

## Plasticity as Globality and Authenticity: The Re-represented Chinese Brazilians in *Cidade de Plástico*/ 蕩寇/蕩寇/*Plastic City* (2008)

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**ABSTRACT:** The present article contends that the cinematic representation of the Chinese enclave in São Paulo, Brazil, along with the Chinese Brazilian characters in *Plastic City* (2008), are the product of a (self)-orientalization and exoticization process. While the plot takes place in Brazil, it is built on collective imaginations from Asia through plasticity, which has two dimensions. The definition of the first dimension draws on Bhaskar Sarkar's theory of plasticity and globalization, which focuses on the mutability and flexibility of representations in a global context (452). As *Plastic City* is a cross-border collaboration from Asia for Asian spectators that engages these global representations, this research investigates how the transnational production process re-represents an exotic Orient in São Paulo. The other dimension of plasticity is based on Walter Benjamin's theory of reproduced products and their auras (4) with a focus on how the re-representing process presents itself as an attempt to construct historical authenticity. This topic is symbolized through pirated goods and the film's transnational production process, distribution, and the reproducibility of plastic goods. This article also takes a cue from studies of the representation of Asia and Asian characters in Spanish and Latin American cinema, which is an area gaining increasing interest in recent years (Lu, Dávila Gonçalves, Vázquez Vázquez), by calling into question the often ignored or stigmatized population of the films.

**KEYWORDS:** *Plastic City*, Asia in Latin American Cinema, Chinese Brazilians, Transnational Cinema.

Including Asia in Latin American cinema is not a novel trope. Films such as *La serpiente roja*/*The Red Snake* (Caparrós, 1937) and *Corações Sujos*/*Dirty Hearts* (Amorim, 2011) portray the adventure of a yellow-faced "exotic Chinese detective" (Vázquez Vázquez 124) and a Japanese family in Brazil who refuses to believe World War II has ended. Despite Asian community presence in those films, most of these communities are represented as "Others" by Edward Said's definition; they are reconstructed through an imaginary based on Western influences (Said 3). However, recently Latin American cinema has been "expanded to allow for more hybridity" (Vázquez Vázquez 124). One way this hybridity manifests is through offering the Asian communities' perspective. Nominated in the 65<sup>th</sup> Venice Film Festival, *Cidade de Plástico*/ 蕩寇/ 蕩寇/*Plastic City* (Yu, 2008) represents the Chinese Brazilian community from the heart of the Liberdade district in São Paulo, Brazil. *Plastic City* is a transnational production that portrays a Chinese enclave. In Venice, this film received mostly negative feedback due to the "incomprehensible script and the shallowness of its characters" (Vázquez Vázquez 136). Nevertheless, this production, made by producers and actors from Asia, is in fact a product of the transnational cinema that discusses diasporic experiences (Berry, Higbee and Lim).

The present article contends that the cinematic representation of this enclave and the Chinese Brazilian characters are actually the product of an (self)-orientalization and exoticization process. While

the plot takes place in Brazil, it is built on collective imaginations from Asia through plasticity, which has two dimensions. The definition of the first dimension draws on Bhaskar Sarkar's theory of plasticity and globalization, which focuses on the mutability and flexibility of representations in a global context (452). As *Plastic City* is a cross-border collaboration from Asia for Asian spectators that engages these global representations, this research investigates how the transnational production process—casting, post-production, and budgeting—re-represents an exotic Orient in São Paulo. The other dimension of plasticity is based on Walter Benjamin's theory of reproduced products and their auras (4) with a focus on how the re-representing process presents itself as an attempt to construct historical authenticity. This topic is symbolized through pirated goods and the film's transnational production process, distribution, and reproducibility of plastic goods.

In addition to the two mentioned dimensions, this article also takes a cue from studies of the representation of Asia and Asian characters in Spanish and Latin American cinema, which is an area gaining increasing interest in recent years (Lu, Dávila Gonçalves, Vázquez Vázquez) by calling into question the often ignored or stigmatized population of the films to contribute to the current debate based on interdisciplinary methodologies in order to raise awareness of this research topic.

## Portraying China in Brazil

The representation of China in the Brazilian imaginary can be traced back to the transoceanic trades of the sixteenth century as well as collective memory about those routes. According to Ana Paulina Lee's monograph *Mandarin Brazil: Race, Representation, and Memory* (2018), the pictorial representations of Chinese immigrants are part of the "circumcoceanic memory." Extending Roach's "circum-Atlantic memory" theory, Lee uses the term circumcoceanic memory "to include transpacific passages that connect the histories of once distant places through the shared experience of racialized exploitative labor and the networked cultural processes that produce racial subaltern subjects" (10). In the Chinese-Brazilian context, the trade routes were dominated by silk and spice trade. Later, coolies—a system of Chinese indentured workers—is implemented throughout the country. This system replaced the labor force after the abolition of slavery in the nineteenth century. The two significant events—the transoceanic trades and the introduction of the coolie system—shaped the societal perception of China and Chinese immigrants in Brazil. The Sino-Portuguese trades circulated luxury objects since the sixteenth century yet declined because of the political turmoil in China in the seventeenth century (Lee 24). As a result, one of the luxury objects that was highly sought after—porcelain—was not able to meet the demand. European countries, as leading consumers of these objects, invented chinoiserie as "a new genre of imitation porcelain and motifs" (24). This imitation was made by Dutch potters who "produced chinoiserie objects and decorations that circulated imprinted images of not only an imagined Asia but also an invented Europe" (24). The history behind chinoiserie sheds light on the transoceanic trades between China and Brazil in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries as it demonstrates the tradition of imagining China through goods and printed culture. The representation of China, in this case, was malleable due to the bilateral imagery—between China and Europeans.

The representation of coolies in the nineteenth century also took part in the Brazilian imaginary when portraying China. Parallel to the circulating luxury goods in the country, Chinese laborers faced unfavorable treatments in the Americas. During the Anti-Chinese sentiment (1890-1892) in the United States, according to Lee, coolies "were racially and ethnically coded as uncivilized, sub-human, and filthy—as markers of the 'exotic alien.' They were undemocratic, unfree, and thus un-American bodies" (40). In Brazil, however, "mixed views toward the Chinese existed, and terms such as *yellow race*, *yellow labor*, and *coolie race* were used interchangeably in discussions over Chinese labor" (50). The history of coolies, as mentioned above, is parallel to Brazil's *branqueamento* (whitening), an ideology started in 1889 with the aim of making the population whiter. The Chinese laborers, along with other immigrants and minorities, underwent *o Sistema de casta* (the caste system)—a "genealogical rubric about racial caste hierarchies" (Lee 13). Despite the name, the *branqueamento* did not aim to discard or isolate other

non-white ethnic groups but to celebrate miscegenation to produce whiteness, as a "symbol of progress, modernization, and liberty" (Lee 14). In this context, coolies were an integral part of the nation's modernization project.

Celebrating miscegenation while portraying Asia through (imitated) luxury goods resulted in the economic prosperity of the Liberdade district. While Liberdade has functioned as an epicenter of Japanese-Brazilian commercial relationships since the last century, it also houses immigrants from different Asian countries selling goods imported from Asia at economical prices. Thus, Liberdade gradually changed the economic dynamics in the area. Among those Asian immigrants, the Chinese population has been growing significantly. Today, more than 250,000 Chinese immigrants are living in Liberdade, causing Brazil to host the "largest Chinese population in Latin America" (17). This aligns with the cultural imagery represented in *Plastic City*.

## *Plastic City*: A Re-represented Cultural Imagery

The story of *Plastic City* revolves around Yuda—an undocumented immigrant from China who first arrived in Brazil in 1984—and his adopted son Kiri—a second-generation Chinese Brazilian. These two build an underground pirated goods empire in the heart of the Liberdade district in São Paulo. Using the *Novo Mundo* (New World) shopping center as a façade and a collection center, Yuda and Kiri smuggle pirated merchandise and use the profit to bribe Carvalho, a government official. With the Brazilian government on their side, Yuda and Kiri's fake goods business becomes prosperous. On top of the smuggling business, Kiri oversees a clandestine factory that manufactures pirated goods to be sold locally and overseas. Yuda and Kiri's empire is later challenged by another Asian gang led by a "Mr. Taiwan." Mr. Taiwan and his Taiwanese gang buy out *Novo Mundo* and import pirated goods at better quality to compete with Yuda. To fight back the Taiwanese gang, Yuda appeals to fellow smuggler, Mario, to share his cargo. Mario wants the lion's share of the profit, and Yuda refuses. Kiri later murders Mario since he is not cooperative. Yuda surrenders in the competition between him and the Taiwanese gang in exchange for Kiri's freedom. Upon getting out of prison, Kiri asks for a duel with Mario's remaining supporters to avenge Yuda. Kiri annihilates all the opponents using a katana. In the end, Yuda flees to live in the jungle by the border through which Yuda arrives in Brazil. Yuda takes Kiri's hand using his katana to end his life. The film concludes with a quote from the *Original Vows of Ksitigarbha Bodhisattva Sutra* (地藏菩薩本願經) (652-710): "一物一數一界之內一塵一劫." (For each unit there would be a Ganges River; for each grain of sand in each of these Ganges Rivers, there would be a world; for each speck of dust in each of these worlds, there would be a Kalpa; and for every speck of dust accumulated during each of these Kalpas, there would be a Kalpa, Tsai 19).

The story of *Plastic City* represents cultural/racial hybridity in a global context through the movement of goods. Representing cul-

tural and racial hybridity in a global context is, as María Mercedes Vázquez Vázquez (2018) has outlined, one of the main characteristics in Latin American cinema:

The term Latin American cinema has to be expanded to allow for more hybridity and include these types of productions given the continuing transformation of societies due to migration at a global level—which undermines the still common assumption of ethnically homogenous nations—and the increase in transnationalism in film production, especially BRICS co-productions. (124)

*Plastic City* embodies this cultural hybridity. As a co-production from two of the BRICS countries<sup>2</sup>—China and Brazil—the hybridity comes from transnational encounters manifesting through the film's casting, post-production, and budgeting. Chinese immigration history in Brazil and the societal perception of Chinese and other Asian immigrants in the country also influence how this cultural hybridity appears in the film. With Chinese immigrant characters as protagonists, the film presents an infrequent portrayal that centers a growing population that deserves more representation. Regarding the scarce filmic representations on the Chinese community in Latin America and the importance of them, Vázquez Vázquez observes:

[I]n comparison to the enormous volume of trade between the two regions, Asian-Latin American cultural relations and their studies are minimal. Regardless of the number of Latin American films registering the Asian contribution to the reconfiguration of contemporary Latin American societies, their importance is, however, undeniable. (123)

While the film provides a rarely shown portrayal from within the community, it seeks an aesthetic (re)portrayal utilizing pre-existing tropes in Brazilian imagery through Asian imagery. This re-represented imagery of Chinese immigrants in Brazil is of a “reverse-chinoiserie making” nature since in this case, it is Asia that imagines its presence in Brazil. In an interview, the director of the film, Yu Lik-Wai, recognizes:

I consider the film as a modern fable. In this Mestizo city, there are no facts, only fairy tales. I always have some vague sense of an imminent Utopia, and inexplicable longing for ‘somewhere else.’ In one way, Brazil is a Utopian society. Generations of immigrants have come to its virgin land to fashion a new world and a new god for themselves. If Utopia is a glorious dream of the future, then *Plastic City* is a reflective elegy for our future world. (qtd. in Vázquez Vázquez 139)

Although the director claims the film itself is a classic fairy tale, in

a broader sense it still reflects the economic and power dynamics among different Asian ethnic groups in an enclave. This has to do with the fact that this film is a fruition of a global film-making process. That is to say, there are multiple ideologies behind the film-making process and the director “reinterprets this tradition from a global film-making perspective rather than from Latin American film history” (139). As a production situated in a global context—from its production process, the story's historical and cultural background to its releases and reception—*Plastic City* inevitably converges influences drawn from Asia and Brazil. These convergences and the film itself—as a re-representation—comes from the artificial nature of globality, which Bhaskar Sarkar denotes as plasticity.

### Plasticity as Globality

In his article “Plasticity and the Global” (2015), Bhaskar Sarkar observes that globality and global contexts have a heavy influence on the contemporary film production process. Sarkar studies how the global affects Indian cinema and analyses these influences in films such as *Slumdog Millionaire* (Boyle, 2008). His definitions of the global and globality, however, can be extended to *Plastic City* when analyzing the represented cultural hybridity, transnational collaboration and adaptation, dubbing, and cultural evasiveness in the film.

Regarding globality, Sarkar mentions that it “materializes from the mobile encounters between mutating nodes—as networks of shifting relations between entities that are themselves in the process of becoming” (452). Since the global is built on constant practices of edifying worlds, it is artificial (453) and an aesthetic strategy to de-center the global/local dichotomy. Regarding these constant practices, Sarkar further theorizes them as plasticity, noting:

In this formulation so far, the global is characterized by the dual conditions of relationality and mutability: I call this compound spatiotemporal characteristic *plasticity*.... Plasticity summons up the global as a set of relations between units that are in a continual state of transformation. (453)

The mentioned relationality and mutability, along with fluidity, are vital elements as the global “is best thought of as a fluid emergence rather than as a stable totality” (452). The three components mentioned above allow us to study the production process and the way Chinese Brazilians are represented in *Plastic City*.

The mutability and fluidity can be observed from the movie's budgeting and casting. While both protagonists in the film, Yuda and Kirin, are of Chinese descent, the actors who portray them, Anthony Wong and Jō Odagiri, are from Hong Kong and Japan. Since *Plastic City* is a “Hong Kong-Japan-France-Brazil co-production” (141), it is understandable to cast actors from more than one country to appeal to a multinational spectatorship. The multinational cast reflects the interests of the patrons and presents fluidity, which demonstrates the plasticity in this film. This fluidity manifests

through the dubbed conversations. Half of the dialogues in *Plastic City* are in Portuguese, which reflect the cultural background of the two protagonists. Since Portuguese is neither of the two actors' native language, in many scenes, the character's voice does not match their lip movements. In this case, dubbing can be considered as the transnational production team's attempt at gazing into Liberdade, an enclave that marks the presence of Asian immigrants. As previously mentioned, the film is a fable in modern times. As a result, dubbing conversations in Portuguese functions as an intervention into this romanticized world. Liberdade, then, enters the global fluidity that is carried out by filmic interpretation, and the two actors are the means through which the plasticity takes place. When talking about plasticity and global fluidity, it is essential to figure out the designated audience of this performance. Would it be the Brazilian spectators because the dubbed conversations are in Portuguese, or could it be the audience who is from other countries that are in this co-production? The answer might be both. For the Brazilian spectators—or other spectators from the Lusophone world—seeing Asian Brazilian characters speaking Portuguese and living in Liberdade, it adheres to what they know about that district. As for audiences from other countries—presumably from East Asia—seeing the actors they are familiar with “speaking” Portuguese while showing them exotic street views, dubbing becomes part of the romanticizing process. In this case, it is clear that the concept of identity and nationality are subject to interpretations within the global flux.

In addition to dubbing, the title of the film can also be interpreted as plasticity, especially considering the differences between the title given in Mandarin, Portuguese, and English. While the English and the Portuguese titles reflect the same idea—*Plastic City*/*Cidade de Plástico*, the Mandarin title *Dankou* (蕩寇), which roughly translates into “Annihilating the Bandits” (掃蕩賊寇), conveys entirely different connotations and provides another possible reading on the story. The term *Dankou* derives from a novel titled *The History of Annihilating the Bandits* (續蕩寇誌) (1847), which is the continuation of a canonical Chinese literary work *Outlaws of the Marsh* (水滸傳) that was first published in the fourteenth century. Both novels mention outlaws who congregate in a geographical enclave as a critical reaction to corrupted aristocrats and monarchs. These two novels romanticize the outlaws, and the image persists in Chinese culture. As a result, when selecting the Mandarin title for the film, associating an iconic and romanticized image of a group of bandits in the collective memory is a strategy to appeal to the Chinese audience. That is to say, upon seeing the title, the spectators would tie Chinese Brazilian characters' behavior—such as smuggling, producing pirated goods, and bribing government officials—to the romantic/romanticized outlaws underlying their perception of these characters, notwithstanding the differences in the contexts. This strategy—appealing to a specific group within an audience using cultural references—adheres to the mutability and fluidity in Sarkar's theory of having diverse interpretations of known monuments or icons. While Sarkar's definitions of plasticity can be

deployed to study this film, I argue that there is another aspect in *Plasticity* that can also be read as plasticity when analyzing the Chinese Brazilian characters. It is the relationship between the Chinese Brazilian characters and the plastic pirated goods.

### Plasticity as Authenticity

Regarding the reproducible/reproductive nature of pirated goods as a form of plasticity, I argue that each copy is a reflection of its referred product. However, each copy has less aura than the authentic one. In his iconic text “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” (1935), Walter Benjamin illustrates that the loss of aura comes from the reproduction process because it diminishes the authority of the authentic subject. Benjamin exemplifies his observation through applications in different disciplines, such as political science and photography, noting that the quality of the mechanical reproduction is oftentimes depreciated (4). As for the art objects, its “sensitive nucleus” (4) is its authenticity, which is the “the essence of what is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced” (4). While Benjamin studies said dynamics between the reproduced product and the authentic subject—where authenticity manifests itself as a kind of aura—in art, he suggests that the relationship between the two is carried out more prominently through films. The portrayed truth—the authenticity—in the film, after multiple mechanic reproductions, goes through two processes. Firstly, the aura “substitutes a plurality of copies for a unique existence” (4). The second process is phenomenological. When the reproduced product meets its audience, it allows the audience to understand the reproduced version and “reactivates the object” (4). Regarding these two processes, Benjamin alludes to its social significance as “inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage” (4). The destructive and cathartic aspect of the film relates tightly to the receive-reproduce process. This aspect can be found in *Plastic City* through two parallel representations. The first representation is through the smuggled and reproduced goods, while the second representation is the re-represented Chinese Brazilians in the film.

For the first representation, each pirated merchandise is a reproduction with less aura compared to the original subject. The authentic item undergoes a massive-reproduction process and is widely distributed both domestically and internationally. The filmic representation of this process can be viewed as a redefining process. In other words, Chinese Brazilians first analyze the authentic merchandise, then clandestinely reproduce and distribute these re-interpreted versions within Brazil or overseas. While the pirated goods—as replicas—look almost identical to the original one, they will never be the same. As a result, buyers of these pirated goods perceive a reproduced version without being any the wiser. In this representation, the globality aids the distribution of the altered versions. The plasticity, in the sense of both dimensions, carries out this process.

The second representation links to the filmic portrayal of Chinese Brazilian characters such as Yuda and Kirin. Yuk Li-Wai, as both the screenwriter and the director of this film, absorbs historical Chinese culture and Chinese immigrant representation and portrays a re-represented version of this history. While the story and the characters in a way reflect the history of transoceanic trades and coolies—as mentioned above—which functions as the authentic subject, the re-represented version will never be identified as the authentic one. However, this re-representation is reproduced—as film copies—and distributed all over the world. The movie audience receives a “fine-tuned” version, an embellished, romanticized, and re-represented product after an elaborate mass-production process. In this case, both senses of plasticity are representation related to malleability—in terms of re-portraying Chinese immigrants—and reproductivity of this filmic product.

While I categorized the two dimensions of the plasticity separately, they are not mutually exclusive. After studying the representation of the two meanings in the film individually, in the following section, I select two scenes in the movie to investigate how the plasticity—in both senses—intersects with cinematographic maneuvers.

#### Kirin: A Chinese Brazilian “Samurai”

The plasticity can be first found in the scene where Kirin goes to Devil’s an underground bar in Liberdade, to meet his lover, Rita. This scene starts with a sequence of montages of Liberdade’s street view. It then shifts to an eye-level shot in which the camera shows Kirin going down to the basement of a building where Devil’s is located (see fig. 1). The camera then follows Kirin as he enters the bar through a tracking shot and fixates on Rita’s half-naked body. In the next cut, the camera shows Kirin and Rita’s intertwined bodies. When becoming intimate, Rita starts to tell various legends from Japan, such as how Japanese geishas’ “husbands” would use egg white as lubricant before taking their virginity (0:10:18-0:10:35). This scene ends with a close-up as Rita shouts: “I want to be your geisha” (0:09:48) and “come on me, my Samurai!” (0:11:36).



Fig. 1. Screenshot. Kirin greets an exotic dancer at the entrance of the Devil’s. The bar’s name and the color of the sign suggest its clandestine nature. *Cidade de Plástico*/ 荡寇/ 荡寇/ *Plastic City*, 2008.

While it is tempting to jump in to analyze the hypersexualized conversations and cultural vagueness in this scene, I will begin by studying the set. As previously mentioned, this scene takes place in an underground bar located in the heart of Liberdade. This film depicts Liberdade as an enclave where all the (illegal) business and the imaginary on Asian population occur. That is to say, it is a place that holds both the Asian population’s collective memory and receives other ethnic groups’ fascination with this enclave. The place is more than a physical space, but a physical space that is transformed by emotional ties. In his book *Place: A Short Introduction* (2004), cultural geographer Tim Cresswell highlights the correlation between place and memory:

Place and memory are, it seems, inevitably intertwined. Memory appears to be a personal thing... but memory is also social.... One of the primary ways in which memories are constituted is through the production of places. Monuments, museums, the preservations of particular buildings (and not others), plaques, inscriptions.... are all examples of placing of memory. The very materiality of a place means that memory is not abandoned to the vagaries of mental process and is instead inscribed in the landscape-as public memory. (119-20)

This correlation between place and memory can be observed in the very bar that hosts Kirin and Rita. It is a place that contains both Rita’s imagination—built on generalizing and mixing up cultures from different Asian countries—and Kirin’s emotional tie that links him and Liberdade since his only family, Yuda, and his entire pirated goods career are there. In this scene, their passionate relationship interweaves the two dimensions of plasticity.

Rita’s statement at the end of the scene reflects the mutability and flexibility in the global context. Kirin is the subject of Rita’s carnal desire and a body that receives the generalizing gaze on immigrants. This generalizing gaze emanates from the presumption Lee mentions—mostly Japanese Brazilians living in Liberdade. Kirin’s dubbed lines also reflect the first dimension of plasticity. As previously mentioned, the Japanese actor does not speak Portuguese, but in this scene, as per the character required, Kirin speaks flawless Portuguese, though the lip movements and the sound are not synchronized. This shows the global intervention and effort to keep this romanticized story coherent. Interestingly, the references Rita makes correctly coincide with the actor’s country of origin, but as Kirin, the actor does not react to it to stay in character. In this case, the plasticity is present by reflecting the Japanese actor’s performance through dubbing. At the same time, the plasticity renders the Asian immigrant representation through Rita’s generalizing gaze.

The second dimension of plasticity has to do with the reproduced and distributed portrayal of Chinese immigrants. Rita’s gaze exoticizes Kirin’s body, which adheres to the tradition of freely depicting Chinese culture, as exemplified previously through the

history of chinoiserie. This gaze evokes pleasure in the spectators. While Kirin's body represents the authentic subject—Chinese immigrant—and exhibits for the spectators' gaze through the cinematographic arrangements such as close-ups and pan shots, the final product is an authentic subject's re-represented version. The plasticity then finalizes this process by distributing this "fine-tuned" version globally.

### The Visiting *Novo Mundo* Scene

The second scene I selected is toward the film's beginning when Yuda enters his gang's headquarter, the *Novo Mundo* shopping center. This scene shows an agglomeration of diverse Asian cultural references. This scene also illustrates how pirated goods participate in the Chinese-Brazilian gang's underground business. These two aspects coincide with the two dimensions of plasticity.

Opening with a tracking shot, the cinematic apparatus guides the spectators to cross *Novo Mundo's* threshold. The camera later focuses on the "Princess of Liberdade," Ocho, performing a Japanese song. It is the shopping center's inauguration day. When Yuda is cutting the ribbon, the main rival in the film, Mr. Taiwan, makes his first appearance by visiting and commenting on *Novo Mundo's* sign as tacky. As a response, Kirin simply smirks and says: "your fly is open" (0:07:14). This scene might look light-hearted at first, but it sheds light on the power dynamics among different Asian factions within Liberdade. In this scene, Mr. Taiwan represents the newcomer to the Asian enclave, and his actions can be seen as a transgression that challenges Yuda and Kirin's place. This place is not only a physical space but one that also bears emotional weight. Cresswell theorizes this intersection of the physical and emotional in his book *In place / Out of Place: Geography, Ideology, and Transgression* (1996), designating a kind of "territorialization" (149) that carries out a classification or a "constructed arrangement" (152). This arrangement serves to define the social norms in a specific cultural context. While the social standards that align with the expectations of that context are considered *in place*, the "marginal, grotesque, extraordinary elements and events" (149) under this context are *out of place*. When *out-of-place* scenarios are registered, transgressions take place. These transgressions, according to Cresswell's definition, do not always bear negative connotations. They could indicate a series of ongoing changes that lead to a new social norm that is eventually considered *in place* within a particular cultural context. The encounters between Mr. Taiwan and Kirin, as a result, mark the initiation of later conflicts between the two factions. This dynamic adheres to Lee's description of Liberdade:

Liberdade is, arguably, Brazil's most diverse neighborhood. Throughout the twentieth century, different waves of Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrants also began to open shops and work in Liberdade alongside or replacing Japanese-owned business. Today

it is a hub for purchasing inexpensive commercial goods from Asia, and it serves as a critical node that joins migrant networks in Latin America and Asia. (XX)

This scene, then, embodies the first dimension of plasticity, which is the mutability and fluidity under the global gaze. While the Liberdade in the film is at the mercy of the cinematographer's interpretation and can be exotic, the ethnic diversity in Liberdade is portrayed through allegorical characters such as Mr. Taiwan, Kirin, Ocho, and Yuda.

In addition to the characters, *Novo Mundo* also takes part in the cited mutability and fluidity. That is, *Novo Mundo*, as a set for this scene, creates a place where transgressions occur. As a set, this place is represented on-screen through a cultural simulation built based on the real Liberdade while wiping out the original cultural signifiers. This idea emanates from Mark Sandberg's article "Location, 'Location' On the Plausibility of Place Substitution" (2014) in which the author explains that when a film is shot in a location different from what is claimed on-screen, the substitution between the two locations "will inevitably collide at times with local site-specific knowledge, but if it does so within an acceptable range of plausibility for most viewers, it will pass unnoticed" (26). The collision between the two locations creates a sentiment that draws the spectators towards the "falsely claimed" area. Regarding this concept, Sandberg explains:

Those early experiments with place substitution and location simulation... create an inadvertent historical appeal. As I have worked with this material, I have found myself consistently drawn to what one might call the "failed" locations—those that substitute poorly... Perhaps it is a relief to us to see that not every place can be substituted smoothly, that places can in fact still matter. (43-44)

This inadvertent appeal can be found in the filmic portrayals of *Novo Mundo* and Liberdade. As this film is fictional, accuracy is not the director's primary concern. Although *Plastic City* is filmed in São Paulo, several scenes were shot in a studio. The *Novo Mundo* shopping center, for example, does not exist in real life. As a result, the Liberdade in the film deviates from the original one. This leaves room for the represented locations—the shopping center and Liberdade—to be malleable and shaped according to the director's imagination. The transnational production process and imagery cause this deviation from the original location. This process shows the plasticity as mutability and fluidity.

The represented areas are places that hold sentimental value for the Chinese Brazilian characters. At the same time, there is part of the ethnoscape, a notion on human motions—such as migrations and tourism—affected by foreign capitals, an idea introduced and explained by anthropologist Arjun Appadurai. In his book *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (1996), Appadurai defines ethnoscape as such:

By ethnoscape, I mean the landscape of persons who constitute the shifting world in which we live: tourists, immigrants, refugees, exiles, guest workers, and other moving groups and individuals constitute an essential feature of the world and appear to affect the politics of (and between) nations to a hitherto unprecedented degree. This is not to say that there are no relatively stable communities and networks.... But it is to say that the warp of these stabilities is everywhere shot through with the woof of human motion, as more persons and groups deal with the realities of having to move or the fantasies of wanting to move. What is more, both these realities and fantasies now function on larger scales.... And as international capital shifts its needs, as production and technology generate different requirements, as nation-states shift their policies on refugee populations, these moving groups can never afford to let their imaginations rest too long, even if they wish to. (33-34)

The mentioned elements—shifting capitals and imaginaries—are represented in *Novo Mundo* and *Liberdade*, demonstrating the ongoing financial and physical encounters of Asian immigrants from different origins. This representation is carried out firstly through portraying *Liberdade* as a place by putting in a location that only exists in the film—*Novo Mundo*—to allow the director creative space for his interpretation. Then, the re-represented Chinese Brazilian characters—such as Mr. Taiwan, Yuda, Kirin, and Ocho—perform via dubbing and cultural vagueness to convert *Novo Mundo* and *Liberdade* into part of the ethnoscape. The creation of place/location/ethnoscape and the re-representation of those characters take place through the flexibility of plasticity.

The second dimension of plasticity, the reproducibility of plastic goods, is represented through the merchandise in the shopping center. The *Novo Mundo* houses many shops that sell pirated products. As the shopping center becomes a place and part of the ethnoscape for the Chinese Brazilian characters, the pirated goods in this shopping center symbolize the circulation of reproduced truth—the re-represented Chinese Brazilian population and their place in the film.

When analyzing plasticity and authenticity, dubbing and cultural vagueness also play essential roles in this scene. There are two characters with dubbed voices. The first one is Kirin. As previously mentioned, throughout the movie, his lines in Mandarin and Portuguese are dubbed, which can be identified by the unsynchronized lip movements. In this particular scene, Kirin's dubbed lines are in Mandarin and revolve around the shopping center and the newcomers in town. This is yet another example in which the cinematographers create flexibility through Chinese Brazilian characters. To build a convincing narrative on the power dynamics among diverse Asian communities in *Liberdade*, Chinese Brazilian characters are "fine-tuned" through dubbing.

The second character relevant to this topic is the "Princess of *Liberdade*," Ocho. In this scene, Ocho performs a Japanese song entitled "The Crossing Point of the Love Affair," whose original singer, Feifei Ouyang, is Taiwanese. While the lyrics in a way reflect Ocho's (unrequited) affections toward Kirin,<sup>3</sup> there is another aspect in this performance that relates to the representation of diverse Asian ethnic groups in this film. In an interview, Yi Huang—the Chinese actress who portrays Ocho—extends her gratitude to Jō Odagiri—the actor who plays Kirin—for helping her perfect the Japanese pronunciation so that she could deliver a convincing performance.<sup>4</sup> The interactions between the two actors are reverse to the characters they are playing. That is to say, the Japanese actor who plays a Chinese Brazilian in the movie teaches the Chinese actress who plays a Chinese Brazilian to perform Japaneseness. This reverse-playing culminates in a dubbed performance. The fact that Ocho is performing a Japanese song as a Chinese Brazilian is a decision made by the director. In the same interview in which the Chinese actress mentions the help from the fellow Japanese actor, the film's director says he chose this specific song along with another because "the elders in his family adore these two songs, and they sound like the songs that the Overseas Chinese elders would appreciate" (Zho 2008). That is, in this scene, a Chinese Brazilian character is performing a Japanese song in a historically Japanese predominant enclave. It is because the director imagines the Chinese Brazilians would have liked it. The director's assumptions are another dubbing made by the transnational production team on *Liberdade*. Therefore, the *Liberdade* and Chinese Brazilian characters in this scene are the reproduced image, the version with a weakened aura in comparison to the original ones. However, it does not mean the duplicated versions have less value than the original copies; on the contrary, the ethnic diversity within the Asian enclave is shown and dispersed through the filmed copies. These copies divulge this seldom portrayed diversity in Latin American cinema to a broader spectatorship.

## Conclusion

*Plastic City* provides a re-representation of the Chinese Brazilian community through a transnational co-production. This re-representation is carried out through the two dimensions of plasticity: mutability and flexibility in conjunction with reproduction and distribution. Via the two said dimensions, the production team and the Hong Kongese director (self-)exoticize Chinese Brazilians through a transnational and bilateral—Asia-Brazil—collective imaginary. This process is carried out in a global context in which the production distributes the "authenticity" through the film's copies. From the *chinoiserie* in the sixteenth century to the plasticity in this twenty-first-century film, the interpretation of Asian culture in the Latin American context is an ongoing process, and it requires more attention in future studies.

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## NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Throughout the twentieth century, different waves of Chinese, Taiwanese, Korean, and Vietnamese immigrants also began to open shops and work in Liberdade alongside or replacing Japanese-owned business" (Lee xix).

<sup>2</sup>BRICS refers to Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa.

<sup>3</sup>The original excerpt reads as follows, "Yi Huang sings the Japanese version of Feifei Ouyang's "Love me tonight," "The Crossing Point of the Love Affairs. She pushed herself to memorize all the Japanese lyrics and made Jō Odagiri be a *pro bono* Japanese tutor. She sang it to him whenever possible" (Zho; translated by the author). ("黃奕在「蕩寇」裡演唱歐陽菲菲「愛我在今宵」的日文版「戀的十字路」，硬背日文歌詞，還拗小田切讓當免費日文老師，沒事就唱給他聽。")

<sup>4</sup>The original fragment reads as follows: "*Plastic City* also incorporates Lei Hsieh's song 'Man Li'. The director Yu Lik Wai says the elders in his family adore these two songs, and they sound like the songs that the old Overseas Chinese would appreciate" (Zho; translated by the author). ("「蕩寇」裡選用了謝雷演唱的「蔓莉」，導演余力為表示這兩首歌都是家中長輩愛聽的歌，很像是片中老華僑會愛聽的歌。")

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