

“I’M FROM THE FUTURE. YOU SHOULD GO TO CHINA.” *LOOPER* AND THE
RISE OF CHINA IN AMERICAN SCIENCE-FICTION CINEMA

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ABSTRACT

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The past decade has seen a large number of film co-productions between Hollywood studios and Chinese production companies. These co-productions reflect the continued rise of the Chinese box office, and a desire by Hollywood to cash in on the emerging market. Among these co-productions is *Looper*, a cinematic collaboration between Tri-Star Pictures and DMG Entertainment. Along with its co-production status, *Looper* is significant in its unique portrayal of a future featuring a dystopic United States and a prosperous China. Viewing the film as a “representative anecdote,” this thesis argues that *Looper* represents United States cultural apprehensions towards China. By the circumstances of the film’s production and its on-screen portrayal of the future, the film reflects the distinct American fear in which China is the dominant world economic power. The film accomplishes this through its appropriation of science-fiction cinematic conventions, particularly regarding utopia, dystopia, and “alienation of the familiar.”

To my parents

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

In the past twelve years, the image of America as a “city on a hill,”¹ both within its own population and throughout the world, has declined. Wearing by over a decade of war, a recession from which the country is still recovering, and a political system marked by gridlock and frustration, the view of America as a society in decline is increasingly accepted. In 2011, a *Wall Street Journal*/NBC News Poll found that, for the first time, the majority of Americans do not believe their culture to be superior to others.² While the concept of a declining America is hardly new, these recent developments created what Charles M. Blow of *The New York Times* called “a dangerous national pessimism.”³ Rather than remaining the only superpower left in the world, an increasing number of

¹ The expression, first used by Puritan colonist John Winthrop in a sermon on the ship *Arbella*, was echoed by both John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan in speeches about the image of America to the rest of the World.

² Charles M. Blow, “Decline of American Exceptionalism,” *The New York Times*, November 18, 2011, accessed September 23, 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/19/opinion/blow-decline-of-american-exceptionalism.html>.

³ *Ibid.*

Americans believe that China, a country on track to catch up economically with the United States, is the superpower of the future.⁴

Reflections of the perception of American decline and Eastern ascension can be found in Hollywood, both in the films themselves and in the rapid changes in how Hollywood operates in the global market. Many film and television works increasingly portray a future with Eastern Asia as an ascendant power, especially in the science-fiction genre. Cultural apprehensions are finding their way onto the screen, whether through the generically-Eastern image of the super-technological Neo-Seoul in *Cloud Atlas* (2012), or the U.S.-China alliance in the post-Earth universe of *Firefly* (2002-2003) and *Serenity* (2005), or Chinese criminals untouchable from the American government in *The Dark Knight* (2008). Additionally, while the United States cinema audiences are fluctuating,⁵ the Chinese audiences are growing, now projected to overtake the United States in 2020.⁶ Hollywood studios are eager for new markets in this rapidly-changing media landscape, and are both anticipating this rise and working towards profiting from it. In their attempts to navigate the complex web of Chinese censorship and distribution laws, the major studios are increasingly partnering with Chinese production companies to secure distribution of their films in the Chinese market.⁷ At the insistence of Chinese censors,

⁴ “Survey: America in Decline, China on the Rise: Americans Mistakenly Rank China as #1 World Economy,” *Xavier University Office of Public Relations*, April 1, 2011, accessed September 23, 2013, <http://www.xavier.edu/americanream/programs/documents/America-in-DeclineChina-on-the-Rise.pdf>.

⁵ “Domestic Movie Theatrical Market Summary 1995-2013,” *The Numbers*, accessed July 30, 2013, www.the-numbers.com/market/.

⁶ “Why Hollywood Kowtows to China,” Film Blog, *The Guardian*, accessed July 30, 2013, theguardian.uk.

⁷ Simon Montlake, “Hollywood’s Mr. China: Dan Mintz, DMG,” *Forbes*, August 29, 2012, accessed July 15, 2013,

these films are forbidden from portraying Chinese culture or government in a negative light,⁸ eerily preventing an explicit expression of American fears in favor of a portrayal of China that implicitly reflects and reinforces American fears.

At the intersection of this Chinese cultural apprehension and the embracing of Chinese markets is *Looper* (2012), a science-fiction film released by Tri-Star Pictures. While many films are either marketed towards China or portray China as a future power, *Looper* is an example of both. Co-produced by a Chinese production company and released into the Chinese market with scenes unavailable in other countries, the film portrays an America wavering on apocalyptic and a China on the rise. Such a rarity solidifies the film as a valuable cultural artifact, not only in its unique marketing to a rising China, but as a representative anecdote of a larger American cultural apprehension of China. In order to fully understand the background of *Looper*, the context of both China and Hollywood's roles in an increasingly globalized world must be established.

Context

The source of Sino-American tension can be traced back to larger East/West apprehensions predating the founding of the United States. While the emergence of China's economy is far from a generational phenomenon, neither is American political apprehension towards China, toward both its economic growth and its continued human rights violations. Economic growth in China has become particularly troublesome in the minds of American citizens in the last twelve years for a variety of reasons. A major

<http://www.forbes.com/sites/simonmontlake/2012/08/29/hollywoods-mr-china-dan-mintz-dmg/>.

⁸ Ben Fritz and John Horn, "Reel China: Hollywood Tries to Stay on China's Good Side," *Los Angeles Times*, March 16, 2011.

issue is undoubtedly the rise in China's manufacturing and political stature, juxtaposed with the perceived relative decline of the U.S. in manufacturing and political power.⁹ Still, manufacturing and international prestige are only two of several recent conflicts between the two countries.

Tension between the United States government and the People's Republic of China has escalated in recent years. Incidents exacerbating the tension between the two countries include the Chinese detention of the crew of a U.S. spy reconnaissance plane, President Bush's proclamation of continued support for the disputed island nation of Taiwan, the denunciation of continued attacks by China on religious freedom, Bush's meeting with the Dalai Lama, and issues over China's increasing expansion of their military.¹⁰ A more recent political incident occurred in May 2013, when hackers in China gained access to dozens of designs for major U.S. weapons systems. This story prompted accusations by the United States media towards the Chinese government, followed by a denial of any wrongdoing by the PRC.¹¹

Additionally, the years following 9/11 have affected this relationship in unexpected ways. Political scientist Jacques deLisle notes that the American Government's "predominant focus on al-Qaeda, kindred groups and suspected allies and facilitators—and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq—meant that the U.S. would pay less

⁹ Arvind Subraminan, *Eclipse: Living in the Shadow of China's Economic Dominance* (Washington, DC: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2011).

¹⁰ Jacques deLisle, "9/11 and U.S.-China Relations," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (September 2011), www.fpri.org.

¹¹ Terril Yue Jones, Bill Trott and Rob Taylor, "Chinese Hackers Steal U.S. Weapons Systems Designs, Report Says," *NBCNews.com*, May 28, 2013, accessed July 24, 2013, http://usnews.nbcnews.com/_news/2013/05/28/18556787-chinese-hackers-steal-us-weapons-systems-designs-report-says.

attention to China issues and, thus, to irritants in the U.S.-China relationship.”¹² This lack of focus on China by the U.S. government also manifested in fears about China’s growing military, as noted by *Time*’s Ishaan Tharoor, in the revealingly titled article, “Ten Years After 9/11, Is it Now Time to be Afraid of China?” Regardless of whether the fears are justified, these public incidents helped nurture a perception that though China has risen significantly on the global stage, they remain, as President George W. Bush stated, “a ‘strategic competitor’ rather than a ‘strategic partner’” to the United States.¹³

American fears concerning China’s ascension are not only economic, but political as well. The governmental policies and economic circumstances leading to the country’s current status as a premier world power date back to the 1970s. Following the death of Mao, decades of economic isolation, lack of innovation, and political instability reversed. Beginning in 1978 under the leadership of Deng Xiaoping, China overhauled its antiquated agricultural infrastructure, cut back on market restrictions, broke down trade barriers, and encouraged foreign investment in Chinese industry.¹⁴ The result of this policy has been a growth per capita that, from 1978 to 2008, averaged 8.7%, far greater than the less-than-4% growth of the United States, United Kingdom, and Japan.¹⁵ While China remains a communist country, its adaptation of certain aspects of global capitalism has reaped considerable economic rewards for the country. While economic competition

¹² Ibid.

¹³ deLisle.

¹⁴ Loren Brandt and Thomas G. Rawski, “China’s Great Economic Transformation,” in *China’s Great Economic Transformation*, eds. Brandt and Rawski (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8-14.

¹⁵ John Knight and Sai Ding, *China’s Remarkable Economic Growth* (Oxford Scholarship Online, 2012), accessed July 24, 2013.

between the two countries stretches across several industries, Sino-American cultural tensions have emerged, especially in one specific economic sector.

The rise of the Chinese cinematic market can be directly attributed to economic reforms implemented by the People's Republic in the 1970s. When compared to all other foreign markets for Hollywood films, China is the most promising, fastest-growing market. In 2009, global ticket sales for the six major media conglomerates rose 7.6 percent, with most of that growth coming from the Asia Pacific market, which increased 12.3 percent that year.¹⁶ This growth is especially staggering in China. According to the Chinese government's State Administration of Radio, Film and Television (SARFT), ticket sales in China have grown by 40 percent every year.¹⁷ The number of movie screens in the country is currently estimated at around 11,000, and according to *The Guardian* that number "is expected to double by 2015."¹⁸ Such potential for expansion in a relatively untapped market explains the eagerness with which Hollywood studios approach the Chinese market.

A major obstacle for Hollywood expansion into China has been, and remains, the stringency with which the Chinese government approaches foreign cultural imports. Starting with the rise of Communists in China in 1949 and continuing up until the mid-1990s, the Chinese government enforced a ban on all American films, maintaining a consistency with their economic policies of insulation and exclusion. With the reform

¹⁶ Susan Christopherson, "Hard Jobs in Hollywood: How Concentration of Distribution Affects the Production Side of the Media Entertainment Industry." In *The Political Economies of Media: The Transformation of the Global Media Industries*, eds. Dwayne Winseck and Dal Yong Jin (London, UK: Bloomsbury Academic, 2011), 128.

¹⁷ Kirsten Tatlow, "Coming-of-Age Tale for Chinese Cinema," *The New York Times* (September 10, 2012). The article does not specify the exact timeline of this growth.

¹⁸ "Why Hollywood Kowtows to China," Film Blog, *The Guardian*, theguardian.uk.

and the reopening of Chinese markets in the latter half of the century came inevitable change in Chinese film policy. In 1994, the Chinese government implemented a system of revenue sharing with foreign studios, in which SARFT permits ten imported foreign films a year, with profits divided between the China Film Group (CFG), the government-run organization that oversees SARFT, and the local Chinese distributors. Subsequently, Hollywood studios receive 13-17% of the gross profits.¹⁹ This small foot in the door for Hollywood in China was pushed open wider at the turn of the millennium. In 2001, as a condition of China joining the World Trade Organization, China would eventually allow thirty-four films to be imported a year.

Another rule implemented by the PRC is the co-production status, which allows a Hollywood studio to collect a greater percentage of the profit and to circumvent the quota system. These two considerable benefits make “co-productions” much more beneficial for Hollywood studios. This loophole for American studios has been utilized by several major productions, including *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008), Columbia Pictures’ 2010 remake of *The Karate Kid*, *Looper*, and *Iron Man 3* (2013).²⁰ The effects of these co-productions, not only on the quality and appropriateness of the Chinese elements in the films,²¹ but also on the authenticity of the productions as “Chinese filmmaking,”²² have already been brought into question by journalistic and academic sources. What has not

¹⁹ Ibid., 63.

²⁰ The latter two films were both co-produced by DMG Entertainment, a Chinese production and distribution company co-founded by an American businessman. DMG also distributed the Chinese release of the aforementioned *Red Dawn* remake.

²¹ Brian Ashcraft, “Why Many in China Hate *Iron Man 3*’s Chinese Version,” *Kotaku* (May 2, 2013), accessed July 28, 2013, <http://kotaku.com/why-many-in-china-hate-iron-man-3s-chinese-version-486840429>.

²² Michael Berry, “Chinese Cinema with Hollywood Characteristics, or How *The Karate Kid* Became a Chinese Film,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, eds. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Chow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 170-189

been covered in detail is how one of these films reflects not only the effect of China on Hollywood filmmaking, but also the American mentality toward the cultural and political rise of China.

Looper

An American science-fiction film released in 2012, *Looper* is one of the more notable examples of American-Chinese co-productions in recent years. The film was written and directed by Rian Johnson, a respected American filmmaker whose previous work includes *Brick* (2005), *The Brothers Bloom* (2008), and several episodes of the television series *Breaking Bad* (2009-2013). The film was produced by Endgame Entertainment, distributed in the U.S. by Tri-Star Pictures (a division of Sony Pictures), and co-produced and distributed in China by DMG Entertainment. The setting of the film is 2044 Kansas, deep enough into the future for the United States to disintegrate into a dystopia of crime-ridden cities and hobo-overrun country-sides. The film's intricate plot concerns time travel; while invented deeper into the future than 2044, it has been outlawed and is used only by powerful organized crime syndicates. When the syndicates, or "mob," of the future wants a person killed, they send them hooded and tied back in time to be disposed of by hired assassins, called loopers. The loopers are paid in silver for their services, their contract terminated by the mob when their future self is sent back for them to kill.

The plot of *Looper* concerns one looper in particular, Joe (Joseph Gordon-Levitt), who fails to execute his older self (Bruce Willis) when the latter is sent back to be killed. This failing to "close his loop" sets off a violent and indelible chain of events, with Joe's

employers hunting down both his older and younger self. The situation becomes even more complicated when the younger Joe hides out on a farm occupied by a woman (Emily Blunt) and her young son (Pierce Gagnon) whom the older Joe believes might grow up to be the mass murderer responsible for his wife's death. The film, like many that feature time travel, uses a convoluted story to comment on many cultural anxieties and ills, including urban decay, discord between the older and younger generations, and the endless cycle of violence in society.

A cursory glance of these facts of *Looper* contain nothing remarkable in the line of cultural analysis. While the film ranked number two in its opening weekend at the American box office, it grossed just over \$66 million domestically, only the forty-fifth highest grossing film of the year.²³ The film's gross looks better when taken into account that the film grossed an additional \$110 million outside of the United States, with \$20 million coming from China. Judging by the numbers, *Looper* appears to be a modestly successful Hollywood release that did not translate well into the Chinese market.

Despite this modest reception, *Looper* is a noteworthy cultural landmark worthy of study for two main reasons. The first of these reasons is the film's status as a Chinese co-production. Qualification for co-production status led to several decisions that affected the final film product. The screenplay was altered so that Joe visits Shanghai instead of Paris. A Chinese actress was cast as the older Joe's love interest. *Looper* was also released into the China with added scenes exclusive to that market.²⁴ While the practice of adding scenes exclusively for China was replicated for the 2013 blockbuster

²³ "Looper" and "2012 Domestic Grosses," boxofficemojo.com (accessed July 30, 2013).

²⁴ Only those in China during its theatrical release had access to the added scenes; they were never added to any home video release, North America or otherwise.

Iron Man 3 (also co-produced by DMG Entertainment), *Looper* remains the first Sino-Hollywood production to implement this practice.

The second reason for *Looper*'s cultural significance is in the actual on-screen portrayal of the United States and China. Throughout the film, not only is the United States uniformly portrayed as an impoverished, lawless dystopia, but this picture of anarchy is contrasted in the film with a pristine, modern, and thriving China. While the one American city shown in *Looper* is portrayed as modern and imposing from the distance, the scenes in the streets paint a picture of mass homelessness and violence. Even the American currency of the future is the Chinese renminbi, with a portrait of Mao Zedong still printed on the bills. The connection of this positive portrait of China and the movie's Chinese funding has already been noted by some outlets. A writer for an e-magazine that covers Chinese social media went as far as to call the Chinese scenes "a product placement ad for China."²⁵ *Looper*'s status as a co-production and its portrayal of the United States and China are directly related to each other. Just how the two are connected, and how they both relate to United States cultural apprehensions of China, is the objective of this thesis.

Methods

With its longstanding utility in analyzing a text's interaction with its audience, the academic lens of rhetoric will be used to answer these questions. While rhetorical study has dedicated itself to the spoken word for the vast majority of its existence, it has

²⁵ Rachel Lu, "Pandering Misfire: Sino-Centric "Looper"'s Lesson for Hollywood Producers," Tea Leaf Nation, October 5, 2012, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.tealeafnation.com/2012/10/pandering-misfire-sino-centric-loopers-lesson-for-hollywood-producers/>.

recently branched off into the study of countless areas. Partially driven by Kenneth Burke's theory of dramatism, which "treats language and thought primarily as modes of action,"²⁶ rhetoricians began analyzing a wide variety of media, including film. While many rhetoricians cite Burke as their inspiration in the application of rhetoric to media, Barry Brummett effectively channels Burke's ideas into a practicable approach. Referencing a variety of Burke's texts, Brummett notes that with regard to Burke's views on the symbolic makeup of everyday life, "it becomes the task of the Burkean critic to identify the modes of discourse enjoying currency in a society and to link discourse to the real situations for which it is symbolic equipment."²⁷ The phrase applied in Brummett's identification of the symbolic discourse is the "representative anecdote," another Burkean term, in which the discourse acts as "a lens, filter, or template through which the critic studies and reconstructs the discourse."²⁸ It is this twofold application of Burke, in which the discourse (in this case, film) is first identified by the critic as symbolically significant and then analyzed as a representative anecdote, that is of most use to this analysis.

In addition to its focus on the text's symbolic interaction with its audience (in this case, American and Chinese audiences), rhetorical studies is also useful in its compatibility with existing film theories. There have been significant examples of rhetoricians utilizing auteur,²⁹ psychoanalytical,³⁰ and semiotic³¹ theory. While a

²⁶ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1962), xxii.

²⁷ Barry Brummett, "Burke's Representative Anecdote as a Method in Media Criticism," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1, no. 2 (1984), 161.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 163.

²⁹ Thomas W. Benson, "Joe: An Essay in the Rhetorical Criticism of Film," *Journal of Popular Culture* 8, no. 3 (Winter 1974),

singular rhetorical study featuring no film studies theory is possible,³² the importance of *Looper* is tied directly to its status as a work of science fiction. The significance of *Looper* as a work of science fiction is found in its box office draw in international markets like China, its ability to portray potentially negative futures without alienating its audience, and its common practice playing upon contemporary fears in fictional settings. This importance requires the use of genre studies in the analysis.

The concept of genre has a long history in rhetoric, dating back to Aristotle. Genre studies were subsequently adapted by literature and film studies in more recent centuries, with the latter first coming into existence in the 1940s.³³ Even as film studies expanded its focus to a variety of genre conventions, science-fiction cinema was largely ignored through the 1960s. This academic snub has been partly attributed to perceptions of science fiction as a juvenile cinema, appealing primarily to children and lacking academic significance.³⁴ This perception was overturned in the 1970s and 80s, as science-fiction films found unprecedented critical and box office success.³⁵ This success was followed by a series of significant monographs exploring the conventions of science-fiction cinema both within Hollywood and internationally.

³⁰ David Blakesley, "Defining Film Rhetoric: The Case of Hitchcock's *Vertigo*," in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

³¹ Martin J. Medhurst, "Image and Ambiguity: A Rhetorical Approach to *The Exorcist*," in *Rhetorical Dimensions in Media*, 2nd ed., eds. Medhurst & Benson (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1991), 495-509.

³² Peter Ehrenhaus, "Why We Fought: Holocaust Memory in Spielberg's *Saving Private Ryan*," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 18, no. 3 (Sept. 2001), 321-337.

³³ Robert Warshow, "The Gangster as Tragic Hero," *Partisan Review* 15, no. 2 (1948), 240-44.

³⁴ Keith M. Johnson, *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Berg, 2011), 9.

³⁵ J.P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 33.

Two of these works, J.P. Telotte's *Science Fiction Film* and Vivian Sobchack's *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, are of particular use to the scope of this analysis. In addition to taking an all-encompassing approach to the conventions of the genre, Telotte is useful in his division of science-fiction cinema into subgenres. One of these subgenres, the "fantastic,"³⁶ describes those films which portray a possible future affected by some technological change, a description that clearly matches the plot of *Looper*. The iconography of this subgenre, utopia and dystopia, are crucial to understanding the on-screen portrayals of the United States and China in *Looper*. While Telotte focused on the division and analysis of different subgenres, Sobchack focused more on imagery and sound of American science-fiction cinema, and how these elements defined the genre on the whole. It is through this approach that she came to focus on those films which take the familiar Earthly sights and turn them into unfamiliar, alien universes. This "alienation of the familiar,"³⁷ as Sobchack calls it, is often done by film productions for cost-related reasons, but leads to an uncanny connection between the present reality and the fictional future.

The aim of this thesis is to analyze the film *Looper*, and to answer the following question: how is the film representative of United States cultural apprehensions towards China in the 21st Century? To answer this question, the film will be used as a "representative anecdote" in the tradition of Burke and Brummett, where it represents American cultural fears of China. Additionally, concepts of genre studies will be utilized, particularly within the realm of science-fiction film studies. In the analysis of

³⁶ Ibid., 11-14.

³⁷ Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 107-110.

Looper, two generic concepts will be utilized: J.P. Telotte's characterization of the "fantastic" subgenre, particularly utopia and dystopia, along with Vivian Sobchack's concept of science-fiction cinema's "alienation of the familiar." Through these rhetorical and filmic lenses, this thesis will reveal how the film reflects these apprehensions, both within the on-screen portrayals and within the production of *Looper* itself.

Outline of Chapters

Chapter 2 of this thesis will establish the context of the importance of *Looper*. In this chapter, special attention is given to the rise of China, its political and economic relationship to the United States, the growing importance of China's box office, and how *Looper* was conceived, developed, and produced within the co-production status that is becoming so common in filmmaking. Chapter 3 will explicitly deal with the theory and method of analysis. This will include an overview of rhetoric's history in media analysis, the history of genre studies, the increasing importance of science-fiction cinema in film studies, and how rhetoric and genre are important to the analysis of *Looper*. Chapter 4 will take the established method of the paper and apply it to an analysis of the film *Looper*. In the analysis, particular attention will be given to the film's status as a work of science fiction, its use of the "fantastic" subgenre conventions of utopia and dystopia, and how *Looper*'s production accomplished "alienation of the familiar" in its portrayal of the United States and China. The final chapter will offer conclusions found in the analysis, along with addressing any further research questions or unresolved issues within the analysis of the film and the context of its production.

CHAPTER 2

CONTEXT

Hollywood studios are naturally aggressive in their efforts to expand their box office in new markets, and recent expansion into China is no exception. What have been exceptional are the hurdles the People's Republic has thrown in front of these studios that hinder this expansion. In an effort to encourage national filmmaking and limit the number of foreign films on their shores, the Chinese government caps the number of yearly imported films at thirty-four. They also created a loophole to that quota: if an American film is co-produced by a Chinese company and includes Chinese actors and cultural elements, it is considered a Chinese film. This rule has paved the way for a wide array of Hollywood films that qualify as co-productions, including *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008) and the recent remake of *The Karate Kid* (2010). These films entitle Hollywood studios not only to a guaranteed Chinese market release but also a higher guaranteed percentage of the profits. By featuring scenes exclusive to the Chinese audience, *Looper* (2012) breaks down the traditional paradigms of not only how films are marketed, but how they are made in conjunction with the rising influence of China.

As the production company so vital to the film's Chinese market release, DMG Entertainment is crucial to understanding the importance of *Looper*. Founded in 1993 as an advertising firm,³⁸ the company gravitated toward feature-film production by 2009, with the Mao Zedong biopic *The Founding of a Republic* (2009) and romantic comedy *Go Lala Go!* (2010) listed as its first credits on the Internet Movie Database (IMDb).³⁹ DMG progressed to the distribution of Hollywood films in China, helping movies like *Resident Evil: Afterlife* (2010) and *Red Dawn* (2012) find a second life with Chinese audiences. Their most high-profile business move in recent years has been their co-productions, in which the company embraces a hands-on approach and provides creative input on the films for Chinese markets. In addition to *Looper*, DMG co-produced *Iron Man 3* (2013), the highest grossing film worldwide of 2013, and is teaming with Alcon Entertainment to co-produce *Transcendence*, the upcoming Johnny Depp sci-fi blockbuster, along with a potential remake of the 1990s action movie *Point Break*.⁴⁰ In a very short period of time, DMG Entertainment developed into a major player in both Chinese and American cinema.

The reasons for DMG's success are numerous. The meteoric rise of China as a potential market for Hollywood films, combined with the secretive and exclusionary nature of the Chinese government's film regulation, make companies like DMG increasingly important to Hollywood studios looking to sell their films to a new market.

³⁸ Dan Mintz, "DMG: Owning an Ad Agency and a Film Studio is Helping DMG Create Ideas that Stand the Test of Time," *Campaign*, April 8, 2011. The company maintains its advertising wing to this day, boasting clients such as Volkswagen, NBA, Under Armour, and Johnson & Johnson.

³⁹ "DMG Entertainment [cn]," IMDb, accessed February 1, 2014, http://www.imdb.com/company/co0338904/?ref_=fn_al_co_2.

⁴⁰ Patrick Brzeski, "Johnny Depp's 'Transcendence' Scores China Partner DMG Entertainment," *The Hollywood Reporter*, July 10, 2013.

Dan Mintz, the American CEO and Creative Director of DMG, attributes the success of his company to the relationships created with members of the China Film Group (CFG), the government organization responsible for the country's film regulation. In a TV interview at Bloomberg, Mintz attributes his understanding of *Guanxi*, the Chinese concept of building personal business relationships, to his company's success. Mintz explains, "It's not just a one day process. It takes many years, and the ability to really communicate with people—not just speak their language, but actually speak *to* them—and to build a relationship...it takes quite a bit."⁴¹ The difficulty that Mintz alludes to is the maze of political appeasement, censorship, and light treading that comes with releasing a foreign film in China. This system that allows no more than 34 foreign films to enter the country makes companies like DMG essential to Hollywood.

These are startling changes over a mere two decades. In 1992, a U.S. film had not been released in the Chinese mainland in over a half-century. By 2012, box office gross for Hollywood films in China was \$2.7 billion,⁴² the highest of any foreign market, despite Chinese governmental laws in place actively limiting the number of imported Hollywood films. This rapid change is preceded by several generations of a U.S.-Chinese relationship that is complicated at best. *Looper* is a product of this cultural tension, a modestly successful co-production that greatly redefines the parameters of the U.S.-Chinese cinematic relationship. In addition to featuring scenes exclusive to the Chinese market, *Looper* diverts from the Chinese-American cultural norms by delivering

⁴¹ Dan Mintz, interview by Emily Chang, *Bloomberg West*, Bloomberg Television, May 16, 2011, <http://vimeo.com/23827223>.

⁴² "Theatrical Market Statistics: 2012," The Motion Picture Association of America, accessed November 23, 2013, <http://www.mpa.org/resources/3037b7a4-58a2-4109-8012-58fca3abdf1b.pdf>.

an on-screen future in which the United States is a society in decline, and China is the picture of prosperity. This portrayal is a startling departure from the traditional parameters of this relationship, in which Western economic supremacy and Eastern exoticism are commonly portrayed. In order to fully understand the context of DMG's co-production of *Looper*, the history of American cultural anxieties towards China must first be explored, in addition to the recent geopolitical developments that contributed to the current political, economic and military tensions. It is only after these historical issues are unpacked that recent developments in the Sino-American film market can be fully grasped.

China and the West: A History of Anxieties

East vs. West

The history of Sino-American relations cannot be separated from the history of Eastern and Western civilizations, defined respectively as the Asia-Pacific and Euro-Atlantic regions of the world.⁴³ Specific Chinese interaction with the West was initially defined by isolation, with the civilization remaining largely isolated from the West up until the 1500s. It was in 1513, when Portuguese explorers completed the first visit to China since Marco Polo's land expedition 200 years before,⁴⁴ that commenced a new era of relations between China and the West. During this period, Chinese-Western interaction was defined largely by economic interests, as Dutch and British merchants followed Portugal's lead in initiating trade with the Chinese. While many historians

⁴³ Aaron L. Friedberg, *A Contest for Supremacy: China, America, and the Struggle for Mastery in Asia* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011), 9.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 9.

argue that European powers expanded their maritime commerce while China continued their regression,⁴⁵ others have argued that this period benefitted both Europe and China, with growth in maritime trade for both.⁴⁶ Regardless, relatively peaceful trade relations defined China's relationship with the West for over 300 years.

This status quo was violently altered in the 1840s, when the British Opium Wars opened the floodgates of overt military aggression against China by the West. Prior to the conflict, foreign trade with China was rooted in a tribute system in which China dictated terms. This system was fueled by what diplomatic historian Warren I. Cohen calls a Chinese belief that their realm is “the center of the universe, the Middle Kingdom, and regarded all cultural differences as signs of inferiority.”⁴⁷ While China's favorable balance of trade once allowed it to decree such terms, new trade deficits from West-imported opium, and Great Britain's overwhelming military power, led to a humiliating Chinese defeat. Emboldened by their own perceived cultural superiority, along with newfound firepower produced by the Industrial Revolution, Great Britain, France, the United States, Japan and Germany all forced themselves onto Chinese shores. These powers extracted what political scientist Aaron L. Friedberg calls “extraordinary concessions”⁴⁸ in the form of unfair treaties that gave the foreign powers absolute control over trade and immunity from local law. What followed was a century of instability,

⁴⁵ Mark Elvin, *The Pattern of the Chinese Past* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1973).

⁴⁶ Ho-fung Hung, “Imperial China and Capitalist Europe in the Eighteenth-Century Global Economy,” *Review (Fernand Braudel Center)* 24, no. 4 (2001), 473.

⁴⁷ Warren I. Cohen, *America's Response to China*, 5th ed. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010), 3.

⁴⁸ Friedberg, 16. Friedberg's dissection of the popular historical arguments as to why Europe, and not China, sparked the Industrial Revolution is enlightening.

with Chinese continually fighting both amongst themselves and against foreign powers, all while falling further behind the West in technological relevance.

This instability led to massive Chinese immigration into the United States in the 19th Century. The Chinese immigrants almost immediately faced open hostility from “native” Americans, both legal and extralegal. Fueled by xenophobia and fear of labor competition from the white majority, Chinese Americans became the first ethnic group singled out by immigration law, and the first to be completely excluded from immigrating.⁴⁹ While the United States government simultaneously passed legislation barring Chinese from entering the country, American popular culture began its longstanding tradition of portraying Chinese in offensive stereotypes. These stereotypes, derived from Western perceptions of an exotic East, fears of Chinese culture and labor, and caricatures of immigrant Asian mannerisms, are as diverse as they are overarching in their dehumanization of the “Chinaman,” as men of all Asian nationalities were pejoratively called.⁵⁰ These perceptions of Chinese dominated the U.S. popular imagination for over a century. American stereotypes of Chinese are longstanding and largely unresolved in American popular culture. However, the China of *Looper* is not one of opium dens and mysticism, and the villains of the film are sans the flowing silk robes and twirling facial hair of Fu Manchu. Rather, the China of *Looper* is one of rising skyscrapers and prosperity contrasted with American decay and depression.

⁴⁹ Roger Daniels, *Asian America: Chinese and Japanese in the United States since 1850*, (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1988), 67.

⁵⁰ Yunte Huang, *Charlie Chan: The Untold Story of the Honorable Detective and His Rendezvous with American History* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2010), 120.

China and the United States: Current Political Tensions

Rather than being a singular product of longstanding ignorance and hostility, *Looper*'s portrayal of China is borne out of more recent developments in the U.S.-China relationship. Fully understanding this cinematic representation requires an understanding of China's transition from Maoist communism to open-market capitalism, the ensuing economic growth paired with the relative American economic decline, and recent political tensions. These tensions are particularly palpable now, as the Chinese economy inches closer to surpassing that of the United States.

China: From Communism to Capitalism

In 1949, the culmination of decades of war and upheaval, communist forces led by Mao Zedong overcame Chiang Kai-Shek's Nationalist forces, bringing the Chinese Civil War to an end. Along with the expulsion of Japanese invaders at the conclusion of World War II, Mao's victory "signaled a restoration of Chinese sovereignty," the first time in almost a century that the Chinese maintained control over their own borders.⁵¹ The event was viewed as a disaster by the United States, political and military allies to the Nationalists intent on preventing the spread of communism beyond the Soviet Union. It would be another thirty years before the United States recognized Red China as the legitimate government, instead recognizing the island nation of Taiwan as the Republic of China, allowing the island nation to hold China's seat at the United Nations Security Council.

⁵¹ Friedberg, 28.

Mao meanwhile consolidated his rule over the mainland, absorbing all lands previously claimed at the height of the Qing Dynasty.⁵² Once in control, Mao, styling himself the First Chairman of the Central Committee of the Communist Party of China, implemented an entirely state-run economy, in which he alone dictated the means of production and expansion. The extent to this control is outlined by Aaron L. Friedberg in *A Contest for Supremacy*:

The communists started by collectivizing farms, nationalizing industry, and expropriating the assets of foreigners, landlords, and China's own, comparatively small, entrepreneurial class. Instead of relying on market forces, government bureaucrats took on the responsibility for setting wages and prices, controlling the allocation of labor, and making all the decisions about investment...The state also established a monopoly on foreign trade, restricting imports, eliminating direct investment, and aiming for the highest possible degree of self-sufficiency.⁵³

Such conditions defined the economic environment of the People's Republic China (PRC) from 1949-1978, during which the Communist regime committed itself to isolation and absolutely controlled market conditions. Along the way, Mao implemented a series of disastrous political movements: the Great Leap Forward involved forcing peasant farmers to operate crude steel furnaces in their backyards, leading to a famine that killed over thirty-eight million from 1958 to 1961. Subsequently, Mao implemented the Cultural Revolution five years later to eliminate political opponents of the Great Leap

⁵² Ibid., 28.

⁵³ Ibid., 28-29.

Forward, including many important scientists and engineers. Though the horrifying effects of these movements cannot be overstated, China still reached its goals for industrialization in the 1960s, establishing the basic tenants of a state industry and system of economy.⁵⁴ Additionally, the PRC succeeded in establishing an average growth rate per capita GDP of 2.33%, a number comparable to the growth rate of the United States at that time (2.24%).⁵⁵ This number is less impressive, however, when you take into account that the United States accounted for 21.6% of the World GDP in 1978, while the PRC accounted for just 4.9%.⁵⁶ For all of its effort and upheaval, communist China could not catch up with the more dominant forces of the free market.

Chinese Economic Growth, U.S. Decline

Mao Zedong died in 1976. In the ensuing power struggle, the supporters of Mao's exclusionary policies were defeated by a group of moderates believing in modest economic reforms. The leader of these moderates, Deng Xiaoping, is described by Friedberg as more pragmatic than his fanatical predecessor: "Deng was hardly a principled advocate of economic liberalism. His approach was more practical than theoretical: he wanted results and was willing to try new methods to get them."⁵⁷ The changes that Xiaoping implemented guided China into free market capitalism while maintaining authoritarian control at the highest levels of government. Massive restrictions on free enterprise were removed, longstanding trade barriers with the West

⁵⁴ Hu Angang, *China in 2020: A New Type of Superpower* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2011), 27.

⁵⁵ Angus Maddison, *Chinese Economic Performance in the Long Run*, 2nd ed (Paris, FR: OECD, 2007), 44.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 44.

⁵⁷ Friedberg, 31.

were lifted, and foreign investment in the Chinese economy was encouraged.⁵⁸ The Chinese government also abandoned its insistence of supporting heavy industry of steel and machinery, allowing manufacturing of consumer goods for both domestic and foreign markets to develop.⁵⁹ The PRC, while remaining a communist People's Republic, began experimenting with a free market economy.

The long-term effect of these measures is staggering. The Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) estimates that between 1978 and 2003, China sustained an average growth of GDP per capita of 6.57%, compared to the 1.84 and 1.85% growths of Western Europe and the United States, respectively.⁶⁰ The World Bank estimates this growth closer to 10%,⁶¹ but in both estimates that percentage is markedly higher than any other part of the world, U.S. or otherwise. In 2010, China surpassed Japan as the second largest economy in the world,⁶² and current estimates by Goldman Sachs have China passing the United States as the world's largest economy in 2027.⁶³ Such a recovery would be a remarkable comeback for China, a country for which stagnancy was the economic status quo for over a century.

⁵⁸ Loren Brandt and Thomas G. Rawski, "China's Great Economic Transformation," in *China's Great Economic Transformation*, eds. Brandt and Rawski (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 8-14.

⁵⁹ Friedberg, 30.

⁶⁰ Maddison, 100.

⁶¹ "GDP per Capita Growth (annual %), *The World Bank*, accessed October 27, 2013, <http://data.worldbank.org/indicator/NY.GDP.PCAP.KD.ZG>.

⁶² Andrew Monahan, "China Overtakes Japan as World's No. 2 Economy," *The Wall Street Journal*, Feb. 14, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/news/articles/SB10001424052748703361904576142832741439402>

⁶³ Shamim Adam, "China May Surpass U.S. by 2020 in 'Super Cycle,' Standard Charter Says," *Bloomberg*, November 14, 2010, <http://www.bloomberg.com/news/2010-11-15/china-may-surpass-u-s-by-2020-in-super-cycle-standard-chartered-says.html>.

At the same time, the United States' economy experienced multiple issues, particularly in deindustrialization. Following the post-War economic boom, industrial jobs were coveted for their union wages and security, and were the backbone of the U.S. economy through the 1960s. Starting in the 70s, those jobs started disappearing: the United States lost 22.3 million jobs from 1969-1976, and another 2 million manufacturing jobs were lost between 1995 and 2002.⁶⁴ Entire cities, including Flint, Michigan, Gary, Indiana, and Youngstown, Ohio, plunged into economic depressions from which they have yet to recover. Though a significant manufacturing base remains present in the United States, the factories create significantly fewer jobs, as advanced machinery does much of the work initially marked for human labor.⁶⁵

The correlation of U.S. manufacturing decline and Chinese rise does not make for a direct causation. The reasons for American manufacturing decline are numerous, with the most direct causes commonly attributed to the forces of free market capitalism, factory obsolescence, and plant relocation.⁶⁶ It is this latter reason that connects U.S. manufacturing decline to China, for while relocation "once meant moving production to low-wage areas within Canada and the United States, [it] has increasingly meant exporting the work altogether."⁶⁷ As companies realized they could operate factories overseas while providing workers with less pay and fewer benefits, many jobs left American shores. In the 1980s, when the Japanese economy was booming, Americans were resentful of Japan's industrial success, with American auto plant unemployment

⁶⁴ Steven High and David W. Lewis, *Corporate Wasteland: The Landscape and Memory of Deindustrialization* (Ithica, NY: Cornell University Press, 2007), 3-4.

⁶⁵ Doug Henwood, "Toward a Progressive View on Outsourcing," in *Jobs in America* ed. David Ramm (New York: The H.W. Wilson Company, 2006), 100.

⁶⁶ High and Lewis, 7.

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 7.

labeled by some as “economic Pearl Harbor.”⁶⁸ In 1994, the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA) made creating factories in lower-cost Mexico a more feasible option for some companies, leading many to anoint Mexico as the new scapegoat.⁶⁹ It has even been suggested that given the rise in quality of life in the PRC, China’s days as the world hub of cheap manufacturing may be coming to a close, as many American companies bring manufacturing jobs back to the U.S.⁷⁰ Nonetheless, as China surpassed the United States in 2012 as the largest manufacturing base in the world,⁷¹ it remains exceedingly easy for politicians and citizens alike to blame China for the United States’ economic woes.⁷² While the issue of jobs is a major source of contention between the U.S. and the PRC, it remains one issue in the backdrop of a much larger portrait of political tension.

U.S. Political Tensions with China

At the time of China’s political upheaval and eventual growth, political relations with the West were limited especially with the United States. Diplomatic relations between the PRC and the United States were nonexistent from 1949 until 1972, the year President Richard Nixon famously visited China and the year after the PRC regained its

⁶⁸ Daniels, 342.

⁶⁹ Terry Kosdrosky, “A Mixed Result,” in *Jobs in America* ed. David Ramm (New York: the H.W. Wilson Company, 2006), 102.

⁷⁰ Vivek Wadhwa, “The End of Chinese Manufacturing and Rebirth of U.S. Industry,” *Forbes*, July 23, 2012, accessed October 28, 2013, <http://www.forbes.com/sites/singularity/2012/07/23/the-end-of-chinese-manufacturing-and-rebirth-of-u-s-industry/>.

⁷¹ Daniel J. Meckstroth, “Is China the Largest Manufacturer in the World?” *MAPI*, January 31, 2012, accessed October 28, 2013, <https://www.mapi.net/china-largest-manufacturer-world>.

⁷² John B. Judis, “Romney’s Red Scare: Is China Really a Problem?” *New Republic*, October 17, 2012, accessed October 30, 2013, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/108732/romneys-red-scare-china-really-problem>.

seat on the U.N. Security Council. The United States' recognition of the People's Republic as the official government of China came with a variety of complications. For one, the United States still maintains ties with Taiwan, still styling itself the Republic of China and still recognized by the PRC as their rightful province. Additionally, China was, and remains, an authoritarian state, a contradiction to the United States' traditional stance for democracy and human rights. China's record on human rights includes suppression of political and religious activity, unwarranted arrests and phone/internet monitoring, and restriction of internet access.⁷³ Such issues remain significant hurdles in interactions between the two governments.

The most indelible symbol of China's human rights record remains the Tiananmen Square Massacre on June 4, 1989, in which the Chinese government deployed soldiers and tanks to violently break up student protests, killing hundreds and wounding thousands. This tumultuous event remains censored on Internet searches in China.⁷⁴ While the U.S. has sought multiple paths of encouragement for China to improve their human rights record, including a bilateral Human Rights Dialogue and projects run by the State Department's Bureau of Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor,⁷⁵ the U.S. government is aware there is little they can do to prevent PRC human rights' violations without hurting their national interests in the process. As it currently stands, there is an

⁷³ Michael D. Swaine, *America's Challenge: Engaging a Rising China in the Twenty-First Century* (Washington D.C., Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 2011), 288.

⁷⁴ Kim Zetter, "China Censors: The Tiananmen Square Anniversary Will Not Be Tweeted," *Wired*, June 2, 2009, accessed October 30, 2013 <http://www.wired.com/threatlevel/2009/06/china-censors-internet-before-tiananmen-square-anniversary/>.

⁷⁵ Swaine, 282-284.

inherent contradiction in that the United States must nurture economic and political ties with a state which has unresolved issues of oppression and suppression of its populace.

The issue of China's ascension has become even more troublesome to the United States Government in the past decade. As the United States continues its engagement in the War on Terror in response to the attacks on 9/11, there is a growing debate as to whether these military campaigns have distracted the military from a greater, looming threat. Political scientist Jacques deLisle notes that by predominantly focusing on al-Qaeda and on the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, "the U.S. would pay less attention to China issues and, thus, to irritants in the U.S.-China relationship."⁷⁶ This theoretical lack of focus is validated by the manner in which the United States has treated China in the past decade, with Friedberg noting that China's importance as both a trading partner and an ally in the War on Terror led Washington "to put a premium on maintaining the best possible relationship with Beijing."⁷⁷ Combined with the perception that China is a rising power, the public perception that the United States government is not doing enough to combat this threat only adds to the apprehension that the PRC represents to the United States.

Despite the expressed desires of both governments to maintain positive relations, sustaining good will has not always been easy for the White House. Several embarrassing incidents have provoked international attention, including the detention of the crew of a U.S. spy plane in April 2001, and Chinese hackers gaining access to databases of the U.S. government and several American companies, all while

⁷⁶ Jacques deLisle, "9/11 and U.S.-China Relations," *Foreign Policy Research Institute* (September 2011), www.fpri.org (accessed 8-20-13).

⁷⁷ Friedberg, 94-95.

headquartered on a PRC military compound outside of Shanghai.⁷⁸ This juxtaposition of expressed good will and perceived ill will has caused some experts to question whether China is “lulling” the United States into a false sense of security while actively working towards its domination.⁷⁹ It is this perception, rather than the expressed intents of cooperation, that dwell on American views towards China in the new millennium.

Overall, while Sino-American relations have undoubtedly improved since PRC rose to power in 1949, multiple complications remain for both parties. As China continues to expand its economy, inching closer and closer to the United States, both the American government and general population view China with apprehension, uncertain how they might respond to a world with China as the dominant world superpower. As this uncertainty continues, an interesting subplot in the U.S.-China rivalry continues to develop, in which the fight for cultural supremacy takes place in the world of film distribution.

Hollywood and China

Equally important to establishing the cultural anxieties and contemporary political tensions is the establishment of the singular importance of *Looper*. A multitude of Chinese-American film co-productions have emerged in recent years, all indicative of China’s ascension to the world stage. While *Looper* is neither the first nor the most financially successful of these trends, it nonetheless represents a significant step in the

⁷⁸ Tom Phillips, “Major Chinese Internet Hacking Base Exposed,” *The Telegraph*, February 19, 2013, accessed October 31, 2013, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/asia/china/9879916/Major-Chinese-internet-hacking-base-exposed.html>.

⁷⁹ Friedberg, 194-196.

influence the Chinese market holds over American releases. The high demand for co-production status for American studios, and the iron grip with which the Chinese government maintains the process by which they are attained, means that this chapter in Sino-American relations is yet another battleground for political power and prestige. In order to understand the significance of this battleground, I will go over a brief history of recent Chinese-American co-productions, placing *Looper* in the proper context of recent events.

Co-Productions

The concept of Hollywood films being co-financed and produced by foreign companies is not a recent development, as the practice dates to the 1950s. During this period, the vertically-integrated studio system was dismantled by the U.S. Justice Department and Hollywood studios lost their absolute control over their networks of distributors and theater chains. Italian producer Dino De Laurentiis is commonly credited with being “among the first European producers to realize the potential of the international co-production.”⁸⁰ By taking advantage of the newfound free agency status of Hollywood actors, De Laurentiis lured established stars to foreign productions, paying them with the money he saved by shooting on-location with local technicians. It was through this system that De Laurentiis hired Anthony Quinn for Fellini’s *La Strada* and Kirk Douglas for the epic *Ulysses*.⁸¹ At the same time, De Laurentiis pre-sold distribution rights for each country to local distributors in that country, using the money

⁸⁰ Dave Kehr, “Dino De Laurentiis, Prolific Film Producer, Dies at 91,” *The New York Times*, November 11, 2010.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*

to further finance his productions.⁸² The basic structure of De Laurentiis' strategy remains the template for how Hollywood conceives its blockbuster films to this day, in which an international project is buoyed by big-name stars, on-location shooting in cheap locales, and financial partnering with local production companies.

De Laurentiis' strategy revolutionized Hollywood, broadening its influence and changing the way Hollywood creates and markets its films. The strategy led to an eventual redefinition of Hollywood from "an *American* aesthetic" to what Scott R. Olsen calls a "global aesthetic," in which Hollywood films are both the universal norm and are conceived with creating the broadest international appeal possible.⁸³ It is this attempted global appeal that explains why Hollywood blockbusters have universally appealing structures, featuring, among other aspects, "good guys vs. bad guys plots, resistance to the idea of film as art, middle class sentiments, formulaic and emotional stories with happy endings, stories with clear, simple, and predictable affect...obsession with beauty, action, [and] hope and optimism."⁸⁴ These characteristics, all laid out by Olsen, can be clearly seen both in recent Hollywood productions like *Titanic* (1997), *Transformers* (2007), and *The Avengers* (2012). Given the extraordinary success of these films overseas, the argument for the global Hollywood aesthetic is still very strong.

⁸² Frederick Wasser, "Is Hollywood America? The Trans-Nationalization of the American Film Industry," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 12 (1995), 431.

⁸³ Scott R. Olsen, "The Globalization of Hollywood," in *The Contemporary Hollywood Reader*, ed. Toby Miller (New York: Routledge, 2009), 526.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 531.

The Chinese Film Market

From the end of World War I through the Twentieth Century, Hollywood reigned as the dominant international film culture. A country where this dominance was immune was China, whose Communist government banned all American films from their shores through most of the century. As a result, while even the Soviet Union collaborated in co-productions with De Laurentiis and Columbia Pictures,⁸⁵ China remained a notable exception to Hollywood's continued expansion for many years. This stance softened during the 1980s, as the Chinese government conceded in allowing Western productions to film in the mainland. Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Last Emperor* and Steven Spielberg's *Empire of the Sun* (both 1987) are the first examples of such tolerance, with the former even given permission to film in the Forbidden City, previously off-limits to foreigners. Further steps were taken in 1994, when the Chinese government established a system of revenue sharing for imported American films, in which the government-run China Film Group (CFG) receives a percentage of the profits from ten foreign films allowed into the Chinese market. Warner Brothers' *The Fugitive* (1993) was the first such film released under that system.⁸⁶

Even with this major step, obstacles remain in place preventing an unchecked spread of Hollywood films in China. The CFG maintains a monopoly on which films are allowed to play in Chinese multiplexes. Disney, Sony, and MGM learned this the hard way in 1997, when the studios were temporarily blackballed from China for respectively releasing *Kundun*, *Seven Years in Tibet*, and *Red Corner* (all 1997), all of which the CFG

⁸⁵ *Waterloo* (1975), directed by Sergei Bondarchuk.

⁸⁶ Shujen Wang, *Framing Piracy: Globalization and Film Distribution in Greater China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 62.

deemed too critical of the communist regime.⁸⁷ This sensitivity towards cultural slights reveals another characterization of Chinese culture, in which the Hollywood importers are perceived as a potential threat to indigenous filmmaking.⁸⁸ Perhaps with this fear in mind, the CFG implements a strict set of rules as to what foreign films are allowed into the country. The film's script must pass the CFG's board of censors, and any material deemed offensive to Chinese culture is cut from the Chinese release.⁸⁹ An event that significantly increased Hollywood presence at the Chinese multiplex was China's 2001 admission into the World Trade Organization. Under the WTO, the Chinese government agreed to expand the number of foreign films to twenty titles; by 2009, that number expanded to thirty-four, with a 25% profit share for the foreign studios.⁹⁰ After decades of meticulous control, these developments represent a landmark step for Hollywood in developing a burgeoning film market.

In addition to this quota system, China implemented a rule put in place to protect Chinese culture and film production is one upon which Hollywood capitalizes the most. Simon Montlake of *Forbes* notes that if a Hollywood film, in addition to containing "Chinese elements" and passing the censors, is partially funded by a Chinese production company, then the film is considered a Chinese domestic release. If a film receives this co-productions status, the Hollywood studio can circumvent the quota system, in addition to receiving 38% of the gross, significantly greater than the foreign rate of 25%.⁹¹ This co-production status is extremely difficult to receive. Not only must the film contain

⁸⁷ Fritz and Horn, "Reel China: Hollywood Tries to Stay on China's Good Side."

⁸⁸ Wang, 69.

⁸⁹ Montlake, "Hollywood's Mr. China: Dan Mintz, DMG."

⁹⁰ *Ibid.* It was also stipulated that the additional 14 films must be in either 3D or IMAX format.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*

“Chinese elements,” and be partially funded by a Chinese production company,⁹² but it must also navigate the web of Chinese bureaucracy and censorship. It is this last part that remains the biggest hurdle for American productions, as the Chinese bureaucracy in place to regulate film production remains frustratingly unpredictable. Despite initial approval from censors, Quentin Tarantino’s *Django Unchained* (2012) was pulled from theaters immediately after it started running.⁹³ Additionally, superhero blockbusters *The Dark Knight Rises* and *The Amazing Spiderman* (both 2012) were chosen by the CFG to open on the same day, a financial bungling unthinkable by Hollywood’s streamlined practices.

The Chinese government has also resorted to outright censorship of scenes deemed unacceptable. Examples of elements cut by Chinese censors include scenes in *Men in Black 3* (2012) deemed offensive to Chinese-Americans,⁹⁴ references to Chinese government corruption and prostitution in the recent James Bond film *Skyfall* (2012),⁹⁵ and even forty minutes of a storyline involving a homosexual relationship in *Cloud Atlas* (2012).⁹⁶ Compounding this issue is that “even a partnership with a Chinese company on a film doesn’t ensure their movie will be designated an official co-production.”⁹⁷ Nonetheless, while difficulties remain, several examples of Chinese-American co-productions have become great international success, even as they alienate and bother many Chinese viewers.

⁹² Ibid.

⁹³ Kim Masters, “The China Clusterf—k: Is Hollywood Fed Up?” *The Hollywood Reporter*, April 24, 2013.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

⁹⁵ “Why Hollywood Kowtows to China.”

⁹⁶ “‘Cloud Atlas’ Censored for Chinese Release; 40 Minutes Reportedly Cut from Film,” *The Huffington Post*, January 22, 2013, accessed October 29, 2013, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/01/22/cloud-atlas-censored_n_2525909.html.

⁹⁷ Masters.

Sino-American Co-Productions

The most successful Chinese-American co-production, and the film that opened the floodgates of International co-productions in China, is *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Released in 2000 and directed by Taiwanese-American director Ang Lee, the film was a global success, winning four Academy Awards, grossing over \$213 million worldwide, and remaining to this day the highest-grossing foreign language film in the United States.⁹⁸ The film has been noted by Georgette Wang and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh for its undeniable “Chineseness,” noting that that the film is characterized by “dazzling sword fights, period costumes, an iconic Chinese setting and an all-Chinese cast who speak Mandarin throughout the film,” all of which make it the ideal Chinese film to market to a global audience.⁹⁹ Indeed, the film features martial arts mysticism, period costuming, and a message of harmony with nature, all categories of what Edward Said would identify as characteristic of Orientalism. In *Orientalism*, Said’s seminal work, he describes the theory as an idea of the Far East, or Orient, created by Western countries as a method of approaching and dealing with the East as the invented “Other.”¹⁰⁰ This constructed mentality is used by the West in the studying and separating of the Far East, but is ultimately used in “dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”¹⁰¹ For Said, “theses of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality with the West” were examples of latent Orientalism, in which Western peoples asserted the

⁹⁸ “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon,” *Box Office Mojo*, accessed October 28, 2013, <http://www.boxofficemojo.com/movies/?id=crouchingtigerhiddendragon.htm>

⁹⁹ Georgette Wang and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, “Globalization and Hybridization in Cultural Products: The Cases of *Mulan* and *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” *International Journal of Cultural Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005), 179.

¹⁰⁰ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1978), 1.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 2-3.

racial superiority over their Eastern counterparts.¹⁰² While the universe of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* are not overtly racist, the characteristics of its narrative, costuming, and set design all follow the time-worn tropes of “Otherness” identified by Said.

While these exotic characteristics led to a critical and commercial success in the West, reception for *Crouching Tiger* was more muted in Eastern markets. Common complaints from the Hong Kong, Chinese, Japanese, and Korean markets include a much slower pace than normal for martial arts films, along with irritation from watching Chow Yun Fat, a native Cantonese speaker, and the Malaysian-born Michelle Yeoh, struggle through Mandarin dialogue.¹⁰³ This failure to connect to its native audience has been commented by some critics as indicate of director Lee’s diasporic status with his Chinese homeland, causing him to create an idealized and exotic version of China on film.¹⁰⁴ Regardless of the reasons, *Crouching Tiger* is not the last rejection of a co-production by a Chinese audience.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon led to a surge in interest in Chinese martial arts films, leading to a series of similarly international market-targeted martial arts films, including *Hero* (2002) and *House of Flying Daggers* (2004). It was also followed by several more examples of Chinese-American co-productions categorized by Chinese film

¹⁰² Ibid., 206.

¹⁰³ Steve Rose, “The Film is So Slow- It’s Like Grandma Telling Stories,” *The Guardian*, February 13, 2001, accessed October 28, 2013, <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2001/feb/13/artsfeatures2>.

¹⁰⁴ Cheng Shao-Chun, “Chinese Diaspora and Orientalism in Globalized Cultural Production: Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*,” *Global Media Journal* 3, no. 4. Christina Klein, “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon: A Diasporic Reading,” *Cinema Journal* 43, no. 4 (Summer 2004), 18-42.

scholar Michael Berry as “combining Chinese film talent, locations, and lower shooting costs with international investment, scripts, and the infrastructure of the Hollywood system to produce big-budget commercial films that can be easily marketed across different cultures, languages, and regions.”¹⁰⁵ This sub-category of co-productions includes *The Forbidden Kingdom* (2008), *The Mummy: Tomb of the Dragon Emperor* (2008), and the recent China-oriented remake of *The Karate Kid* (2010), all joint productions between American and Chinese companies. Additionally, each film delivers a combination of what Berry calls “an extremely conservative filmmaking style laden with stereotypes and time-worn tropes.”¹⁰⁶ While all three films feature internationally bankable Chinese movie stars,¹⁰⁷ each of the films’ plots involves an American protagonist who enters a stereotypically Chinese martial arts setting and emerges triumphant over a Chinese antagonist. Such plots are examples of “whitewashing” of traditionally Asian roles in American popular culture, and evidence that Hollywood has yet to fully bridge the cultural gap between itself and China.

Looper

The importance of *Looper* is not tied to its box office or critical reception in China. According to Box Office Mojo, *Looper* earned around \$20 million from the Chinese market, the highest gross from any single market outside of the United States. While not unimpressive, the gross is significantly lower than the \$23-25 million *opening*

¹⁰⁵ Michael Berry, “Chinese Cinema with Hollywood Characteristics, or How *The Karate Kid* Became a Chinese Film,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Chinese Cinemas*, eds. Carlos Rojas and Eileen Chow (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), 177.

¹⁰⁶ *Ibid.*, 177.

¹⁰⁷ *The Mummy* co-stars Jet Li, *The Karate Kid* co-stars Jackie Chan, while both of these martial arts actors co-star in *The Forbidden Kingdom*.

weekend initially reported by Deadline Hollywood, a mistake caused by a failure of the theater chains to properly convert the Chinese renminbi.¹⁰⁸ Chinese film critics also explicitly criticized the added scenes as detracting from the story at large. One such critic, Rachel Lu, noted that the film seemed at times to be “a product placement for China.”¹⁰⁹ This reception places *Looper* within another trend noticed by *Esquire*’s Mitch Moxley: the vast majority of co-productions have been unsuccessful in China. Citing the possibility that “Chinese cinemagoers view Hollywood’s pandering as patronizing,” Moxley notes that “with the exception of *The Karate Kid*, no co-production has made significant money, and few have achieved anything close to critical success.”¹¹⁰ Even *Iron Man 3* (2013), the second film co-produced by DMG and a financial success in China, was not immune to criticism by the Chinese over its clumsily-added Sino-centric scenes.¹¹¹ If *Looper* speaks volumes about China’s growing influence in the world market, it also says a great deal about the enigmatic nature of success in the Chinese market.

While Hollywood’s difficulty in cracking the code of the Chinese box office is an important academic question, the importance of *Looper* is tied to on-screen portrayals

¹⁰⁸ Nikki Finke, “UPDATE: ‘Looper’ Execs in China Blooper,” *Deadline Hollywood*, October 3, 2012, <http://www.deadline.com/2012/09/looper-opens-1-in-china-first-time-international-film-debut-there-beats-u-s/>.

¹⁰⁹ Rachel Lu, “Pandering Misfire: Sino-Centric ‘Looper’”’s Lesson for Hollywood Producers,” *Tea Leaf Nation*, October 5, 2012, accessed July 30, 2013, <http://www.tealeafnation.com/2012/10/pandering-misfire-sino-centric-loopers-lesson-for-hollywood-producers/>.

¹¹⁰ Mitch Moxley, “The Problem with Hollywood’s China Pandering,” *Esquire.com*, August 29, 2013, accessed October 15, 2013, <http://www.esquire.com/blogs/culture/hollywood-china-pandering>.

¹¹¹ Brian Ashcraft, “Why Many in China Hate *Iron Man 3*’s Chinese Version,” *Kotaku*, May 2, 2013, accessed July 28, 2013, <http://kotaku.com/why-many-in-china-hate-iron-man-3s-chinese-version-486840429>.

and off-screen production choices. DMG Entertainment's *Looper* is neither an internationally-targeted Orientalist fantasy in the tradition of *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon*, nor is it an American-centric Chinese co-production a la *The Forbidden Kingdom*. While featuring scenes filmed in China, the primary story of the film does not center on China like *The Last Emperor*. Rather than follow any of these Sino-American co-productions established trends, *Looper*'s breaks from the tradition of these co-production by radically shifting the on-screen East-West dynamic. While the film's narrative is still centered on American characters and takes place primarily in the future United States, it is China that is shown to be the more prosperous, more stable future society. This power dynamic is replicated in certain off-screen production choices, including the altering of the script to fit Shanghai and scenes filmed and screened exclusively for Chinese audiences. How these on-screen and off-screen factors are reconciled, and how they represent American apprehensions towards China, is the aim of this thesis.

Two Images of China

The development of China in the 20th Century from a colonial cake to be cut and divided up by the West, to communist menace, to uncertain political and economic partner created an inherent contradiction in how the country is viewed by the United States. Law scholar Randall Peerenboom observes this contradiction in the introduction to his work, *China Modernizes*:

Two sharply opposing popular images of China prevail today.

Skyscrapers, urban professionals in Italian suits dashing in to Starbucks

for their morning latte, streets filled with shiny new BMWs—this is the positive face of the self-confident China seen in glossy advertisements beamed around the world on CNN...On the other hand, there is a much darker image of China as a brutal authoritarian state that violently oppresses its citizens, an anachronistic throwback to the Cold War era. This China arrests political dissidents, censors the Internet, and imprisons courageous lawyers who try to help families thrown out of their homes by profiteering developers eager to build the next skyscraper.¹¹²

The former image of high skyscrapers and BMWs is undoubtedly the image DMG chief Dan Mintz prefers to display in his films, and is the image of China that American audiences are treated to in *Looper*. The latter image, which the PRC has taken great pains to hide, is hard to forget when hearing news reports that *The Dark Knight* (2008) won't be screened in China because of "cultural sensitivities,"¹¹³ or that a Chinese mogul is bankrolling a film production center in Qingdao aimed at rivaling Hollywood.¹¹⁴ The rise of China on the international stage and their growing presence in the film industry, far from being separate entities, are inextricably connected, both indicative of the rise of an economic, cultural, and political threat. Whether real or perceived, this threat is a political quagmire that continues to be debated.

¹¹² Randall Peerenboom, *China Modernizes: Threat to the West or Model for the Rest?* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2007), 1.

¹¹³ "Dark Knight Won't Be on Big Screen in China," *CBC News*, December 26, 2008, accessed September 20, 2013, <http://www.cbc.ca/news/arts/dark-knight-won-t-be-on-big-screen-in-china-1.740993>.

¹¹⁴ Keith Bradsher, "Chinese Titan Takes Aim at Hollywood," *The New York Times*, September 22, 2013, accessed October 1, 2013, http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/23/business/global/chinese-titan-takes-aim-at-hollywood.html?_r=0.

Dan Mintz reflected on the reasons Hollywood Studios are finding difficulty interacting with the Chinese government in an interview with *The Hollywood Reporter*. From his perspective, Mintz notes that Hollywood treats each country of the world as points of distribution, China included. Mintz argues that China is not just another point on the map, and such a perception emerges from outdated ideas of Hollywood-centrism. “The most important thing is the idea that this market is not going away” Mintz argues, “And I think only recently has it started to sink in.” Whether Mintz is right, and China is truly the market of the future, can (and will) be debated endlessly in future meetings of both political figures and film studio chiefs. What cannot be debated is that the government of China, and key industry figures in the co-production spectrum like Mintz, fully believe that China is not only here to stay, but is the power of the future. For evidence of this belief, look no further than the pristine streets and shining skyscrapers of future Shanghai in *Looper*.

CHAPTER 3

METHODS

Science fiction's journey in film is an unlikely one, progressing from a genre associated with juvenile audiences to the most popular cinema on the planet in only twenty-seven years. The history of science-fiction cinema goes back to the dawn of motion pictures, with the pioneering short films of Georges Méliès in the nineteenth century. However, for the first half of the twentieth century the genre lacked a clear identity and presence in the world of cinema. Film scholar Vivian Sobchack notes of this "prehistory" of the genre, that "prior to the early fifties there was hardly a spate—in fact, barely a trickle."¹¹⁵ It was only with the 1950 release of *Destination Moon* that science fiction film "emerged as a critically recognized genre; that is, reviewers and critics...began to talk about the films by grouping them together."¹¹⁶ The onslaught of sci-fi that followed in the 1950s—*The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), *The War of the Worlds* (1953), *Them!* (1954), *Forbidden Planet* (1956)—defined the early genre conventions and provided the groundwork for its status among the most popular films of the modern age. It was this run of films that inspired a future generation of filmmakers

¹¹⁵ Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 11.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.

who took science-fiction film to box office success.¹¹⁷ One of these filmmakers, George Lucas, would go on to direct *Star Wars* in 1977, breaking the ceiling for cinematic box office achievement. The commercial success and scholarly attention of science-fiction cinema has since continued unabated.

Looper portrays a science-fiction future in which China is the dominant world power. It does this as a co-production between the Chinese government, a Chinese production company, and a Hollywood studio, and with the added factor of additional scenes exclusive to the Chinese market. How *Looper* creates a portrayal that curries favor with China without alienating the film's American audience invites analysis using rhetorical and film-studies theories.

Rhetorical Criticism

The academic study of rhetoric has traditionally focused on the interaction of the spoken word with its intended audience. The twentieth century witnessed the expansion of this focus beyond speeches into other fields of expression, including cinema. This expansion is partially indebted to the work of Kenneth Burke, whose theory of dramatism helped expand the focus of rhetoric into all modes of human language and thought.¹¹⁸ One rhetorical scholar who turned Burke's ideas into a focused and applicable method of analysis for cinema is rhetorician Barry Brummett, who took the Burkean concept

¹¹⁷ The television documentary *Watch the Skies!: Sci-Fi, the 1950s, and Us* (dir. Richard Schickel, 2005) demonstrates this, as directors Steven Spielberg (*Close Encounters of the Third Kind*), George Lucas (*Star Wars*), Ridley Scott (*Blade Runner*), and James Cameron (*Avatar*) comment on 1950s science fiction and the effect of the films on them while growing up.

¹¹⁸ Kenneth Burke, *A Grammar of Motives* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 1962), xxii.

“representative anecdote” and applied it to electronic media. Whether it is a newscast, a television program, or a film, the anecdote of Brummett’s method “is a lens, filter, or template through which the critic studies and reconstructs the discourse.”¹¹⁹

Such a lens can be used to analyze film texts in a variety of ways. Brummett explicitly states this, noting that the representative anecdote “is individualized in fiction and nonfiction, in print and electronic media, and in both serious and entertaining discourse.”¹²⁰ The flexibility of this approach has been demonstrated by a number of rhetoricians using the representative anecdote to analyze media as diverse as World War II-era comics¹²¹ and medical dramas on television.¹²² Brummett’s inaugural analysis of film as representative anecdote looks at the first two film versions of *Invasion of the Body Snatchers* (1956, 1978) and how each reflect the cultural apprehensions of their respective decades. Several rhetoricians replicated this approach in articles framing film texts as representative anecdotes, with texts varying from the Mel Brooks spoof *Spaceballs* (1987),¹²³ to *Saving Private Ryan* (1998),¹²⁴ to the animated pictures of Walt

¹¹⁹ Barry Brummett, “Burke’s Representative Anecdote as a Method in Media Criticism,” in *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 1, no. 2 (1984), 163.

¹²⁰ *Ibid.*, 174.

¹²¹ Janis L. Edwards & Carol K. Winkler, “Representative Form and the Visual Ideograph: The Iwo Jima Image in Editorial Cartoons,” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 83, no. 3 (1997), 289-310.

¹²² Lynn M. Harter and Phyllis M. Japp, “Technology as the Representative Anecdote in Popular Discourses of Health and Medicine,” *Health Communication* 13, no. 4 (2001), 409-425.

¹²³ Brian L. Ott & Beth Bonnstetter, “‘We’re at Now Now:’ *Spaceballs* as Parodic Tourism,” in *Southern Communication Journal* 72, no. 4 (Oct-Dec 2007), 309-327. Scarlet L. Wynns and Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, “Father-Daughter Relationships in Disney’s Animated Films,” *Southern Communication Journal* 68, no. 2 (Winter 2003), 91-106.

¹²⁴ Peter Ehrenhaus, “Why We Fought: Holocaust Memory in Spielberg’s *Saving Private Ryan*,” *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 18, no. 3 (Sept. 2001), 321-337.

Disney Studios.¹²⁵ These examples demonstrate the ability of film to act as “symbolic equipment”¹²⁶ for real-life cultural contexts and attitudes.

The rhetorical study of film and visual rhetoric remains exceedingly popular, with communication scholar Lester C. Olsen noting that the study of visual rhetoric “is now free-flowering.”¹²⁷ At the same time, the field of film studies has also come into its own, with its own theories and methods. Rather than existing in their own respective vacuums, the fields of mediated rhetoric and film studies have frequently interacted, particularly in the co-opting of film-study theories by rhetoricians to broaden their rhetorical analysis of a film. This can be seen in the incorporation of auteur theory by Thomas W. Benson in his analysis of the film *Joe* (1970),¹²⁸ David Blakesley’s use of psychoanalysis in his work on *Vertigo* (1958),¹²⁹ and the application of semiotics by Benson and Martin Medhurst in their examination of *The Exorcist* (1973).¹³⁰ These works demonstrate an established overlap between rhetoric and film studies. While a lens of film studies focuses on a single theoretical approach to a film, rhetoric highlights the interaction of text with its audience. When the two are combined, rhetoricians benefit from the

¹²⁵ Scarlet L. Wynns and Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, “Father-Daughter Relationships in Disney’s Animated Films,” *Southern Communication Journal* 68, no. 2 (Winter 2003), 91-106.

¹²⁶ Brummett, 161.

¹²⁷ Lester C. Olsen, “Intellectual and Conceptual Resources for Visual Rhetoric: A Re-examination of Scholarship Since 1950,” *The Review of Communication* 7, no. 1 (January 2007), 11.

¹²⁸ Thomas W. Benson, “*Joe*: An Essay in the Rhetorical Criticism of Film,” *Journal of Popular Culture* 8, no. 3 (Winter 1974), 610-618.

¹²⁹ David Blakesley, “Defining Film Rhetoric: The Case of Hitchcock’s *Vertigo*,” in *Defining Visual Rhetorics*, ed. Charles A. Hill and Marguerite Helmers (Mahwah, NJ: Laurence Erlbaum Associates, 2004).

¹³⁰ Martin J. Medhurst, “Image and Ambiguity: A Rhetorical Approach to *The Exorcist*,” in *Rhetorical Dimensions in Media*, 2nd ed., eds. Medhurst & Benson (Dubuque, IA: Kendall/Hunt, 1991), 495-509.

theoretical lenses most useful to an analysis of a film, along with rhetoric's emphasis on the message's relationship with its audience.

Cinema as a Cultural Reflection

The nature of *Looper*'s portrayal of the future has obvious implications in its reflection of the cultural apprehensions of the United States towards China. While film has been commonly analyzed as a cultural reflection by rhetoricians like Brummett, such analysis is also an established tradition in the field of film studies. Three landmark instances of this method include film theorist Siegfried Kracauer's Freudian analysis of early German cinema, film scholar Thomas Elsaesser's own analysis of German cinema, and cinema analyst David Bordwell's overview of Hong Kong cinema. Kracauer's 1947 work was particularly noteworthy for being among the first to view a national cinema as a "mirror" to itself, reflecting "those deep layers of collective mentality which extend more or less below the dimension of consciousness."¹³¹ Taking into account the multitude of economic factors that go into making a film, Kracauer argues in *From Caligari to Hitler* that the proliferation of tyrants and dark figures in 1920s German cinema foreshadowed the rise of Nazism in the following decade.¹³²

Kracauer's approach bears similarities to the representative anecdote in many respects: both recognize and call attention to cultural reflections, connecting a film's message to the apprehensions of its audience. The crucial difference is the end to which each respective approach strives. With Kracauer, the diagnosis is the end in itself: he

¹³¹ Siegfried Kracauer, *From Caligari to Hitler: A Psychological History of the German Film* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1947), 6-7.

¹³² *Ibid.*, 10-11.

outlines in the introductory chapter his belief that a time of great political strife “results in the decomposition of psychological systems,” and that the resulting tensions are bound to be released into some medium.¹³³ The identification of German psychological tensions in Weimar Cinema is thus the express aim of *From Caligari to Hitler*. The representative anecdote differentiates from this approach in its focus on the link between how the anecdote helps the audience manage the apprehension through everyday discourse. Drawing from Burke, Brummett argues that the anecdote “allows people to express their hopes and fears in familiar (and thus manageable) patterns... The critic’s task is then to *link* discourse embodying the formal anecdote to an audience’s problems, to show how the anecdotal form equips the culture for living in that situation.”¹³⁴ Rather than as a psychological reflection, Brummett’s approach views the anecdote as an interaction with the audience, an “articulation”¹³⁵ that allows the audience to actively cope with an apprehension. It is this more active, less diagnostic approach that will be applied to the relationship between American apprehension, Chinese ascension, and *Looper*.

Kracauer’s work remains a landmark psychoanalytic writing and application of film theory, but his method and conclusions were questioned by Thomas Elsaesser. Writing his own analysis of Weimar cinema, Elsaesser argues that Kracauer’s findings relied on a great deal of selectivity in the films he analyzed in hindsight. Taking an approach relying on historical and economic tensions rather than a vague notion of a national psyche, Elsaesser sees 1920s German cinema as a product of internal competition within German directors and an external competition of German cinema with

¹³³ Ibid., 9.

¹³⁴ Brummett, 164. Emphasis his.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 164.

rivaling national industries, namely Hollywood.¹³⁶ In refutation of Kracauer's vision of a collective psychological consciousness, Elsaesser argues for a vision of immense creative output resulting from a variety of economic factors.

A study that pushed the scholarship of cinema as a cultural reflection even further is David Bordwell's *Planet Hong Kong*. Focused on a different national cinema of a more recent era (Hong Kong cinema from the 1960s through the mid-1990s), Bordwell separates himself from Kracauer and Elsaesser by arguing for the recognition of Hong Kong cinema's artistic output, as opposed to defining the meaning or causes of Hong Kong cinema. By looking at the collective stylistic trends of Hong Kong cinema within the backdrop of the film business, Bordwell argues that the necessary compromises of business do not prevent mass entertainment from attaining the status of genuine artistry.¹³⁷ Bordwell's argument is interesting in its bridging of the commonly unpassable barrier between those who view cinema as art and those who view it as a product of the entertainment industry.

While each of these writers operates within the realm of film studies, each takes different approaches to explaining film's relationship to culture. Kracauer adapts a psychoanalytic lens in *From Caligari to Hitler*, viewing film as a psychological mirror. Elsaesser prefers a view of film as "historical symbolic"¹³⁸ of the marketing and economic factors, while Bordwell views the collective cinematic output of a country as artistic expression. While each of these works delves into issues of national character,

¹³⁶ Thomas Elsaesser, *Weimar Cinema and After: Germany's Historical Imaginary* (New York: Routledge, 2000).

¹³⁷ David Bordwell, *Planet Hong Kong: Popular Cinema and the Art of Entertainment* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2000), 2.

¹³⁸ Elsaesser, 5.

financing, cinematic conventions, and the beliefs of their respective country that the national cinema reflected, none of these approaches fit into the framework of *Looper* as representative of a larger American cultural discourse dealing with China's surge in economic and political clout. This trend of representation is not tied to a psychological profile or artistic merit, nor is it exclusively tied to economic factors. The nature of *Looper*'s on-screen portrayal of China is connected to its status as a *possible* future, distancing the American audience from reality through fictionalization. This feat is accomplished through the film's status as a work of science fiction. Understanding *Looper* as part of a larger cultural interaction can therefore be tied into genre studies, specifically to the role that the genre of science fiction plays in this on-screen portrayal of the cultural apprehension.

Genre

Appropriating genre criticism to film studies is only the most recent development to an academic field that dates back to the study of rhetoric in Ancient Greece. It was Aristotle who first categorized rhetoric into three divisions of oratory: deliberative, forensic, and epideictic.¹³⁹ This initial conception of genre was further elaborated in the Twentieth Century by rhetorician Edwin Black, who expanded upon Aristotle with the concept of rhetorical moments. He concluded that "there is a limited number of situations in which a rhetor can find himself... a limited number of ways in which a rhetor can and will respond rhetorically to any given situational type," and that "the recurrence of a given situational type through history will provide the critic with information on the

¹³⁹ Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. W. Rhys Roberts, in *The Rhetorical Tradition: Readings from Classical Times to the Present* (Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001), 185.

rhetorical responses available in that situation.”¹⁴⁰ The notion of rhetorical moments revealing convention through repeated occurrence helped to lay the groundwork for modern genre criticism. Rhetoricians Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson further expanded upon these presumptions in their own list of constants that any rhetorical genre must follow. These constants, which include classification justified by critical illumination of the genre, rather than how well it conforms to the genre, continue to influence rhetorical genre criticism.¹⁴¹

The study of genre in rhetoric dates back to ancient origins of rhetorical study, and has roots in the study of literature dating back to the late Sixteenth Century.¹⁴² Just as the generic traditions of rhetoric and literature emerged with the dawn of their respective media, so the study of genre in film scholarship developed with the invention of cinema. Defined by film scholar Barry Keith Grant as “those commercial feature films that, through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations,”¹⁴³ genre pictures operate within a series of narrative conventions and expectations anticipated by the viewer. From the dawn of the medium, filmmakers were quick to categorize certain films according to these conventions. While the practice of dividing films by basic groupings (“fight pictures”) dates back to the 1890s,¹⁴⁴ the vocabulary of categorization gradually expanded, with many early categories (“comedy,”

¹⁴⁰ Edwin Black, as quoted by Karlyn Kohrs Campbell and Kathleen Hall Jamieson in “Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction,” in *Readings in Rhetorical Criticism*, ed. Carl R. Burghardt (State College, PA: Strata Publishing, 2010), 448.

¹⁴¹ Campbell and Jamieson, “Form and Genre in Rhetorical Criticism: An Introduction,” 451.

¹⁴² Rick Altman, “Cinema and Genre,” in *The Oxford History of World Cinema* ed. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 1996): 276.

¹⁴³ Barry Keith Grant, “Introduction,” in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2012): xvii.

¹⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 276.

“drama”) appropriated from literary traditions.¹⁴⁵ Generic terms like “gangster movie,” “Western,” and “war movie” were commonly used by filmmakers and their audience through the early Twentieth Century. However, it was only after literary critic Robert Warshow’s 1948 article on the conventions of gangster film¹⁴⁶ that scholars identified and analyzed the conventions of film genres. To use the example of the Western, genre scholar Andrew Tutor includes such conventions as “ritualistic gun-fights, black and white clothing corresponding to good and bad distinctions, revenge themes, typed villains, and many, many more.”¹⁴⁷ Such conventions provide the audience with a set of generic expectations, and the filmmakers a template of rules that can be followed, bent, and even broken.

While the initial study of film centered on the *auteur*’s construction of meaning, genre studies grew in popularity in the 1970s, coinciding with an increased interest in how film language produces meaning.¹⁴⁸ This subsequent body of work in genre studies takes a wide variety of approaches, including the challenges in attempts to classify an entire genre,¹⁴⁹ the work of certain auteurs within certain genres,¹⁵⁰ and the reflections certain genres reveal about the culture in which they were created.¹⁵¹ This study of *Looper* is not exclusively focused on the film’s status as a genre picture, nor is it

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 276.

¹⁴⁶ Robert Warshow, “The Gangster as Tragic Hero,” *Partisan Review* 15, no. 2 (1948), 240-44.

¹⁴⁷ Andrew Tutor, “Genre,” in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 5.

¹⁴⁸ Grant, “Introduction,” xix.

¹⁴⁹ Janet Staiger, “Hybrid or Inbred: The Purity Hypothesis and Hollywood Genre History,” in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 203-217.

¹⁵⁰ Colin McArthur, *Underworld U.S.A.*, (New York: Viking Press, 1972).

¹⁵¹ Jason Mittel, “A Cultural Approach to Television Genre Theory,” *Cinema Journal* 40, no. 3 (2001), 3-24.

concerned with how the work fits into the oeuvre of its writer-director Rian Johnson. It is therefore the latter approach of cultural reflection that best applies to an analysis of *Looper*, given the film's reflection of Chinese-dominated future. It is this approach that is also the primary appeal of science fiction, a genre with a long history of projecting a culture's apprehensions about the future.

Science-Fiction Cinema

While genre studies of the gangster film,¹⁵² film noir,¹⁵³ the family melodrama,¹⁵⁴ and the western¹⁵⁵ all thrived through the 1970s, the science-fiction film saw far less attention in academic works.¹⁵⁶ Media scholar Keith M. Johnston offers several possible explanations for this lack of interest, including science fiction's association with youth audiences, attitudes of cultural superiority, and a lack of auteurs primarily associated with the genre.¹⁵⁷ Whatever the reason for its initial exclusion, scholarly attention to the science-fiction genre increased tremendously in recent decades. Media and literature scholar J.P. Telotte says this can be attributed to the emergence of science-fiction blockbusters like *Star Wars* as among the highest-grossing films of all time, along with the appearance of critically-acclaimed science-fiction films such as *Blade Runner*

¹⁵² Warshaw.

¹⁵³ Paul Schrader, "Notes on Film Noir," in *Film Theory & Criticism*, 7th ed., eds. Leo Braudy and Marshall Cohen (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009).

¹⁵⁴ Thomas Elsaesser, "Tales of Sound and Fury: Observations on the Family Melodrama," in *Film Genre Reader IV*, ed. Barry Keith Grant (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 433-462.

¹⁵⁵ Robert Warshaw, "Movie Chronicle: The Westerner," *Film Theory and Criticism* 6 (1954), 703-954.

¹⁵⁶ A notable exception to this is Susan Sontag's landmark essay, "The Imagination of Disaster," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, Dell, 1966).

¹⁵⁷ Keith M. Johnson, *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Berg, 2011), 9.

(1982).¹⁵⁸ Following this period of increased respectability, studies of science-fiction cinema flourished. The journal *Science Fiction Film and Television* has published two issues a year since 2008, and collections of significant science-fiction analyses have appeared in anthologies.¹⁵⁹ That entire anthologies are now dedicated to individual science-fiction franchises like *Star Wars*¹⁶⁰ is evidence in itself of how far the scholarship has progressed in only a few decades.

The most focused and insightful analyses of science-fiction cinema have come in the form of monographs that provide an overview of the history and conventions of the genre in film. These works include film scholar Vivian Sobchack's landmark analysis,¹⁶¹ Telotte's *Science Fiction Film*, and, most recently, Johnston's critical, historical, and commercial overview.¹⁶² While each of these authors begins their work with sections dedicated to the literary and historical overviews of the genre, the approaches each of these books takes following this overview are distinct. Keeping her analysis exclusive to post-1950s American sci-fi cinema, Sobchack focuses primarily on the "visual and aural elements"¹⁶³ that define the genre. Her *Screening Space* takes note of the imagery and sound that make up American sci-fi from 1950 to 1987. Telotte's *Science Fiction Film*

¹⁵⁸ J.P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 33.

¹⁵⁹ Gregg Rickman, ed., *The Science Fiction Film Reader* (New York: Limelight Editions, 2004). Tobias Hochscherf et. al, eds., *British Science Fiction Film and Television: Critical Essays* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2011).

¹⁶⁰ Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka, eds., *Myth, Media, and Culture in Star Wars: An Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012). Brode and Deyneka, eds., *Sex, Politics, and Religion in Star Wars: An Anthology* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2012).

¹⁶¹ Vivian Sobchack, *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987).

¹⁶² Johnston.

¹⁶³ Sobchack, 12.

takes a much more all-encompassing and critical approach to sci-fi. After defining separate subgenres of science fiction cinema and their conventions, Telotte devotes a third of his book with analysis of films that demonstrate the traits of these subgenres. The most recent example of the three science fiction monographs, Johnston focuses primarily on the market forces that drive science fiction to this day. He describes this focus as “a new approach to genre: a move beyond the textual quality of the films to study how such films were marketed and what that reveals about studio policy toward genre products.”¹⁶⁴ When brought together, these respective foci on filmic conventions, critical analysis, and economic factors come closer to a broad approach to understanding science-fiction cinema.

Iconography and Conventions of Science-Fiction Cinema

Despite the innumerable works on the genre, scholars have yet to settle on a consistent definition of science-fiction cinema. Johnston notes that even the American Film Institute’s (AFI) definition, “a genre that marries a scientific or technological premise with imaginative speculation,” is problematic in its very selective criterion that excludes by definition many science fiction classics.¹⁶⁵ While a definition could be based on the basic criteria of a science-fiction film, this becomes difficult when considering the endless variety of settings and tropes spread across science-fiction films. Vivian Sobchack notes that while genres like a Western and gangster film can be relegated to the respective settings of the frontier and the city, science fiction is “a genre which is unfixed

¹⁶⁴ Johnston, 3. An unconscionable omission from Johnston’s analysis on science fiction marketing is any mention of the importance of science fiction in international markets in the present age.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid., 23.

in its dependence on actual time and/or place.”¹⁶⁶ Outer space is often associated with science fiction (*Star Wars*), but it is not a location exclusive to the genre (*Apollo 13* takes place in space, but is considered a drama), nor is it necessary for a film’s classification as science fiction (*Robocop* is considered science fiction, but never incorporates the idea of outer space). Additionally, Sobchack notes that iconography used in science-fiction cinema is used as a blank slate, with no inherent meaning beyond the one assigned by the filmmakers. A space ship might be a common occurrence in sci-fi cinema, but its meaning can range from a hopeful vessel to alien threat, depending on the needs of the filmmakers.¹⁶⁷

Despite these obstacles to a systematic classification of science-fiction conventions, certain iconography can be identified when the genre itself is divided into different categories. J.P. Telotte does this in his work *Science Fiction Film*, using literary theorist Tzvetan Todorov’s divisions of “the fantastic” as a framework for categorizing science-fiction film. These divisions include “the marvelous,” defined by Telotte as those films dealing with the celestial and alien beings from beyond the human world; “the fantastic,” relating to “the possibility of changes in society in culture, wrought by our science and technology;” and “the uncanny,” which delves into technological alterations of the self.¹⁶⁸ Of all of these categories, “the fantastic” is the most appropriate

¹⁶⁶ Sobchack, 64-66.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 68-75. This follows Rick Altman’s approach to film genre, in which the semantic of a genre (the spaceship) is combined with the syntactic approach of the filmmaker (for example, the domesticated ordinariness of the Pan Am space flight in *2001: A Space Odyssey*). See “A Semantic/Syntactic Approach to Film Genre,” in *Film Genre Reader IV* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2012), 27-41.

¹⁶⁸ Telotte, 11-14.

characterization of *Looper*, given the film's focus on a possible future (2044) in relation to a potentially dangerous technological innovation (time travel).

Of primary importance in the analysis of a “fantastic” science-fiction text is the way the film combines the sub-genre's specific iconography and the narrative conventions of science-fiction cinema at large. The iconography of the “fantastic” subgenre, utopia and dystopia, are concepts pinpointed by Telotte as the hallmarks of the subgenre. These icons are a part of a larger narrative convention in science fiction in which the everyday sights of the contemporary are appropriated for a portrayal of the possible future. This convention was identified and labeled by Sobchack in *Screening Space* as “alienation of the familiar.” For any utopia or dystopia to resonate with an audience, they must be grounded in the reality of the contemporary. Therefore, in a “fantastic” film like *Looper*, utopia/dystopia and “alienation of the familiar” are interwoven and incorporated into a science-fiction narrative.

Utopia can be described as the imagined perfect society in which every citizen is orderly, prosperous, and content. French philosopher Paul Ricoeur defines utopia as “the imaginary project of another kind of society, of another reality, another world”¹⁶⁹ Ricoeur notes that this definition can be interchanged with countless variations of governmental, religious, or societal change, depending on the society which imagines the utopia. A dystopia, on the other hand, is described by anthropologist Li Zhang as “utopia

¹⁶⁹ Paul Ricoeur, “Ideology and Utopia as Cultural Imagination,” in *Being Human in a Technological Age*, eds. Dolad. M. Borchert and David Stewart (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 1979), 118-119.

that has gone wrong,” in which society lacks prosperity, structure, and integrity.¹⁷⁰

While dystopias have as much theoretical variety as utopias, Zhang notes that dystopias are “often manifested in an imagined or future society completely controlled by an oppressive and corrupt government, or by forces of technologies beyond the original intention of human designers.”¹⁷¹ While its original usage dates back to as early as 1818, the imagery of dystopia became prevalent in the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century industrial age, during which cities grew increasingly large and destitute. The reflections of future society’s greatest potentials, juxtaposed with its lowest depths, encompass importance of utopia and dystopia.

In the world of science fiction, utopia and dystopia are never far removed from each other. J.P. Telotte identifies utopia and dystopia as the hallmark iconography of “fantastic” science fiction. Taking note of the long literary tradition of utopias and dystopias in works ranging from Plato’s *Republic* to Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World*, Telotte argues that “such utopian and dystopian works typically reveal two basic principles at their core.”¹⁷² These principles, appropriated from philosopher Lewis Mumford, are the criticism of the civilization that served as the background of the utopia/dystopia, along with “uncovering potentialities that the existing institutions either ignored or buried beneath an ancient crust of custom and habit.”¹⁷³ This tradition can be seen in the false utopic and dystopic reflections of post-war Germany in Fritz Lang’s *Metropolis* (1927), Thatcher-era Great Britain in Terry Gilliam’s *Brazil* (1985), and (the

¹⁷⁰ Li Zhang, “Postsocialist Urban Dystopia?” in *Noir Urbanisms: Dystopic Images of the Modern City*, ed. Gyan Prakesh (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 128.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 128.

¹⁷² Telotte, 125.

¹⁷³ Lewis Mumford, quoted in Telotte, 125.

subject of Telotte's analysis) Nixon-era American culture in George Lucas' *THX 1138* (1971).

While utopia and dystopia are hallmarks of Telotte's "fantastic" sub-genre, they fit into the traditional reflection of a society so prevalent in science fiction cinema at large. Keith M. Johnson argues that there is often an attempt in science fiction to create a universe "that is firmly rooted in contemporary understanding."¹⁷⁴ For a film to be believable, even in a space opera such as *Star Wars*, it has to be set within a universe sharing some similarities to our own, or audiences will not relate with the story. These similarities include aliens speaking English, the appearance of gravity in space, and even similarities in surroundings (i.e, an alien planet looking like Earth). It is this latter characteristic that Sobchack identifies as "the alienation of the familiar," in which filmmakers take familiar landmarks and landscapes and appropriate them into the alien of science fiction.¹⁷⁵ The primary examples provided by Sobchack are literally "alien" terrains, such as an American desert posing as Mars for *Robinson Crusoe on Mars* (1964).¹⁷⁶ Nonetheless, Sobchack does not limit herself to these parameters in describing less literal "alienations":

The same visual tension can be found in those SF films which are literally grounded, films which because of budgetary limitations and/or story line do not leave the Earth and its familiar terrain for distant galaxies, films which cannot or choose not to manufacture a totally alien environment or depend on elaborate special effects and creative machinery for their visual

¹⁷⁴ Johnston, 14.

¹⁷⁵ Sobchack, 107-110.

¹⁷⁶ Ibid., 108.

evocation of the unknown. These films, starting from home base and the familiar, strive not to bring us down to Earth, but to remove us from it in various ways, at the same time we remain visually grounded.¹⁷⁷

Sobchack's elaboration provides a concrete link not only between a dystopic future and an alienated familiar, but the way that off-screen production realities affect the reality portrayed on-screen. Alienation of the familiar thus provides a lens for understanding the importance of how these two realities relate to each other in the production of *Looper*.

Such conventions are a part of a larger Hollywood tradition of crafting clear, linear narratives that appeal to mass audiences. Dating back to the early days of the Hollywood studio system, these narrative conventions continue to be appropriated by mainstream American cinema, especially in genre films. Labeled as the "Classical Hollywood Narrative," these films feature "psychologically defined individuals who struggle to solve a clear-cut problem or to attain specific goals. In the course of this struggle, the characters enter into conflict with others or with external circumstances. The story ends with a decisive victory or defeat, a resolution of the problem and a clear achievement or nonachievement of the goals."¹⁷⁸ It is due to the success of this narrative style that genre films have always been the best-performing Hollywood products in international markets.¹⁷⁹ This legacy can be seen in Hollywood's continued domination of international markets in the "Age of the Blockbuster," a period that began in the late 1970s with the international success of genre hybrids like *Jaws* (1975) and *Star Wars* that

¹⁷⁷ Ibid., 108.

¹⁷⁸ David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), 157.

¹⁷⁹ Thomas Schatz, *Hollywood Genres* (Boston: McGraw Hill, 1981), 6.

reaped massive box office rewards for studios.¹⁸⁰ The blockbuster age continues to this day through the unprecedented international success of science fiction films such as *Avatar* (2009), the *Transformers* franchise, and *Iron Man 3* (2013). When considering that all of the Hollywood-Chinese co-productions that have been genre pictures, along with the multitude of science fiction films not identifying as co-productions filming on-location in China, the importance of *Looper*'s identification as science fiction cannot be overstated.

Science Fiction as a Cultural Reflection

Science fiction has an established tradition of mirroring the culture from which it originates, and many film scholars picked up on these reflections in their analyses. A few noteworthy examples include Susan Sontag's landmark reflection on the function and need for destruction in 1950s science-fiction cinema,¹⁸¹ Telotte's aforementioned analysis of *THX 1138* against 1970s United States,¹⁸² and religious scholar Douglas Cowan's characterization of 1950s United States' religious identity in *The War of the Worlds*.¹⁸³ Nonetheless, analysis of science fiction as a cultural reflection is problematic for many scholars. One of the primary objections is that given the multitude of factors that go into the production of a commercial film, the on-screen depiction can often be explained by

¹⁸⁰ Thomas Schatz, "The New Hollywood," in *Film Theory Goes to the Movies*, eds. Jim Collins, Hilary Radner, and Ava Collins (New York: Routledge, 1993), 24-25.

¹⁸¹ Susan Sontag, "The Imagination of Disaster," in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York, Dell, 1966).

¹⁸² Telotte, 123-141.

¹⁸³ Douglas Cowan, *Sacred Space: The Quest for Transcendence in Science Fiction Film and Television* (Waco, TX: Baylor University Press, 2010), 105-138.

commercial or industrial factors.¹⁸⁴ This viewpoint is expanded upon by Johnston, who knows that “while such readings are tempting, they tend to rely on a series of false assumptions.”¹⁸⁵ These false assumptions include the film’s ability to reflect the opinions of everyone in a society, that every audience will take the same meaning, and that all science-fiction films from a certain time period reflect the same attitudes.¹⁸⁶ Critics of analyzing science fiction as a cultural reflection will note that for every science-fiction film with a social criticism, there is a science-fiction film from the same period with a contrary message, or a film from a previous age with a similar message.

Such concerns about a culturally reflective critical approach are well-founded, and should be addressed in any cultural criticism of science fiction cinema. It is also in these concerns that the unique textual context of *Looper* is revealed. *Looper* is a Chinese-Hollywood co-production, a factor that directly led to the choice of filming in Shanghai and the casting of Chinese actors. The fact that the film’s producers consciously chose this financial strategy directly plays into American cultural fears about a growing Chinese hegemony. The commercial and industrial factors are therefore not a hindrance, since I argue that they contribute to the film’s reflection of future Chinese dominance. Additionally, while it is true that every film is open to multiple interpretations, this correlation with commercial interests (the PRC co-funded *Looper* through government-sponsored tax subsidies) and on-screen portrayal (the China of *Looper* is shown in a positive light) circumvents many of Johnston’s concerns about the analysis of reflection. Additionally, using the representative anecdote lens allows for a

¹⁸⁴ Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace* (London, UK: Wallflower Press, 2000), 13.

¹⁸⁵ Johnston, 29.

¹⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

clear boundary in the generalization of the analysis, since *Looper* is situated as representative of one type of cultural discourse without assuming it reflects all voices involved. That *Looper* is a part of a larger trend of genre and science-fiction pictures being financed by and/or filmed in China to take advantage of the Chinese market furthers the legitimacy of genre analysis in the understanding of *Looper*'s significance.

Method

The purpose of this thesis is to analyze *Looper* as illustrative of a larger cultural discourse of American apprehension towards China. To accomplish this, I will use Barry Brummett's appropriation of Kenneth Burke's "representative anecdote" to show U.S. cultural apprehension towards China. *Looper*'s status as a science-fiction film is crucial to such an analysis, given the genre's tradition of reflecting aspects of the society from which it was produced, and the mass appeal that science fiction holds with international audiences to this day. Additionally, the identity of *Looper* as what J.P. Telotte defined as "the fantastic" science fiction is also vital to a textual understanding of *Looper*. As established by Telotte, the traditional iconography associated with "the fantastic" is utopia and dystopia, in which a society's greatest hopes and fears about the future are projected on-screen. This iconography directly relates to "the subversion of the familiar," a narrative function identified by Vivian Sobchack as used in science fiction at large, in which images familiar to the viewer are subverted in subtle ways to create an alien or futuristic landscape.

It is the film's appropriation of utopia/dystopia and the subversion of the familiar that will be of primary focus in the analysis of *Looper*. How the film uses utopia,

dystopia, and subversion of the familiar is the key to understanding its reflection of American cultural apprehension towards China. Ultimately, this analysis will be done while taking into account the film's status as a co-production, and how the circumstances of the production led to the on-screen portrayal that reflects this cultural apprehension. The analysis will consist of the following: first, a rhetorical close viewing of the text, in which *Looper* is analyzed as a single rhetorical act. Following this groundwork, I establish *Looper* as part of the science-fiction genre. Next, the film will be established as a part of the "fantastic" subgenre; this step will involve looking at the ways in which utopia and dystopia appear and are used by the film's narrative. Once the utopia and dystopia of *Looper* are identified and analyzed, the film's usage of the "alienation of the familiar" will be analyzed, tying the film's science-fiction universe to the context of the real world. In all, I will argue that these factors reinforce American cultural apprehensions towards China.

CHAPTER 4

ANALYSIS

Nearly twenty minutes into *Looper* (2012), there is a sequence in which the main character Joe (Joseph Gordon-Levitt) is grilled by his boss Abe (Jeff Daniels). Abe is from the future, sent back to run the Loopers for criminal bosses who send their enemies back in time to be killed and disposed of. Abe says he knows that Joe saves half of the silver he earns, planning for the future, “studying up [his] Mandarin.” When Joe corrects him that he is practicing French, Abe is incredulous:

“Why the fuck French?”

“I’m going to France.”

“You should go to China.”

“I’m going to France.”

“*I’m from the future.* You should go to China.”

This seemingly throwaway exchange, unrelated to the main topic of conversation, demonstrates the crux of the film’s relationship with the United States, China, and the possible future. Up until that point, the primary location of the film, an unnamed city in

Kansas, is a city in ruins. Homeless people overrun the streets, while Abe controls the city with little effort. This line by Abe is the first mention of China in the film, hinting at a society of such unhindered progress that a young man of means would be crazy not to travel there. This promise comes to fruition in the later scenes filmed in Shanghai, with the Chinese metropolis providing a near utopic juxtaposition with its American counterpart.

For *Looper* to appeal to both Chinese and American audiences with such a contrast requires a delicate balancing act, one only possible through science fiction. The portrayal is tied directly to the genre, providing a reflection of the present through the distancing lens of a possible future. The real-life tensions between the United States and China in *Looper* are depicted through the “fantastic” science-fiction subgenre conventions of utopia and dystopia. Contributing to this depiction is the science-fiction cinematic concept of the “alienation of the familiar” and how it connects the on-screen tensions with the off-screen production details. Before either of these can be analyzed within the text of *Looper*, the film must first be established as a science-fiction film.

Looper as Science-Fiction

Establishing *Looper* as science fiction is both necessary and problematic. On the one hand, the film’s textual significance is tied directly to its status as a science-fiction film, making classification an essential first step. However, the classification of a film as belonging to any genre runs the risk of regressing into a mundane process of checking off of a predetermined list of generic conventions. The specific process of classifying science fiction is especially challenging when considering the fundamental plasticity of

the genre and its constant evolution over time. While a list of *Looper*'s science-fiction attributes (time travel, futuristic guns, characters with telekinesis, etc.) could be compiled, this list would neither be authoritative of the genre nor make for engaging analysis.

Compounding these challenges is the trend of genre hybridity; films combining the conventions of multiple genres, whose popularity emerged in the 1970s and endures to this day. In addition to retaining characteristics of science fiction, *Looper* also fits the description of a gangster movie. Similarities to the gangster genre include its narrative structure,¹⁸⁷ its primarily urban setting, its portrayal of the corrupting forces of city life, and appearance of gangster iconography, like “the nightclub” “guns” and “automobiles.”¹⁸⁸ The process of categorizing *Looper* as science fiction is further challenged by this parallel categorization as a gangster film. As we will see with *Looper*, the film's narrative function as science fiction is more important than its exclusive categorization as a sci-fi film.

¹⁸⁷ The narrative strategy used by *Looper* matches Thomas Schatz's “rite of order,” which he identifies as commonly associated with Western, gangster, and detective films. In such a narrative, “an individual male protagonist, generally a redeemer figure, who is the focus of dramatic conflicts...translated into violence, usually resolved through the elimination of some threat to social order...The hero, either through his departure or death at film's end, does not assimilate the values and lifestyle of his community but instead maintains his individuality.” In *Hollywood Genres* (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 1981), 34-35.

¹⁸⁸ All of these icons are listed as associated with the gangster genre in Vivian Sobchack's *Screening Space: The American Science Fiction Film*, 2nd ed. (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1987), 66.

Establishing *Looper* as science fiction provides what J.P. Telotte calls “a safe aesthetic distance”¹⁸⁹ between its American audience and the contemporary socio-political rise of China. Inextricably tied to science fiction, this distance would also allow the film’s Sino-centric future to appeal to a Chinese audience as fantasy. If the film is not science fiction, the rise of China would be seen as contemporary reality, rather than as a “possible” future. *Looper*’s status as a multi-genre hybrid is inconsequential as long as the film establishes this distance from reality. Thus, despite its hybrid genre status, *Looper* still fits within the boundaries of science-fiction cinema because it differentiates from the contemporary, primarily through its setting in the future and its treatment of time travel in the opening sequences.

The film opens with Joe standing in a field, listening to French conjugation on his ear buds. After checking his pocket watch, Joe takes out his ear buds and picks up a shotgun-like device. A man suddenly materializes from nowhere, on his knees, hands tied behind his back, bag over his head, screaming. Joe fires the gun (we later learn this is a “blunderbuss,” a futuristic weapon that cannot miss from fifteen yards out), killing the man instantly, with Joe acting as if this is business as usual. Following the opening scene and the subsequent title scroll, the caption “2044” appears as Joe establishes the setting in the narration: “Time travel has not yet been invented,” Joseph Gordon-Levitt’s character claims, “but thirty years from now, it will have been.” He further explains that it is instantly outlawed, and thus used only by powerful criminal organizations when they want someone dead.

¹⁸⁹ J.P. Telotte, *Science Fiction Film* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 130.

This crucial opening two minutes of the film immerses the viewer in a world vastly different than the present. The audience can deduce that if time travel is invented in the future, than Joe's victim was sent back from the future to be killed. The established time also produces a multilayered timeline: the film takes place in the future, but the invention of time travel is still thirty years away. Rather than simply place the primary timeline in the present, the filmmakers chose to completely immerse the film in the future. Had they simply set the primary narrative of the film in the present, as in *The Terminator* (1984) or *Back to the Future* (1985), the portrayal of the United States and China would not be a possible future but rather a contemporary reality, with China as the civilization of *today* rather than tomorrow. A contemporary reality in which the United States is no longer the hegemonic power is a far more drastic shift than a future in which that power has eroded over time.

The utility of time travel in *Looper* is just as important as the distance from the present that the film's narrative creates. Time travel is one of the hallmark conventions of science fiction, dating as far back as H.G. Wells' 1895 novel *The Time Machine*. Narratives involving time travel appear in many prominent science-fiction films, including *The Time Machine* (1960), *Planet of the Apes* (1968), *The Terminator*, *Back to the Future*, *Twelve Monkeys* (1995), and the most recent incarnation of *Star Trek* (2009). Vivian Sobchack specifically identifies it as a genre icon, interchangeable with the space ship as the designated mode of transportation in science-fiction cinema.¹⁹⁰ The very nature of time travel plays into the conventions of science fiction, with scientific principles combined with elements of the "fantastic" to create a potential technology.

¹⁹⁰ Sobchack, 75.

Despite its strong ties to science fiction, the concept of time travel has been stretched beyond its traditional film parameters in recent years. Film scholar Keith M. Johnston accounts for this recent trend, noting that time travel films like “*The Lake House*, *The Time Traveller’s Wife*, *The Butterfly Effect* (2004), *Next* (2007), and *Déjà Vu* (2006) combine science-fiction conventions with those of the romance, teen-pic, action and thriller movie genres.”¹⁹¹ This trend is especially evident in romance films, with more recent works like *About Time* (2013) and *Winter’s Tale* (2014) further weakening time travel’s ties to science fiction. Such a prolific development demonstrates that simply featuring time travel as a narrative convention is not enough to ensure sole categorization as science fiction.

Rather than point to time travel as evidence in itself of the film’s science-fiction status, it is therefore important to demonstrate how time travel’s presence in the narrative furthers the distance from the present. This distancing begins in the opening sequence; Joe assassinating his first time travel target is the first act the viewer sees. Through both the on-screen act of time traveling and the omniscient narration, the viewer is presented with time travel as a reality, rather than a disruption of the otherwise normal status quo. This time-travel-as-reality sets the stage for conflict later in the film, when Joe is encountered by his future self (Bruce Willis) and fails to assassinate him, or “close his loop.” It also establishes a reality for the viewer that is clearly differentiated from that of the present. Even in the future (2044), time travel is still thirty years from fruition (2074), rather than emerging from the past or present (before or in 2012).

¹⁹¹ Keith M. Johnston, *Science Fiction Film: A Critical Introduction* (New York: Berg, 2011), 110.

A noteworthy factor in the narration is a refusal to explain how time travel was invented. Though it could be argued that not establishing the science of time travel hurts its status as science fiction, there is a tradition within the genre of using time travel as a vessel for narrative convenience. Sobchack establishes this in her description of the possible uses of the spaceship in science fiction, which she later establishes in *Screening Space* as interchangeable with time machines.

The spaceship need not, however, be treated either positively or negatively. In numerous SF films, it is seen and used neutrally; its wonders are deemphasized visually, made to seem commonplace, accepted not only by the characters but by the camera as well—matter-of-factly. The ship is merely a means to get from here to there—and has about as little visual impact or iconic power as a Greyhound bus.¹⁹²

This “matter-of-fact” portrayal of time travel is seen in its appearance in the opening sequence, and in the actual appearance of the time machine. When the film later shows the older Joe entering the time machine, it is portrayed in very minimalist terms: a large metal sphere situated in an abandoned industrial factory.¹⁹³ While it is primarily used as a force of evil (used by crime bosses for killing), this scene is the only on-screen appearance of the device. The film spends no time pondering the morality of time travel,

¹⁹² Sobchack, 71.

¹⁹³ In the Blu-ray commentary, director Rian Johnson says he meant the time machine device to resemble the design of atomic bomb at the Trinity test site. Rian Johnson and Joseph Gordon-Levitt, *Looper*, directed by Johnson (2012; Culver City, CA: Sony Pictures Home Entertainment, 2012), Blu-ray.

using it primarily to progress the narrative.¹⁹⁴ This function of time travel places the film within what literary scholar William J. Burling labels the “temporal contrast form” of time-travel narratives. Contrasted with the “temporal dislocation form,” which focuses on the actual machinations and puzzles of time travel, the temporal contrast form creates a sci-fi universe that “*emphasizes not an abstractly scientific mediation on the “how” of time travel, but rather a dynamic historical critique.*”¹⁹⁵ Burling notes that this historical critique sets up the possibility of portrayals of utopia and dystopia. In addition to reemphasizing the science fiction of *Looper*, this narrative function of time travel further sets up the historical reflection of Telotte’s “fantastic” subgenre.

Looper’s setting in the future provides its American audience distance from the contemporary, allowing the film’s portrayal of China to be seen within the comfortable boundaries of a possible future. The film’s narrative function of time travel furthers this alternative universe, while laying the groundwork for the film’s function as representative anecdote to apprehensions about the present. These factors establish the film as a work of science fiction, with its possible characterization as a sci-fi/gangster hybrid providing no hindrance to this classification. In addition to establishing this classification as science fiction, the future setting and portrayal of a technological innovation places it within a sub-classification of sci-fi. *Looper* falls within the boundaries of J.P. Telotte’s “fantastic” subgenre, which he describes as dealing with “the possibility of changes in

¹⁹⁴ Writer-director Rian Johnson admits as much in the Blu-ray commentary, stating that “the movie is really not about time travel” and that he tried to write it into the story “so the audience isn’t having to process the rules of it the whole time.” Johnson and Gordon-Levitt, *Looper*, directed by Johnson, Blu-ray.

¹⁹⁵ William J. Burling, “Reading Time: The Ideology of Time Travel in Science Fiction,” *KronoScope* 6, no. 1 (May 23, 2006), 12. Emphasis his.

society in culture, wrought by our science and technology.”¹⁹⁶ Utopia and dystopia, the hallmark iconography of this subgenre, is the key to understanding the film’s portrayal of the United States and China. How *Looper* plays with the conventions of utopia and dystopia reveals not only how the film acts as a “representative anecdote” of American cultural apprehensions towards China, but also how such a film can maintain cross-cultural appeal between the two nations.

Looper as a “Fantastic” Text

For as large of a role that the country eventually played in the film’s production, it may be surprising that the original screenplay for *Looper* makes no mention of China. Rian Johnson’s initial draft called for his main character to travel to France, and the writer-director of the film was faced with the daunting task of making New Orleans pass for Paris due to budgetary restrictions. It was in pre-production that the American producers were offered an alternative by DMG Entertainment, the film’s Chinese distributor: shoot part of the movie in China and the film can be subsidized as a co-production. Johnson ultimately agreed with the script change, resulting in two separate American and Chinese audience versions of the film, both featuring Shanghai. He notes that while he initially rejected the idea, “the more I thought about it, the more I thought, you know what, in some weird way, it actually makes sense if it takes place in China.”¹⁹⁷

Though Johnson does not elaborate beyond this vague qualification, one reason that the

¹⁹⁶ Telotte, 11-14.

¹⁹⁷ Jordan Zakarin, “How Hollywood’s Obsession with China May Change Movies Forever,” *BuzzFeed Entertainment*, May 12, 2013, accessed February 12, 2014, <http://www.buzzfeed.com/jordanzakarin/how-hollywoods-obsession-with-china-may-change-movies-foreve>.

script change “makes sense” is the Chinese-American socioeconomic tension, and how it would enhance the imagery of American decline already present in the script.

Looper portrays a future affected by science and technological innovation. In this respect, it falls under the subgenre of “fantastic” science fiction, a term appropriated from theorist Tzvetan Todorov by science-fiction analyst J.P. Telotte.¹⁹⁸ Using the threat of a potential future to comment on the present, members of this subgenre include films such as *Metropolis* (1927), *THX 1138* (1971), *Brazil* (1985), and *The Matrix* (1999). Telotte is clear to denote the necessity of creating a separate universe from our own in order to comment on the contemporary. “Simply put,” he argues, “the fantastic texture of these...films typically seems to indicate at every turn a troubled relationship with the real. Our questionings of society thus often become bound up with an unspoken suspicion about reality itself.”¹⁹⁹ For Telotte, these questions are embodied in the portrayal of utopia and dystopia on-screen, and the implications these utopic/dystopic portrayals have on the reality of the present.

“Fantastic” science fiction is obsessed with utopic and dystopic portrayals of the future. These portrayals often show a utopic life for some with a dystopic existence for some in the same city (*Metropolis*), while others are unflinchingly pessimistic in their portrayal of a dystopic future (*Brazil*). Still others toy with “false utopias,” featuring future societies which appear to be content and happy on the surface, but which hide a dark secret (*The Matrix*). *Looper* is a distinctive addition to the “fantastic” subgenre through its portrayal of two separate civilizations, one utopia and one dystopia, in a single

¹⁹⁸ Telotte, 11-14.

¹⁹⁹ Telotte, 126.

vision of the future. The unnamed city in Kansas, combined with the surrounding countryside, is the dystopia of the film. Presented as a utopic alternative to this dystopia is Shanghai, with the city standing as the representative of China in the film. The imagery used for each location reflects apprehensions many in the United States hold towards American decline and Chinese ascension. As it was created within the universe of a science-fiction film sufficiently separated from our own, *Looper* offers both of these portrayals without fear of cultural slight.

Dystopia

The first minutes of *Looper* take place in rural Kansas, with the film following Joe as he navigates cane fields, a derelict power plant, and a solitary diner in his work as an assassin of targets from the future, or a Looper. After about three minutes, Joe drives his truck towards a tremendous metropolis in the distance. The skyline from the distance features multiple skyscrapers, with one resembling an even more colossal version of Chicago's Willis Tower.²⁰⁰ The following shot framed within the city itself: futuristic-looking skyscrapers, hologram billboards, a low-flying helicopter, and double-layered lattices that appear to be massive elevated highways.

Any initial hope of a bright future for this unnamed American city is dashed by the next shot, which pans down to the ground-level to reveal a disheveled man brandishing a shotgun, camps of homeless people on the side of the road, and a pawn shop. An off-screen street preacher can be heard, imploring anyone listening to repent to Jesus. The initial wide shot of hope is quickly brought down by the desolation on the

²⁰⁰ Formerly known as the Sears Tower.

street. When Joe is driving his car through the chaos, disheveled men, women, and children crowd the streets, some living in tents and abandoned cars. Filmed on-location in New Orleans, these scenes provide the viewer with a view of a universe of urban decay. In one memorable tracking shot, a young man in a hood attempts to steal a bag from a man standing next to a broken-down school bus. The victim immediately pulls a shotgun from under the hood of the bus, shooting the thief in the back as he runs away. While the people on the street react in mild surprise, Joe does not even bother to slow down in his convertible. Later in the film, Joe speeds his convertible through the city streets while high on drugs, barely stopping before hitting a dirty young child in the middle of the street clutching a soccer ball. Such despondency is presented as commonplace for 2044.

Far from limiting the dystopia to the city limits, the film extends the chaos into the countryside. Later in the film, as Joe is hiding out from his criminal syndicate who hunt him for letting his older self run free, Sara (Emily Blunt), the woman who eventually takes Joe in, initially mistakes him for a vagabond trespassing on her farmland. “I have shot and buried three vagrants in the past year,” she warns him as she brandishes a shotgun, “so I don’t care what hobo sob story you got, I get a dozen a week pal, it cuts no cash with me.” The threat turns out to be a bluff, but the prevalence of homelessness is a real threat. Later in the film, Sara’s son Cid (Pierce Gagnon) describes a recent past when things were direr: “My granddad built this tunnel when the vagrant raids got bad,” Cid tells Joe as they explore a shelter below the farm. Again, the description of violence without the presence of law is described as routine, with a recent

point in the past when matters took a turn for the worse. These descriptions further emphasize the dystopic reality of the film's future.

While most Americans in the future are either homeless or struggling to protect what is theirs, the gangsters of the film are the only ones who thrive. Crime boss Abe holds court in a vault-like room in the basement of a burlesque nightclub called La Belle Aurore.²⁰¹ The only time any police show up in the film is when Abe calls them to his club during a crisis. Abe's henchmen, the "gat men," and his loopers are shown to be very well paid and dressed. Joe himself has an impressive loft apartment with appliances, a floor safe, and a parking garage to house his convertible. Like the rest of the loopers, Joe is paid with four bars of silver for every target from the future that he kills. At one of Abe's pawn shops, he is given the option to turn in his silver for hard currency. That the currency is the Chinese renminbi (with Chairman Mao's face gracing the bill) reemphasizes the lack of governmental infrastructure in America, while alluding to Chinese economic dominance.

A portrait of America with casual killings on Main Street and Chinese currency holding sway is extreme. However big an exaggeration it may be, though, it is one based on the image of post-industrial ruin in America. The abandoned buildings, mass poverty, and vagrancy are as present in American perceptions of the "rust belt" as they are on-screen in *Looper*. Examples of this can be found in Detroit, Michigan, with entire neighborhoods that have been left to the elements, and Braddock, Pennsylvania, where

²⁰¹ The name is taken from the Paris café in the film *Casablanca* (1942).

the population is reduced to 10% of its population at its peak.²⁰² The abandoned industrial building used in the film to house the incinerator Joe uses to dispose of bodies is particularly reminiscent. Rusted, overgrown, and graffiti-strewn, the location is described by Rian Johnson as an abandoned power plant in New Orleans. Johnson also notes that the location was hardly even altered by the production team; a convenient on-location example of industrial decay.²⁰³ The city in Kansas of *Looper* is a product of science fiction, but one which plays into what Telotte labeled the “unspoken suspicions” of our reality. For a reality of an American dystopia relying on Chinese currency to maintain plausibility, it must at least be rooted in the suspicion of American decline, and of Chinese ascension.

Utopia

There is a sequence thirty minutes into *Looper* that provides a glimpse of what thirty years into the future might look like. Titled “A Life in a Day,” it provides an alternate timeline in which Joe succeeds in killing his older self, followed by a montage of how he moves on with his life. The sequence lasts less than three minutes, and chronicles Joe intensifying his drug habit, squandering his fortune, and eventually returning to a criminal lifestyle. In this sequence, Joe also follows Abe’s advice: he goes to China, finding a country with a very different state of affairs than his own.

Joe is shown to arrive in Shanghai by a shipping freighter. The first shot of Shanghai is a CGI rendering of a cargo ship arriving into a harbor, revealing a bright,

²⁰² Jim Straub and Bret Lieberdorfer, “Braddock, Pennsylvania: Out of the Furnace and into the Fire,” *Monthly Review* 60, no. 7 (December 2008).

²⁰³ Johnson and Gordon-Levitt, *Looper*, directed by Johnson, Blu-ray.

clean-looking skyline of a futuristic city.²⁰⁴ This shot alone draws comparison to the establishing shot of the city in Kansas, and, like that sequence, it cuts to a shot of Joe at the city's ground level. Rather than resembling the desolation of the city in Kansas, however, the ground-level shot of Joe in Shanghai reveals tranquility and order. This shot features a pan of a crowd that includes an old couple walking, a child flying a kite, and young people smiling, peacefully going about their business. The shot ends on Joe looking over another futuristic skyline, with the caption "SHANGHAI" fading in and out of the top right corner of the screen. The on-screen connotation is clear: Shanghai is an orderly, prosperous, and safe city.

The shot that follows this introduction is a brief one of Joe walking down an alley full of Chinese children playing soccer. Walking past, Joe playfully kicks the ball around with them. Aside from a heavy-handed reinforcement of Shanghai's safety, this shot also provides a parallel to the city in Kansas that serves as a reinforcement of Shanghai's relative prosperity. Previously in Kansas, Joe nearly runs over a child holding a soccer ball in the middle of the street. While the Shanghai children are shown playing soccer, Kansas's child is solitary and destitute, his blank stare fixed on Joe. The film's exposition establishes that Joe was once such a child, an orphan criminal taken under the wing of Abe after robbing one of Abe's watch shops. That each city features sequences highlighting the safety level of children establishes a clear parallel, with one city that

²⁰⁴ The original live-action shot, or "plate," from which this CGI shot was rendered was footage of San Francisco Bay. This shot is the only Shanghai exterior that uses another American city: the rest work with footage of China. From Vincent Frei, "Looper: Ryan Tudhope – Co-founder & VFX Supervisor – Atomic Fiction," *Art of VFX*, August 8, 2012, accessed March 1, 2012, <http://www.artofvfx.com/cgi-sys/suspendedpage.cgi?p=3080>.

turns children into criminals, while the other is so safe that they can play in the streets without worry.

There are moments in the Chinese sequence that hint at a reality less than utopic. Scenes following Joe's return to a life of crime are such moments: he is shown blowing up a store front, participating in drive-by shootings, and taking part in a massive bar fight. While potentially diminishing China's status as utopia, these violent acts are framed in a different manner than the violence in Kansas. In the establishing shots of the American city, the viewer is shown a world of violence: the first street-level shot is of a man wielding a shotgun on the open street. The establishing shots of a tranquil Shanghai frame the later scenes of violence as disruptions of a status quo, in which violence comes in from the outside and upsets the utopic balance. This framing of peace first, followed by violence provides Shanghai with an initial status of utopia.

In *Looper*, a prosperous China is shown in direct contrast with a United States lacking the most basic elements of infrastructure. While violence in Shanghai is framed as a violation of the status quo, violence in the city in Kansas is presented as a reality of everyday life. That Joe curiously arrives in Shanghai on a cargo freight ship can be read as symbolic of China's preeminent status as the future center for trade, one where even Chinese renminbi is the accepted currency within American borders. The on-screen portrayal plays into every apprehension expressed on cable news over the rise of China, and op-eds stressing the need to "get tough" with China over currency manipulation.²⁰⁵ *Looper* presents a vision of the future in which many possibilities for the future are

²⁰⁵ Matt Miller, "Who Will Get Tough on China?" *The Washington Post*, July 25, 2012.

determined by the choices made in the present. What is never in Joe’s power to create is a future in which China is not the dominant power.

The change from Paris to China in the script thus “makes sense” from the story perspective because of a preexisting apprehension in the United States towards China’s economic rise. However, there is another reason that the script change “makes sense” that should not be overlooked: a government-subsidized location shoot is an offer difficult to refuse. Along with Louisiana, DMG Entertainment enticed the production of *Looper* with a financial incentive, providing the filmmakers with a choice that would force them to alter their script to accommodate a more financially feasible location. The factors behind this change actually have a precedent in science-fiction cinema, and shed even more light on the economic tensions between the United States and China.

Alienation of the Familiar

The oddity that the cities of New Orleans and Thibodaux, Louisiana respectively substitute for the city and countryside of Kansas was not lost on everyone. Mike Scott of the New Orleans *Times-Picayune* highlighted the irony, calling the production choice “safe to say—a first.”²⁰⁶ The location choice was also not without complications to the original story line. The original script called for a farmhouse with a barn and a cornfield, all of which are in short supply in Louisiana. On the Blu-ray commentary, Rian Johnson discusses how the production team found out that a “traditional Midwestern” farmhouse was not usually found in Louisiana; the house used had to be modified, the barn built by

²⁰⁶ Mike Scott, “‘Looper’ Once More Highlights New Orleans’ Knack for Doubling as Other Cities On-Screen,” *The Times-Picayune Greater New Orleans*, October 1, 2012, http://www.nola.com/movies/index.ssf/2012/10/new_orleans_knack_for_doubling.html.

the production team from scratch.²⁰⁷ Additionally, with little corn to be found, the script changed the farm's crop to sugar cane,²⁰⁸ begging the additional (and unanswered) question of where one would find sugar cane fields in Kansas. Issues of location shooting in Louisiana are linked with the location in China in the latest in a long tradition of altering the landscape to match a science-fiction universe.

In her initial formulation of her concept “alienation of the familiar,” Vivian Sobchack describes science-fiction productions that lacked the funding to create their own alien landscapes in studios, and were therefore forced to recreate it in the everyday. “These films,” Sobchack describes, “starting from home base and the familiar, strive not to bring us down to Earth, but to remove us from it in various ways, at the same time we remain visually grounded.”²⁰⁹ In short, it is cheaper to find a Mars in the desert than to create one from scratch. Originally applied to films created in the 1950s and 60s, this principle seems unrelated with contemporary science-fiction cinema, in which computer-generated imagery carries the bulk of the load in creating new worlds. However, unless a science-fiction film is entirely computer generated in-studio, on-location filmmaking is still required in order to “visually ground” a science-fiction universe.

The concept of alienation of the familiar in science-fiction cinema is historically tied to the considerable financial costs of creating an alien or future world. In modern filmmaking, this concept can be directly connected to the allure of tax subsidies offered by U.S. states or foreign nations. How these locations are chosen not only affects the on-screen formulation of that future world, but also reflects the contemporary economic

²⁰⁷ Johnson and Gordon-Levitt, *Looper*, directed by Johnson, Blu-ray.

²⁰⁸ Scott.

²⁰⁹ Sobchack, 108.

realities of those locations. With *Looper*, Sobchack’s alienation of the familiar is applied especially to the locations in which the dystopia and utopia are portrayed: New Orleans, Louisiana and Shanghai, China. The alienation of the familiar operates with both locations through its function in the storyline and the circumstances of the production itself. These alienations of the familiar prove that like a Mars in the desert, it is easier to find a utopia in Shanghai, or a dystopia in New Orleans, than to create either from scratch.

Alienation of the familiar within the storyline

The two primary filming locations in Louisiana were New Orleans, where all of the city scenes were filmed, and Thibodaux, where the majority of the country scenes were shot. The dystopia of New Orleans previously described was accomplished through a dystopic “dressing” of O’Keefe Street, a major intersection in the Central Business District.²¹⁰ Through production-provided graffiti, vehicles, props, and sets, the street was transformed from a bustling avenue to one more lawless and dangerous. In her discussion of the alienation of the familiar, Sobchack delves into the specifics of how cities are “alienated” in science fiction:

There are images in certain SF films...which show us emptiness on a scale which is psychologically as well as visually awesome...When we think of the city, when we see it in “real” life or even in most movies, it is bristling with activity, people, traffic, motion. To see it robbed of that motion

²¹⁰ Johnson and Gordon-Levitt, *Looper*, Blu-ray.

(which is, after all, a visual sign of life) is to see it as something devastatingly strange.²¹¹

In this paragraph, Sobchack refers primarily to post-apocalyptic films in which the city is shown as abandoned, like *I Am Legend* (2007). However, Sobchack’s analysis places an emphasis on the alienation from the expectation of a bustling, active city. When *Looper* puts a city on-screen in which American citizens camp on the side of the road and where homicide is a regular occurrence, the familiar landscape is subverted and alienated as much as it would to show it abandoned. The alterations can be read as an “alienation” of common conceptions of city life, furthering the dystopic reading of this segment of the film.

While the process of alienation of the familiar in Louisiana involved extensive dressing with both practical and computer effects, the process of alienation in Shanghai was much less drastic. The only shot that significantly altered is the ground-level establishing shot of the Shanghai skyline, a shot which combines computer-generated buildings with preexisting ones. While featuring recognizable Shanghai landmarks like the Oriental Pearl Tower and Aurora Plaza, *Looper*’s skyline aligns these buildings alongside artificial constructions, which now connect by walkways nearly as high as the buildings themselves. Other than this shot and a few holograms that show up on street level, Shanghai exteriors are left untouched by computer rendering. That the city is shown largely as it appears today provides the sobering conclusion that Shanghai does not need to be sufficiently “alienated” to look like a city in 2044. The remarkable economic development offered by the post-reform Chinese economy provides Shanghai

²¹¹ Sobchack, 118.

with the necessary futuristic aesthetic, one that was similarly appropriated as representative of the future Los Angeles of the science-fiction film *Her* (2013).²¹²

Looper provides an interesting case in the alienation of the familiar, for the film's "alienation" of the New Orleans cityscape and the production's choice to film there both derive from a position of economic weakness. The result is two vastly different alienations of two cities within a single science-fiction universe. While New Orleans is "dressed" into a dystopic future set in Kansas, Shanghai is given minimal cosmetic work to its already pristine appearance. In both acts of "alienation," the choices of location are related primarily to the economic flexibility of the location.

Alienation of the familiar within the production

The financial context of the choice of filming in New Orleans relates to the tax credit offered by the State of Louisiana to film productions and to the larger trend of state tax credits offered nationwide for film and television production. The state of Louisiana offers a thirty percent tax credit for all in-state expenditures, with no limit on the amount of credits a single production can earn.²¹³ While this credit is on the high end of what is offered by other states, Louisiana is far from alone in this practice, with forty-five other states and Puerto Rico offering similar subsidy packages.²¹⁴ While Hollywood has always looked out for foreign production locations to save money, it is only in the past decade that states have passed laws with the hope of enticing productions through

²¹² Christopher Hawthorne, "Spike Jonze's 'Her' a Refreshingly Original Take on L.A.," *Los Angeles Times*, January 18, 2014.

²¹³ "State Film Production Incentives and Programs," *National Conference of State Legislatures*, accessed March 5, 2014, nsls.org.

²¹⁴ *Ibid.*

financial means. The tax break deals have become increasingly utilized by Hollywood studios, to the point that even films that take place in Hollywood are being outsourced to cheaper locations. One example of this outsourcing occurred recently, when the Southern California-based sci-fi film *Battle Los Angeles* (2011) was filmed in New Orleans.²¹⁵

This trend of tax credits is best understood within the context of post-recession America, in which states desperate to create jobs attempt to make it as convenient as possible for film productions to bring work to their cities. While film productions would once choose to shoot on-location in a state for primarily aesthetic purposes, states beyond California are chosen increasingly for financial reasons. As a result, a “race to the bottom” mentality has developed, with states rushing to pass production tax credits to avoid losing a potential production to a state with one already in place. Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich commented negatively on this race, pointing to a link between income disparity and the “wave of states” offering tax incentives for film and television production.²¹⁶ Such actions provide a more pragmatic perspective on the practice of alienation of the familiar, in which the desire to save money gradually overtakes the desire for finding a location that matches the vision of the science-fiction universe. Given the locations highlighted in the film and described by the director, the logical location shoot for *Looper* would appear to be a city and surrounding countryside in Kansas. Rather than shoot on-location in Kansas City and in the cornfields of Kansas,

²¹⁵ Dave McNary, “Hollywood Continues to Flee California at Alarming Rate,” *Variety*, March 5, 2014, accessed March 5, 2014, <http://variety.com/2014/film/news/even-films-set-in-california-are-shooting-elsewhere-to-save-money-1201125523/>.

²¹⁶ Ted Johnson, “Former Labor Secretary Robert Reich: Production Tax Incentives Create ‘A Race to the Bottom,’” *Variety*, November 19, 2013, accessed March 5, 2014, <http://variety.com/2013/biz/news/robert-reich-former-labor-secretary-says-movie-and-tv-tax-incentives-create-a-race-to-the-bottom-1200856000/>.

the production settled for a dressed-down New Orleans and the cane fields of Thibodaux. While the move likely saved production costs,²¹⁷ the choice of location reveals a production mentality that values cost saving over screen authenticity.

While the methods taken by China to entice filmmakers are similar to Louisiana and other states, their economic reality makes their negotiating position of such deals vastly different. China's burgeoning domestic film market, the wary selectiveness with which the government bureaucracy allows foreign films to be released on their shores, and the potential benefits a co-production status provides a Hollywood film are all outlined in the context chapter. To qualify for co-production status, a film must be co-made by a Chinese production company, feature Chinese cultural elements, and co-star Chinese talent. *Looper* accomplishes all of these, including casting Chinese actress Summer Qing as Bruce Willis' love interest. By categorizing *Looper* as a co-production, the Hollywood production companies receive the benefits of a guaranteed Chinese market release and a bigger cut of the proceeds than if the film were released through China's quota system. The balance of power within this system is distinctive from the U.S., since Hollywood studios need Chinese markets more than the Chinese government needs Hollywood product. It is this situation that gives China leverage to dictate how its locations are utilized on-screen. One need only look at the Chinese scenes to assess the results.

²¹⁷ Kansas also offers a 30% film production tax credit, but caps that credit at 2 million per year, as opposed to Louisiana's unlimited 30%. "Kansas 30% Film Production Tax Credit," *Kansas Department of Commerce Film Commission*, filmkansas.com (accessed March 12, 2014).

Shanghai's on-screen portrayal in *Looper* is so ideal for Chinese self-image that it actually connects with Chinese perceptions of *their own* utopia. Anthropologist Li Zhang notes that after the economic reforms of the 1970s, Mao's vision of a socialist utopia was redefined into one in which every Chinese citizen enjoyed a high standard of living. "In such a society," she writes, "everyone would enjoy a decent standard of living and a measure of comfort. In the early years of economic reform, this vision was highly appealing to Chinese people who were fatigued by endless revolutionary struggles. It became a powerful source of inspiration for the nation to put its energy into economic development and capital accumulation."²¹⁸ This vision of happiness is reflected in general contentedness and prosperity of the populace in the Shanghai scenes of *Looper*. The Chinese in Shanghai are not just shown as happy, but prosperous. The clothes they wear on the street are bright, clean, and stylish. In another scene in the montage, Joe is shown dancing in the middle of a crowded nightclub; the other clubbers have nice hair. Compared to the desperate-looking women waiting in line outside La Belle Aroure in Kansas, the women in the club in Shanghai are supermodels. In addition to enhancing the perception of industrial decline in America, these scenes reflect the self-image that the China Film Group would like to reflect in their co-productions. Regardless of the filmmaker's intent, it is easy to watch the Shanghai scenes and understand why critics accused *Looper* of being an advertisement for China; for the CFG, it was.

Both Louisiana and China were chosen as filming locations for budgetary reasons. Both offered generous tax credits to the production in exchange for filming on-location. The former is a state with aspirations for economic growth through on-location filming,

²¹⁸ Zhang, 130.

while the latter's government aspires to maintain control of Western influence on its own shores. The city of New Orleans provided generous latitude to *Looper*, allowing the production to close down a major street and cover it in graffiti, tents, and vehicles to create an "alienated" urban setting. In Shanghai's "alienation" as a utopic city of the future, very little alteration was even needed to produce the effect. While filming in Louisiana created a temporary source of employment and economic stimulation, Shanghai's appearance brought positive exposure to a fast-growing metropolis, all while allowing the Chinese government to maintain its status of power broker. While New Orleans appears as a double for some city in Kansas, Shanghai appears as Shanghai, China, the place where people from the future say you should go.

Summary

Looper's sci-fi status is crucial to both the film's international appeal and its ability to comfortably project an uncomfortable future. In addition to establishing this science fiction universe, the film's utilization of a not-too-distant future and the invention of time travel in that future to qualify it for Telotte's "fantastic" subgenre. In turn, the film's play on the "fantastic" icons of utopia and dystopia further its reflection of contemporary fears. Presented within the framework of a sci-fi movie, a utopic Shanghai and a dystopic city in Kansas falls within Brummett's criteria for representative anecdote, in which viewers "express their... fears in familiar (and thus manageable) patterns."²¹⁹ A science fiction film featuring China's economic rise is far more palatable than a news story about China surpassing the United States in manufacturing, even though the two stories are essentially the same.

²¹⁹ Brummett, 164.

The film's usage of alienation of the familiar adds to the utopia/dystopia juxtaposition within the narrative, while also connecting this on-screen portrayal with off-screen economic realities. A New Orleans street is remade as a post-industrial nightmare, while the Shanghai skyline is subtly altered to project a unspoiled, prosperous utopia. These location choices and the manner in which they are portrayed are connected to the rising trend of government-subsidized filmmaking within Hollywood. The production team's choices to film in Louisiana and China are both tied to generous tax breaks, but China's stance as the fastest-growing film market in the world provides the People's Republic with an advantageous position of controlling the manner in which their country is portrayed. That Louisiana (and every other state in the U.S.) has no such leverage leaves their landscape to be alienated in any way a Hollywood production like *Looper* sees fit.

In both its production and narrative choices, *Looper* stands as a remarkable text for Sino-American relations. In addition to adding scenes exclusive to the Chinese market, the film's production altered its original script to accommodate filming in Shanghai and to qualify as a co-production. Meanwhile, the narrative is simultaneously an American nightmare and a Chinese dream: a United States so destitute and a China so prosperous that the former accepts the latter's currency as tender. *Looper* stands at the center of an intersection of narrative, commerce, and genre: a film co-produced with the goal to entertain that successfully represents the respective economic fears and hopes of its two national audiences. Regardless of its entertainment value, the film's portrayal of a dystopic United States and a utopic China establishes its tremendous value as a cultural reflection.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The analysis of *Looper* (2012) as representative anecdote of larger cultural apprehensions provides several new insights into how Americans view and deal with the rise of China. The analysis conducted utilizes existing academic lenses in ways that divert from their traditional usage. The research also leaves open several avenues for future study into the issues of Chinese audiences, the production of *Looper*, Sino-Hollywood co-productions, and portrayals of China in American film and television. Overall, the final importance of *Looper* may turn out to be its place on the forefront of a future in which even more portrayals of China depict it as the civilization of the future.

In many respects, the demonstration of *Looper* as a representative anecdote falls within the traditional criteria established by Brummett. In his article on the representative anecdote, Brummett uses the analogy of a television show about unemployment that helps the viewer better cope with the prospect of losing a job.²²⁰ *Looper*'s interaction with American apprehensions towards China operates a similar way. Rather than witness the economic rise of China through cable news or an economic article, it is far easier to cope with this potential rise through the prism of the anecdote.

²²⁰ Brummett, 164.

The same goes with the economic downturn of the United States. While a book on the fall of Detroit might elicit sadness for a once-prosperous city, the ruined city in Kansas equips the viewer to better handle seeing an abandoned American urban landscape first-hand.

While the basic framework of the representative anecdote was unaltered, the means at which to arrive at how that anecdote interacts with its audience is new. I previously noted the rhetorical tradition of utilizing film studies theories to enhance the analysis. While previous analyses of representative anecdotes in film have analyzed an entire film genre,²²¹ none have emphasized generic study as crucial to understanding the anecdote. *Looper* is not the only example of science-fiction cinema to express cultural apprehensions in such a way. Science fiction, particularly within Telotte's "fantastic" subgenre, is rife with examples of futures eerily similar to our own. While there is a long tradition of analyzing these within film studies, it is very possible for further academic works analyzing these films as anecdotes that make it easier to deal with social issues going on at the time of their release.

This thesis also appropriates and expands the theoretical boundaries of science-fiction film scholarship. Within the fantastic subgenre, it was previously noted that it is uncommon for a science-fiction universe to portray a utopia and dystopia separated from each other. More common is a single universe in which the utopia and dystopia are the same city, with each designation depending upon a character's placement in that society. That *Looper* does not follow this pattern adds to the uniqueness of the text, revealing

²²¹ Scarlet L. Wynns and Lawrence B. Rosenfeld, "Father-Daughter Relationships in Disney's Animated Films," *Southern Communication Journal* 68, no. 2 (Winter 2003), 91-106.

another dimension of how that apprehension appears on-screen. Rather than manifesting as a Soviet-esque infiltration of American culture, China is shown as rising by itself, on its own terms, while in a manner detrimental to the survival of the United States. As long as there is an American cultural fear towards China, there will be anecdotal expression of that fear in the media. Expressions of apprehension are also likely to continue in science-fiction film and television. How they manifest themselves, particularly within the “fantastic” subgenre, reveals the exact nature of those apprehensions.

The final generic lens utilized was alienation of the familiar. The concept of alienation of the familiar was conceived by Vivian Sobchack as a way in which low-budget science fiction films from the 1950s through the 1980s took the everyday and turned it into something foreign or futuristic. While the decision to alienate the familiar was sometimes for budgetary reasons, Sobchack’s analysis focused primarily on the aesthetic effects of this alienation.

The analysis of *Looper* goes well beyond the original conception and scope of alienation of the familiar. Firstly, the usage of alienation of the familiar in *Looper* focused primarily on the economic factors, with the aesthetic choices presented as secondary results of the off-screen production choices. Secondly, *Looper* is not a low-budget science-fiction film as they were categorized in the 1950s. While far from the blockbuster-level budgets of a *Star Wars* (1977) or *Avatar* (2009), *Looper* is still a product of a major Hollywood studio, with considerably more resources available than the low-budget, low-tech sci-fi of the 1950s. *Looper* features extensive use of expensive computer-generated imagery, with the CGI often used to enhance the actual alienation, especially in the case of Shanghai.

Despite these considerable differences, *Looper*'s relatively low budget²²² by modern standards, combined with its commitment to on-location filming, separate it from the mega-budgeted, hyper-CGI excesses of films like *Avatar*. As long as a science-fiction film utilizes location filming, there is potential for viewing these locations as acts of alienation of the familiar. With such possibilities in mind, there is a considerable potential for alienation of the familiar to be expanded to account for the current wave of science-fiction films film on-location, especially ones taking advantage of filming tax credits. The transformations of Cleveland into New York for *The Avengers* (2012), and of New Orleans into Southern California for *Battle: Los Angeles* (2011), are two such examples of alienations deserving further analysis. While these alienations are a far cry from the desert-as-Mars examples demonstrated by Sobchack, as long as there is a city altered for a science-fiction universe, there will be potential for analyzing the significance of that alteration.

There are many research areas that can build off of this work. One such area is in the audience reaction towards *Looper*, especially in China. While researching the context, the only gauge for how *Looper* was received in China (other than the box office gross) was the social media website Douban. Comparable to the ratings on the American website IMDB, the ratings and reviews for films on Douban are generated by the users of the website. While the ranking provided by *Looper* (6.7/10) was a helpful signpost, it is not an empirically reliable score for how Chinese audiences received the film. Additionally, the time constraints of the project did not provide enough time to secure reliable translations of a sample of the user-generated reviews. Further research on the

²²² \$30 million, according to "Looper," boxofficemojo.com, accessed July 30, 2013.

reception of *Looper* and other Sino-American co-productions would be augmented by translations of these reviews.

Another area of research that could enhance the conclusions of this thesis is in the details of the production of *Looper*. I utilized Vivian Sobchack's concept of "alienation of the familiar" to emphasize the significance of the production choices in relation to the on-screen portrayal of cultural tensions. The sources on the details of the production were articles in trade publications and websites and audio commentary by the director Rian Johnson. While these sources are reliable, they are only pieces of a larger story of how the film is made. While Johnson's account of why the film moved to China was instrumental in my analysis, further production details on why the decisions that were made were made would shed further light on the dynamic between the Hollywood and Chinese production companies behind the making of *Looper*. Thus, a more comprehensive account of the making of *Looper* and other co-productions is another avenue for exploring the relationship between China and Hollywood.

The scenes filmed and screened exclusively for Chinese audiences also represent a technique worth of further analysis. *Looper* was the first collaboration between Hollywood and China featuring scenes exclusive to the Chinese market, a process emulated by *Iron Man 3* (2013) a year later. The scenes were never made available to American audiences. With the exception of one scene featuring a brief exchange between Bruce Willis and Summer Qing, the American-release Blu-ray did not include the Chinese-exclusive scenes in its special features. Online sources such as streaming sites and Chinese movie vendors similarly did not contain these scenes. Access to these deleted scenes would not only provide more text to analyze the utopic portrayal of China,

but would also add to how China portrays itself on-screen in its own country and help understand how Hollywood crafts specific appeals to China.

Looper is but one of a growing trend of collaborations between Hollywood and China. While all of these films are generic pictures, they vary greatly in genre, quality, and narrative. Additionally, with the recent Chinese box office smash of *Iron Man 3*, it can no longer be claimed that all Sino-Hollywood co-productions are financially unsuccessful in China. With current projections having the Chinese box office overtaking that of the United States by 2020,²²³ the importance of these co-productions and other Hollywood projects aimed at Chinese audiences is only going to grow. While there has been some work on co-productions, further analysis on past, present, and future co-productions is worthwhile.

Finally, while *Looper* is a clear representation of American cultural apprehensions towards China, it is not the only American production to portray China in a dominant light. Joss Whedon's television/film universe of *Firefly* (2002-2003) and *Serenity* (2005) features a future dominated entirely by the United States and China, the last superpowers in narrative set five-hundred years into the future. When Tony Stark seeks to have his arc reactor surgically removed from his chest in *Iron Man 3*, he eschews the medical centers of his own country for a Chinese surgeon/acupuncturist. In his portrayal of a future Los Angeles in the 2014 science-fiction film *Her* (2013), the production team chose to film many of the exterior scenes in Shanghai, with the futuristic-looking metropolis standing in for L.A. Such narrative and aesthetic decisions reflect the same cultural apprehensions and "alienations of the familiar" that *Looper* projects in its Shanghai

²²³ "Why Hollywood Kowtows to China," Film Blog, *The Guardian*, theguardian.uk.

scenes. That exclusively American-made films like *Her*, which did not even receive a Chinese release, is using China is an eerily similar way as *Looper* adds a new dimension to the Sino-Hollywood discourse. Further work on Hollywood portrayals of China would shed light on the nature and proliferation of United States' cultural apprehensions.

China is not the first country portrayed as a potential "other" rivaling the United States in science-fiction cinema. *Looper* can be viewed as a historical marker in a long line of American science fiction reflecting cultural tensions towards a foreign country. In the 1950s, as the Soviet Union acquired nuclear weapons, American science-fiction films like *The War of the Worlds* (1953) portrayed alien invaders causing wanton destruction of American cities.²²⁴ In the 1980s, as the Japanese economy reached its peak, the future Los Angeles of *Blade Runner* (1982) featured massive Japanese advertisements dominating the skyline.²²⁵ More recent post-9/11 science fiction such as Steven Spielberg's remake of *War of the Worlds* (2005) characterizes alien invaders as insurgents already buried within the United States.²²⁶ While *Looper* shares characteristics with these films, it is distinct from them in one major respect: the direct funding of the production by the on-screen "other."

Looper successfully overcomes many common criticisms on the limitations of science fiction as a cultural mirror. For example, the origins of the film's on-screen portrayal derive from both financial production choices and cultural factors, allowing the

²²⁴ Robert Torry, "Apocalypse Then: Benefits of the Bomb in Fifties Science Fiction Films," *Cinema Journal* 31, no. 1 (Fall 1991), 18-19.

²²⁵ Timothy Yu, "Oriental Cities, Postmodern Futures: *Naked Lunch*, *Blade Runner*, and *Neuromancer*," *MELUS* 33, no. 4 (Winter 2008), 52.

²²⁶ Antonio Sánchez-Escalonilla, "The Popular Genres of Action and Fantasy in the Wake of the 9/11 Attacks," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 38, no. 1 (2010), 16.

film to skirt the common criticism that cultural concerns can be explained away by “commercial/industrial imperatives.”²²⁷ However, another common criticism that hits closer to the target is offered by Keith M. Johnston; not all films “will present the same attitude towards aspects of society.”²²⁸ Even in the science-fiction genre, not all Chinese-American co-productions portray a dystopic United States. *Iron Man 3*, the highest-grossing, highest-profile co-production, portrays a United States under attack, but which maintains a tremendous infrastructure and military power. While the choice to portray the United States as dystopic rang true on a cultural level, it remains an artistic choice, one which is not reliant on economic or social factors.

A choice that was not left to the decision of the filmmakers was how China would be portrayed. Acting as the regulatory arm of the People’s Republic, the China Film Group maintains an active hand in what portrayals of China are allowed on Chinese screens. Films with negative elements are edited,²²⁹ films that cannot be edited are banned,²³⁰ and studios that go too far in their negativity towards China are blackballed.²³¹ While the filmmakers of both versions of *War of the Worlds* and of *Blade Runner* freely chose to place their films within a universe of cultural apprehension towards an “other,” the filmmakers of *Looper* conceded that freedom when they chose to co-produce with DMG Entertainment. Writer-director Rian Johnson can claim that filming in China “makes sense” and that it ultimately added to the storyline, but a negative portrayal was simply not an option for Johnson. China’s current film regulation and censorship

²²⁷ Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska, *Science Fiction Cinema: From Outerspace to Cyberspace* (London, UK: Wallflower Press, 2000), 13.

²²⁸ Johnston, 29.

²²⁹ Montlake.

²³⁰ “Dark Knight Won’t Be on Big Screen in China,” *CBC News*.

²³¹ Fritz and Horn, “Reel China: Hollywood Tries to Stay on China’s Good Side.”

practices stipulate that any negative portrayals of China will not be tolerated, and Chinese censors show little sign or desire to change.

Another practice that continues with little sign of stopping is American discourse of apprehension toward China as a political and economic threat. The 2012 United States Presidential Election prominently featured China as a source of contention, with Republican candidates Mitt Romney, Newt Gingrich, and Rick Perry all adapting a strong anti-Chinese rhetoric as a part of their campaigns.²³² In March 2014, the Pentagon announced their belief that China is waging “three warfares” against the United States through psychological, media, and legal operations.²³³ Though it takes a conciliatory tone with China, even the Obama administration expresses frustration at the inability to make headway on the Chinese cyberattacks towards American corporations and government networks.²³⁴ While direct military conflict with China is not expressed outright, the underlying tensions about Chinese actions and intentions are ongoing.

While American politicians and military officials express apprehensions, China’s economy continues growing. As of 2014, China also shows little sign of halting its unprecedented economic growth. In 2010, economist Robert Fogel projected that China’s economy would reach \$123 trillion by 2040, with a global GDP that “will dwarf

²³² Rachel Will, “The China Card: China in the 2012 U.S. Presidential Election,” *US-China Today*, February 13, 2012, accessed April 8, 2014, www.uschina.usc.edu.

²³³ Bill Gertz, “Warfare Three Ways: China Waging ‘Three Warfares’ against United States in Asia, Pentagon Says,” *The Washington Free Beacon*, March 26, 2014, accessed April 8, 2014, www.freebeacon.com.

²³⁴ David E. Sanger, “U.S. Tries Candor to Assure China on Cyberattacks,” *The New York Times*, April 6, 2014, accessed April 9, 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/04/07/world/us-tries-candor-to-assure-china-on-cyberattacks.html>.

that of the United States.”²³⁵ While these projections have been challenged by recent developments in the Chinese economy,²³⁶ the perception of future Chinese ascension remains very strong in the United States. As long as Chinese government regulation of cinema, American cultural tensions, and Chinese economic growth continue unabated, futures like the American dystopia and Chinese utopia of *Looper* will find their way onto film and television.

²³⁵ Robert Fogel, “\$123,000,000,000,000* *China’s Estimated Economy by the Year 2040. Be Warned,” *Foreign Policy*, January 4, 2010, accessed March 29, 2014, <http://www.foreignpolicy.com/articles/2010/01/04/1230000000000000>.

²³⁶ Mitali Das and Pap N’Diaye, “Chronicle of a Decline Foretold: Has China Reached the Lewis Turning Point?” *International Monetary Fund*, January 2013, accessed April 14, 2014, <http://www.imf.org/external/pubs/ft/wp/2013/wp1326.pdf>.

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