jack hears in his head. It is conspicuously absent from the scene with Egg Shen and the lawyer; it only begins once we begin to align with Burton.

I'd like to close by relaying the levels of consciousness that exist in this film. I have alluded to all four, but I would like to explicate each in order to summate the Wehiliyeen nature of the film. At the base level, there is Jack Burton (and by extension the audience). We understand little, and are not able to meaningfully travel between worlds. The second level is Gracie Law, there is some level of travelling experience, but because this is not her world, she too fails to meaningfully travel to this world, and as such is relegated to side-character status in not only Jack's interpretation of events, but when her actions to move the story forward are considered as well.

The third level is that of most of the Chinese characters. This is their world; they know the legends. Even if they don't know everything that is going on, they have the tools to be able to figure it out. This is exemplified when they can read the signs in Lo Pan's hideout or relay exposition to Jack, Gracie and Margot. The final level, however, is a level of meta-knowledge. One of the magic powers that Egg Shen and David Lo Pan have in the film is to realize that they are in a movie. Consider Lo Pan's 4<sup>th</sup> wall-breaking line to Burton. Egg Shen has a similar line of his own, upon being asked about the nature of the mysticism in the film, he says "Taoist alchemy, Buddhism and Confucianism, we take what we want... like your salad bar..."<sup>23</sup>

Egg Shen knows he is in a movie. Consider how he makes his living, despite being an all-powerful wizard; he gives bus rides to tourists. While on the ride, he tells a fake version of the Chinese immigrant story. Egg Shen is talking to the audience. The majority of audiences of the era didn't know anything about Chinese mysticism; they didn't know if he was making things up

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<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

or not. I believe this is the reason that the mysticism is fake. The film's attention to detail is otherwise stunning. I don't think this excuses the erasure, but makes it at least explicable.

This happens throughout the film. David Lo Pan must acquit himself of his curse twice, once to satisfy a real man, again for a fake god. This is an explanation of the film's target audience. It is full of Chinese actors who are the un-ironic stars of the film and viewers who might understand the Chinese spoken in the film, but it also needs to appeal to audiences whose only experience with Chinese culture is with the tropes of the genre. In one of the first fight scenes, two gangs square off, and the scene is shot like a martial arts battle is about to take place, but then both sides draw guns, subverting the audience's expectations yet again. All of this coupled with the Jack/Wang Chi, protagonist/deuteragonist swap shows that the real purpose of this film is to hold a mirror up to the audience to show them *how* they are watching the film.

Contrast this with Jack's ignorance. "This place is a dump," he says, describing Egg's building full of magical potions and spells. "To western eyes." Wang returns. We are the Western eyes unable to see the world that we are not attuned to. Does Egg's magic look like fireworks, or are we unable to see it with non-western eyes? The entire film vibrates at a frequency most of the audience will never be able to comprehend.

The film follows this conclusion to its final scene, when Jack takes a monster from below David Lo Pan's palace out of town with him on his truck, unwittingly of course. Jack is the audience, leaving the theater blissfully unaware of what they carry with them, but another world, one just out of sight, comes home with every person who watches *Big Trouble in Little China*, whether they realize it or not. But then, we were not brought upon this world to get it.