

# Where Has the Aura Gone? Reflections on Cultural Studies, Neoliberalism, and Literature as the Auratic Event

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## Abstract

This paper provides a cross-cultural discussion of the dynamics and problems of cultural studies. I examine Simon During's genealogy of cultural studies in the context of the current crisis of the American higher education. I explain why there is no longer "aura"—in the Benjaminian sense—on college campuses, and how this lack of aura is related to the global dominance of neoliberalism both as a set of economic policies serving the free markets and as a political rationality governing education and the everyday life. I present several preliminary counter measures against neoliberalism. One of them is to incorporate cultural studies in literary studies—not the other way around—so as to use the aura as a critical tool against neoliberalism, to re-establish the core values of literature in teaching moral and political responsibilities as well as public goodness. The paper ends with a brief reading of Wong Kar-wai's latest film *2046* as an allegory of the auratic event.

## Keywords

cultural studies, literary studies, American higher education,  
neoliberalism, aura, auratic event, *2046*, Wong Kar-wai

I recently served on a search committee for a faculty position in one of the Asian national literatures. Many applicants claim on their C.V. and cover letters that their fields of study include “cultural studies.” They emphasize that, besides trainings in canonical literature, they have done substantial work on popular fiction (detective, science fiction, etc.), film, gender, ethnicity, or folk traditions (folklore, live performances, animations, etc.). My colleagues and I were excited about the research diversity of the candidates. But when we began to read their works closely, our excitement turned into disappointment: the works are mostly shallow, full of jargon, generalized notions and predictable arguments. Everyone seems to be a jack-of-all-trades, attempting to address all the popular issues yet failing to achieve clarification on any of them.

While one can easily complain about the lack of quality in these applicants’ research and about the state of the field in general, I propose to put this search experience in a larger intellectual context in order to understand the changes that are reshaping the disciplines of “East Asian languages and literatures,” the primary academic home for many of us teaching in North America. The changes are related to recent developments in cultural studies. Cultural studies itself, as a method of inquiry or as a field/fields of investigation, is also going through transformations. I examine in this article how the changes of cultural studies are related to neoliberalism, and how these changes are indicative of the dynamics as well as the inherent problems of cultural studies. While studies of literature have forever been transformed by both the demise of traditional literary analysis and the popularity of cultural studies at the turn of the millennium, we might be facing unprecedented opportunities to redefine literary studies in a more globally relevant and more politically engaged way.

## **I. Simon During’s Genealogy of Cultural Studies**

In North America, cultural studies has increasingly become synonymous with “studies of cultures.” These cultures, although never explicitly exclusive of “mainstream culture,” that of white, heterosexual, and financially secure man, do mainly connote “foreign cultures” or “subcultures”—exotic, feminine, colonized, homosexual, or poor. Evident of this implication are cultural studies’ disciplinary affiliations: one can hardly imagine North America’s English departments boast expertise on “cultural studies,” while programs of foreign literatures and women and

gender studies often take pride in their “cross-disciplinary” engagements with cultural studies. This does not mean, of course, that my colleagues in English departments do not engage in cultural studies. But the institutional structure of the traditional English department is set up in specific ways so as to facilitate studies of literature of various periods and genres. When transplanted to Taiwan and China, the “culturally foreign” implication of cultural studies created dilemmas at the very outset. Like the English departments in North America, Chinese departments in Chinese-speaking areas do not show strong institutional interest in cultural studies. Enthusiastically pursuing cultural studies are Chinese students in comparative literature, anthropology, and foreign literatures. But since the “culturally foreign” is based on the Western perspective, the subject of investigation inevitably turns to Chinese culture, which is doubly distanced or defamiliarized—through the eyes of Western cultural studies scholars and then through the scrutiny of Chinese scholars on the cutting edge of Western theories.

The irony is that, while students in North American foreign studies programs have no problem with studying, say, Chinese or Japanese turn-of-the-twentieth-century streetcars or fashions as symbols of modernity, students of foreign literatures in China would not be encouraged to study Victorian fashions unless these fashions help them interpret Victorian literature. Cultural studies does not study foreign cultures the way the Chinese culture is studied in the West. It is not that North American academics do not pay attention to their own societies’ cultural patterns, but they usually study these patterns in well-established disciplinary boundaries despite occasional cross-disciplinary dialogue: Time Square’s giant billboards are studied within “communication studies,” popular TV reality shows within “media studies,” and Hollywood blockbusters within “cinema studies.” Each discipline has its own unique and well-defined methodology, while the queer, the foreign, or the marginal are conveniently lumped together for studies by interdisciplinary programs such as cultural studies or women’s studies. In comparison, Chinese cultural studies houses not the studies of the queer, the foreign, or the marginal; instead, it finds particular interest in the popular or at least the queer as the popular—consumer icons, visual materials, global circulations of cultural artifacts, which are studied elsewhere in separate disciplines. Cultural studies in North America often implies oppositional politics that defies the established and the popular while continuously setting boundaries between *the* culture and “other” cultures; cultural studies in Chinese-speaking territories is inevitably statist, paying attention to and often celebrating the popular in the context of globalization while unknowingly sanctioning the authority of the state in discourses of “resistance” or

“subversion.” For what is subverted is not the state legitimacy or the entire capitalist system, but the often vague “dominant ideology,” which could be anything from America’s global capitalism, Taiwan’s nationalism under the name of universal democracy, to China’s postsocialist neoliberal pragmatism. Without a clearly defined field of investigation or a consistent methodology, cultural studies in China and Taiwan only augments its original problems: lack of clearly defined subjects of study, vacillation between statism and populism, and the inherent distinction of “cultures” as different from the Western mainstream culture.

Before we go any further, we must take a look at the origin and the development of cultural studies in order to understand better the dilemmas of Chinese cultural studies. One of the most comprehensive guides to cultural studies is provided by Simon During, whose edited volume, *The Cultural Studies Reader*, has become one of the standard textbooks of cultural studies. In his “Introduction,” During first acknowledges the “non-disciplinary” and multivalent nature of cultural studies. During, however, is certain of one thing: cultural studies concerns “contemporary culture.” It is worth noting that During consistently uses the singular form for the word “culture.” We will shortly come back to this notion of singular contemporary culture. During traces the origin of cultural studies to the Great Britain in the 1950s that saw publication of Richard Hoggart’s *The Use of Literacy* (1957) and Raymond Williams’s *Culture and Society: 1780-1950* (1958). These two texts, During claims, have given two defining features to early cultural studies: (1) subjectivity, which means that cultural studies is personal, ethnographic, involving the observer as much as it involves the observed; (2) engagement, referring to the social, political, and ethical concerns of one’s immediate environment and time. These early moments clearly set cultural studies apart from literary studies that traditionally pursued the transcendental, the objective, the long-lasting, and the non-political. These two features became the cornerstones of cultural studies after Hoggart founded the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, which trained and attracted scholars such as Stuart Hall and Paul Willis.

That Hoggart and Williams chose to involve themselves passionately in the fields of their investigation had to do with their working-class background and with the fact that the British working-class was in rapid decline of fortune and in disintegration after the Second World War. “Culture” to them signifies a whole way of life that needs to be engaged, saved, and savored. They thus came to rely on the “social democratic power bloc,” which sought to intervene in the private sector both socially and culturally. But the increasing power of the state became disturbing and eventually backfired. The early cultural studies began, in the 1970s, to absorb

Antonio Gramsci's notion of cultural hegemony, which functions not through coercion but through the masses' consent. Michel Foucault's thoughts on culture as a form of "governmentality" also began to cast a heavy influence on cultural studies. As During summarizes Foucault's ideas, "governmentality" means "to produce conforming or 'docile' citizens, most of all through the education system" (5) that the social democratic power bloc sought to reform.

During links the influence of the French model—works by not only Foucault, but also Michel de Certeau and Pierre Bourdieu—to the replacement of the social democratic bloc by the "new right" led by Ronald Reagan and Margaret Thatcher in the 1980s. During is critical of the French model's emphasis on the lack of a central agency that "might direct a number of fields to provide equitable distribution of resources." There is, in the French model, "a drift to affirm both culture's Utopian force and those forms of resistance only possible in the cracks and gaps of the larger, apparently impregnable, system" (13). That cultural studies accepted this relatively depoliticized analysis had to do with Thatcherism's logic of minimizing state intervention in citizens' lives—the freer the economic system, the more one is expected to govern oneself, and the more potentially productive the culture is within the impregnable and decentered system. There is, however, an internal contradiction in Thatcherism. As During aptly points out, the contradiction is between Thatcherism's economic rationalism and its consensual cultural nationalism:

The more the market is freed from state intervention and trade and finance cross national boundaries, the more the nation will be exposed to foreign influences and the greater the gap between rich and poor. Thatcherite appeals to popular values can be seen as an attempt to overcome this tension. In particular, the new right gives the family extraordinary value and aura just because a society organized by market forces is one in which economic life expectations are particularly insecure (as well as one in which, for some, rewards are large and life exciting). In the same way, a homogenous image of national culture is celebrated and enforced to counter the dangers posed by the increasingly global nature of economic exchanges and widening national, economic divisions. (14)

Cultural studies did respond to the new right's emergence, attacking in particular the mono-racial imagery. Stuart Hall's *The Hard Road to Renewal* (1988) and Paul Gilroy's *There Ain't No Black in the Union Jack* (1987) are two prominent exam-

ples. Paradoxically, however, there are intricate parallels between cultural studies and its target of criticism. As During correctly points out, “when cultural studies moved away from a marxian (analysis based on class), it began to approach, if in a different spirit and register, certain Thatcherite themes. After all, both movements were strongly anti-statist; both affirmed, within limits, a decentered view of social organization” (15).

During provides his explanation to the similarities: the new right insists that no social institution stands outside particular economic interests, and the evolving cultural studies bases itself on the strong belief that there is no “meta-discourse” outside any discursive practice and that all theories must be engaging, subjective, and contemporarily relevant. While Thatcherism was finding great success after the initially disastrous early 1980s, in both the United Kingdom and the United States, cultural studies also blossomed. Various theoretical discussions have managed to get under the big umbrella of cultural studies, simultaneously globalizing and diversifying cultural studies. These discussions include postcolonialism, subaltern studies, gender studies, visual studies, hybridity theories, and identity politics. Each has its own validity, geographical and historical particularity, and each has contributed greatly to the enrichment of humanities, but cultural studies as a discipline is becoming increasingly problematic during its expansion. A series of questions arise during the process of pluralizing “culture” in cultural studies: If cultural, ethnic, or gender identities can be infinitely divided, how do we conceive relations between the dispersed communities and sub-communities? This question is further complicated when we put the fractions in both national and transnational contexts. If sub- and sub-sub-identities can be affirmed as “other” ways of life, where is the need for radically progressive politics against the entire state-sponsored capitalist system? And if sexual and ethnic identities render national cultural identity irrelevant, would culture as “a whole way of life” be replaced by multiple ways of life worth celebrating and studying by scholars who more than ever feel the need to formalize whatever popular the society offers? Most importantly, when scholars from the “other” side master the theoretical language of the Western culture, how do they analyze their own culture and the “foreign” culture? Are they supposed to continue to reinforce differences, or to serve as “native informants” for providing more “authentic” ethnographic knowledge of the native?

Simon During provides no answer to these questions. He does insist on using the singular instead of the plural in making references to the contemporary culture. His unmistakable yearning for returning to totality and disagreement against minimizing the role of agency in the French model could be potentially productive. But

the two implications in his insistence on cultural singularity are inherently contradictory: (1) the totality of culture is believed to be essential for a radical politics that can cut through all the illusions of choice and multiplicity to reveal how contemporary life has been thoroughly homogenized and commodified; (2) Derrida's positioning is still that of the old empire's intellectual, who, despite his relentless fight against capitalism and his recognition of the existence of the other, fails to see that there are other "ways of life" beyond the horizon of modernity and that those ways of life would provide multiple positionings and subjectivities essential for rich analysis of cultural work.

## II. "Where Has the Aura Gone?"

Where does cultural studies go from here? This is a question we must ask if we agree that cultural studies is still one of the most dynamic interdisciplinary fields at once generated by and critical of global capitalism. But this question could also be misleading—it sounds as if we, as individual scholars, can dictate the direction of cultural studies by discussing its limits and potentials. Knowing that cultural studies owes as much to the changes of political landscape as to the Western intellectual tradition, we should instead ask: "What is the institutional environment in which cultural studies will either further its cause or become increasingly marginalized and irrelevant?" Since cultural studies has never been a meta-discourse, its active involvement with contemporary culture(s) makes it both popular and vulnerable in the Euro-American higher education system. To understand what will become of cultural studies, it is essential for us to at least catch a glimpse of the changes that are re-shaping Western higher education, especially the American research university system, which has been the cradle and incubator of many of the great theories of the twentieth century.

An anecdotal note is called for due to its relevance to our discussion here. Once, Slavoj Žižek and I were having a cup of coffee in one of our campus's popular coffee shops. He suddenly made a rather odd comment in the middle of our discussion on the fate of socialism. "Where has the aura gone?" he asked. Aura? Puzzled, I looked around. Most college students were busy typing into their laptops that were wirelessly connected to the internet; several familiar-looking colleagues with whom I never talked were grading student papers; several others were excitedly debating something. A typical scene at a typical college coffee shop. "There

is no leisure around here,” Žižek added. Why? Hard to imagine this comment was from someone like Žižek, who is always fanatically busy and hyperactively productive. I finally got his point: American college life, both that of the teacher and that of the student, is so meticulously structured, planned, and managed that there is no room for leisure. By leisure, I take it not to mean sports, recreation, coffee sipping, or bar hopping—these are well-planned and commercialized as well. Leisure refers to the moments in life that are unplanned for, unaccounted for, that which slip through the conscious and the unconscious of the everyday and fall into that idle, chaotic, yet sweet darkness. Since everything we do in our professional academic life, including what we think, how we think, and how we share our thoughts with others, is meticulously and tirelessly governed by instrumental reason, leisure, and by extension, aura, has disappeared from the American campus. To put it in Žižekian terms, *jouissance*—that fundamental enjoyment forbidden in the symbolic order—is not only actively and consciously excluded from the orderly and corporatized American academic life, the very act of exclusion is constantly rationalized and defended so as to preserve academic integrity and, more importantly, to enhance efficiency and productivity that purportedly prepare students for the work force.<sup>1</sup> In this emphasis of efficiency, “ivory tower” is increasingly impossible and spaces increasingly rare for thoughts devoid of immediate concerns.

According to Walter Benjamin, the aura has long disappeared from the work of art in the modern age. For Benjamin, there are two kinds of aura: the historical one and the natural one. The historical aura withers because “the technique of reproduction detaches the reproduced object from the domain of tradition.” The tradition is shattered in two situations: (1) a plurality of copies replaces a unique existence; (2) “in permitting the reproduction to meet the beholder or listener in his own particular situation, it [the technique of reproduction] reactivates the object reproduced” (“The Work of Art” 221). The natural aura, on the other hand, is defined as “the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be.” Benjamin’s description of the decay of the natural aura is so compelling that it is worth quoting at length here:

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<sup>1</sup> It is an understatement to say that Žižek’s politico-psychoanalytical approaches to contemporary culture have had an impact on cultural studies. He has provided not only a fresh angle for interpretation of cultures, but also a new language of twisted dialectics that typically explains the relationship between *the* “culture” and its others as “exclusive yet inclusive of the exclusion,” referring to the invisible existence of West’s others in the form of a black hole in the middle of Western cultural formations. For a definition of *jouissance*, see Žižek.

If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. This image makes it easy to comprehend the social bases of the contemporary decay of the aura. It rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things “closer” spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction. Every day the urge grows stronger to get hold of an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction. (“The Work of Art” 223)

To make a comparison in the Chinese tradition, we would say it is precisely the natural aura that Tao Yuanming (陶淵明) genuinely feels in his famous poem about picking chrysanthemums near his fence and seeing the mountain in the distance. When everyone tries to imitate Tao Yuanming by creating in large quantity a naturalness in the man-made environment, the aura turns into kitsch, losing its association with a particular moment and location and thus its uniqueness.

There is, we must acknowledge, a seemingly aristocratic tendency in Benjamin’s critique of the masses, of the crowd in the modern metropolis against whom the lone artist of the aura walks. Given the importance of the masses in the modern civil society, one might go so far as to say that Benjamin’s ideas are “anti-democratic.” But we must also remember that Benjamin was against the entire capitalist system and against the façade of modernity that had forever taken away “every reality.” The masses are not the people who struggled in the system, but those who had been created by the system, which in turn based its survival on the endlessly reproducible representations of and for the created masses. True democracy should not only reflect the opinions of the majority of people, but also acknowledge the fact that this majority automatically governs itself to meet the demand of the capitalist system and that the majority opinion is always already manipulated.

One of the greatest products of capitalism is the modern university. The American university system in particular has been the model of social democracy and academic excellence. It was intended to “leave no one behind,” giving the entire population, whatever their income and intellect level, possibilities of liberal arts education and job skill training. It was also designed to preserve a space of

secular, moral, and political freedom, separated from the church, the state, and the economic institutions. The tenure system, for example, was specifically created to prevent college professors from being politically persecuted by the likes of McCarthy. It is safe to say that, without a group of social and political critics harbored by the university system, American democracy would not have been possible. This democratic system, despite its multiple problems, made substantial progress on civil liberties, racial and gender equality, and multicultural diversity before 9/11 struck. There was an aura in this system that was based, paradoxically, on the mission of educating the masses. The educated masses were undoubtedly produced through endless mechanical reproductions that took away the uniqueness of “every reality.” But there was a firm belief in the supreme and transcendental value of liberal arts education in “edifying” the citizenship, so much so that uniqueness, originality, and distance from immediate social and economic concerns could still be *imagined* even if they were never truly possible. This imagined distinctiveness was where the aura existed, where leisure was allowed, and where political movements and interventions were brewing on American campuses in the late 1960s.

The aura is now gone. One can easily blame 9/11—how it precipitated national, ideological, political, religious, economic and cultural antagonisms, and how these antagonisms killed tolerance and collapsed the distinction between the “real world” and the academic world. But the aura did not die a sudden death. I would argue that it began to retreat from the higher education system ever since cultural studies is infused with a sense of urgency, relevance, and engagement into education. Ien Ang, a major figure of cultural studies in Australia, for instance, cites Bill Readings’s book *The University in Ruins* to promote the so-called “institutional pragmatism” in order to cope with financial difficulties the Western university system has been facing. For Ang, cultural studies, ideally as “applied humanities,” is particularly suitable for making expert knowledge relevant to the “real world” (56-57). To be “institutionally practical” implies collaboration with, not defiance against, the university administration that always speaks for the financial interest of the institution. It means to take whatever there is available and turn it into the gain for the intellectual community. As for the aura, the ultimate “non-practical” and “non-engaging” elements in the higher education system, experts in “applied humanities” could not care less about its exclusion. I am not insinuating that cultural studies is responsible for the disappearance of the aura—it will become clear in the next section that neoliberalism is the main culprit. I am also not saying that we do not need to be practical. But I am fully against the argument that opportunistic and entrepreneurial pragmatism is the only intellectual choice we can make under the

unprecedented financial pressure. We must realize that the necessity of engagement can be easily turned into a hegemonic discourse, making appealing to the masses the only academic mission. We also must remember that, as mentioned, cultural studies is at once generated by and critical of global capitalism. The critique itself is entangled with its object of criticism in numerous intricate ways. The principles of global capitalism are able to dominate the higher education system at least partially through cultural studies' will to engage, to diversify, to pluralize cultures, to be "practical," and to treat all perspectives equally.

Examples of cultural studies' complicity with the capitalist system abound. According to an Associated Press report on December 26, 2004, written by Justin Pope, a student at Ball State University has filed grievance against one of his professors, citing the professor's disdain for the war in Iraq and accusing the professor of "anti-Americanism" and academic unfairness. This seemingly isolated case attracted the attention of David Horowitz, a notorious conservative commentator who, ironically, used to be an ardent liberal campus activist. Horowitz is now attempting to introduce an "academic bill of rights" in the Indiana legislature as well as in 20 other states. The gist of this bill is "diversity," claiming that the American higher education has been controlled by "liberals" who preach only "anti-Americanism," and that students are entitled to preserve their fundamental Christian and "American core values." Although there have always been attempts at attacking academic freedom by labeling professors as "liberals," Horowitz's bill stands out due to its imitation of the rhetoric of the socially progressive. As Justin Pope, the AP reporter, puts it, "Once, it was liberal campus activists who cited the importance of 'diversity' in pressing their agendas for curriculum change. Now, conservatives have adopted much of the same language in calling for a greater openness to their viewpoints." Of course, cultural studies should not be simply equated with liberal activism, multiculturalism, or political correctness. But people like Horowitz and the students he supports were indeed trained in cultural studies, with its emphasis on cultural diversity and respect for others' opinions. They have learned that there is no privileged perspective and that edification is not necessary since everyone's "whole way of life" deserves respect and needs to remain intact. The majority opinion, best demonstrated by all the southern states during the 2004 American presidential election, is what stands for the "American democracy."

It is thus fitting that American campuses are described as the ideological battleground between "conservative" students and "liberal" professors. Students are taking initiatives to preserve "democracy" and "American core values." Examples include white students suing the University of Michigan over affirmative action,

blasting the University of North Carolina for requiring them to read the Qur'an, and voting to retain the racist symbol "Chief Illiniwek" as the mascot for the University of Illinois. These cases share several features: students refuse to acknowledge that teachers' opinions are better informed and based on a more comprehensive understanding of education and humanity; the distance between the academic world and the society has collapsed, making universities easy targets for various outside groups ranging from tax watchdogs, state legislatures, to religious leaders; the "American value" is given the uttermost importance, yet the rhetoric supporting such value has no difference from that of multiculturalism. If cultural studies is not responsible for the current turn to campus right-wing activism, it at least coincides with certain themes of this activism: social engagement, statism, subjectivity, equal and non-privileged multi-perspectivism, insistence on essential differences between the American culture and other cultures, and so on. The aura, which conflicts with the popular, the masses, the immediate, and the mechanically reproduced, has no place in today's anxiety-riddled campuses.

### **III. From Thatcherism to Neoliberalism**

The picture that pits "conservative students" against "liberal professors" is misleading, for it uses the ideological struggle to disguise the real life-and-death battle: the fight for a share of the rapidly drained financial resources of the American public higher education system. The financial difficulties of public research universities have been apparent for decades. The gradually worsening process became much more rapid after 9/11. "Homeland security" and the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq created record federal and state deficits. The biggest victim of budget cuts is the state university, whose level of funding has plummeted every year for the past four years. In the worst scenario, such as in the conservative state of Colorado, the legislature has threatened to cut higher education completely from the state budget (Smith 5). Universities responded by drastically raising student tuition. In many state universities, the year 2004 marked the first time that the school income from tuition surpassed that of the tax dollars funded by the state. The public university is turning private. When students feel that the higher tuition entitles them to education tailored to their background and needs, and when professors no longer have job security since tenure-track lines are increasingly been

replaced by temporary positions, their differences tend to be aggravated by financial constraints.

Many blame 9/11 and the budget deficit for the financial difficulties. They naively believe that the funding level will increase as soon as the economy turns around. The truth is that the decrease of state funding is an irreversible trend that began in the Reagan era. The 9/11 incident only gave the federal and state governments the perfect excuse for getting rid of the public higher education once and for all through privatization and corporatization. This trend, according to Lisa Duggan and other progressive intellectuals, is the product of neoliberalism, which is re-shaping all aspects of the global life from the American higher education to African AIDS treatment.

In her book *The Twilight of Equality: Neoliberalism, Cultural Politics, and the Attack on Democracy*, Duggan discusses how the desire to facilitate the “unimpeded operation of capitalist ‘free’ markets” has infiltrated the American public higher education and bulldozed academic freedom (xii). One of the examples she analyzes in detail is how the New York state government and conservative tax watchdogs clamped down on a women’s studies conference at SUNY New Paltz. “Violation of family values” was the verdict on the conference and on the university as a whole. The university’s president was forced to resign as a result. Neo-liberalism’s most prominent characteristic, Duggan contends, is its claim of multicultural neutrality that separates the “natural” processes of capitalism from sticky issues of class, race and identity. The result is the mainstreamization of identity politics: gay activists are content with social recognition of their sexual preference, choosing to close their eyes to rampant homophobia in election discourses and in the public opinion; immigrants are pressing for limited reform of the immigration law while neglecting the deteriorating situation for those with arbitrarily declared “illegal” status; liberal Democrats are giving in on gun control, environmental protection, and women’s rights in order to appeal to the “passionately conservative” voting majority.

This mainstreamization echoes the “institutional pragmatism” advocated by some cultural studies scholars. Single-issue politics, collaboration, adjustment, entrepreneurship, pragmatism are the dominant themes in American higher education, replacing social and moral responsibilities, oppositional politics against the entire capitalist system, institutional separation from the corporate world, and, of course, the aura. All these changes can be traced back to the development of neoliberalism. Wendy Brown offers several succinct referents to the term “neoliberalism”: (1) in terms of economic policy, neoliberalism emphasizes elimination of the Keynesian

welfare state and adopts the theories of a market economy formulated by von Hayek and Friedman, the adherents of Chicago School of economics; (2) in popular usage, neoliberalism refers to “a radically free market”: “maximized competition and free trade achieved through economic deregulation, elimination of tariffs, and a range of monetary and social policies favorable to business and indifferent toward poverty, social deracination, cultural decimation, long-term resource depletion and environmental destruction” (1); (3) neoliberalism and globalization go hand in hand, forcing developing nations to fully open their markets and to change their social structures through pressure from the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. *But neoliberalism is also much more than just economic policies.* At its core is a political rationality that “both organizes these policies and reaches beyond the market” (Brown 2). It is this political rationality that gives the “neo” to neo-liberalism, which, despite its indebtedness to Thatcherism, goes far beyond the logic of the free market preached by the new right. It is the same political rationality that caused the changes in American public higher education as well as in cultural studies.

The neoliberal political rationality functions by not considering the market itself as purely natural. Although the free market requires the ultimate deregulation, the government intervenes more intensely than ever in economic behavior. The intervention is not through regulation, but through political and moral constructions of the *idea* of a free market. In other words, the market as a whole is now the project to be constructed by the government while everything going on *inside* the market is left alone. Brown cites Thomas Lemke to draw attention to this aspect of neoliberalism:

In the Ordo-liberal scheme, the market does not amount to a natural economic reality, with intrinsic laws that the art of government must bear in mind and respect; instead, the market can be constituted and kept alive only by dint of political interventions ... competitions, too, is not a natural fact ... this fundamental economic mechanism can function only if support is forthcoming to bolster a series of conditions, and adherence to the latter must consistently be guaranteed by legal measures. (4)

In Thatcherism, the market is considered natural and economic policies are designed to allow the free flow of the natural development of the market; in neoliberalism, however, the market is clearly understood as constructed and all eco-

conomic, social, and moral behavior is subordinated to the idea of constructing a free market. The construction of the global market is precisely what is behind the George W. Bush administration's free spending and fiscal irresponsibility despite Bush's constant promise to reduce taxes and to minimize the government. His military campaigns have been waged to expand the free market—not democracy—to places where the state used to hold a tight control over its economy. Whenever we turn on the TV, we are given exuberant reports from the post-Saddam Baghdad on how the streets are now lined with shops full of Western merchandise. This is most symbolic of Iraqis' newly bestowed democracy—not the freedom to choose their own government, but the freedom to consume.

On the macro level, neoliberal political rationality constructs the global market; on the micro level, it induces people to calculate everything and “interpellates individuals as entrepreneurial actors in every sphere of life” (Brown 5). “In making the individual fully responsible for her/himself,” Brown contends, “neo-liberalism equates moral responsibility with rational action; it relieves the discrepancy between economic and moral behavior by configuring morality entirely as a matter of rational deliberation about costs, benefits, and consequences” (5).<sup>2</sup> The model neoliberal citizen, therefore, is someone who plans for everything from birth, school, work, retirement, to death through financial calculations. To make the right financial decision is to be morally exemplary, and vice versa. If you miscalculate or were born into a disadvantaged group—minority, immigrant, etc.—you would not have anything to fall back on and you would be condemned to a life of poverty and misery.

The switch to neoliberal citizenry has become apparent in American higher education, which marks a turning point for students into decision-making adulthood. The logic of creating a free market and of learning how to plan one's life is manifested in all facets of the university life. State legislatures' control over state universities is tighter and more intrusive than ever despite the rapidly decreasing state funding. Their ability to control is made possible through discourses of morality, of equal access to education, of fair competition, and, ironically, of diversity.

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<sup>2</sup> Please note that Wendy Brown uses a dash to separate “neo” from “liberalism” in order to emphasize the difference between neoliberalism and liberalism. I choose not to use the dash for the same reason that we write “postcolonialism” instead of “post-colonialism”—the latter refers to a specific historical moment *after* colonialism, whereas the former refers to a set of discursive practices involving colonialization, de-colonialization, and cultural and political constructions of nations after colonialism. “Neoliberalism” reflects more accurately the political rationality behind the logic of free market than “neo-liberalism.”

University administrators use financial pressures as a premise for corporatizing universities: paying university presidents, football coaches, and “star” professors like CEOs and business executives, streamlining administrative duties, discarding high academic standards, minimizing tenure lines, and squeezing on “non-revenue” disciplines such as the humanities in general and foreign literatures in particular. For professors, the more interdisciplinary and the more “applicable” their expertise, the stronger and more flexible their positions are. Cultural studies thus replaces individual literatures, and departments of each national literature are increasingly consolidated into a service-oriented, teaching-based department of foreign cultures. For students, good grades are increasingly more important, yet fundamental values of humanity are becoming less relevant to their career goals.

As for neoliberalism’s influence in China and Taiwan, it is too complex to be discussed in detail here. One of the complexities has to do with the concurrent nature of neoliberalism: it did not “travel” from the West to China, but most likely arose in the same time in China as in the United States during China’s postsocialist transition to the market economy.<sup>3</sup> I will address these complexities of neoliberalism in another article. Suffice it to list here several similar manifestations of neoliberalism in Chinese higher education: (1) insufficient government education funding; (2) rapidly increasing college tuition unaffordable for the majority of the Chinese population—the latest annual report from China’s Social Sciences Academy indicates that college tuition has risen 5,000% between 1989 and 2004 (Guo); (3) corporatization of the higher education results in the fetishization of “money-making” programs such as the MBA and in the diminishment of the liberal arts education; and (4) the college campus has become the fertile field for “free competition” and calculation of life’s gains and losses, while the ideological control in terms of communist monopoly and parochial nationalism is tighter than ever. If the aura can still be an object of nostalgia in the American campus life after the collapse of liberal democracy, it is hardly imaginable for China’s new entrepreneurial generation, which had never experienced a moral and political life independent of socio-economic principles.

The dominance of neoliberalism is overwhelming. What can concerned humanities scholars and progressive intellectuals do to prevent further harm and decay of liberal democracy? Brown proposes a solution:

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<sup>3</sup> Although conceptually confusing and generalized at times, Wang Hui’s article “The Year 1989 and the Historical Roots of Neoliberalism in China” expresses similar ideas in historicizing and localizing neoliberalism.

What remains for the Left, then, is to challenge emerging neo-liberal governmentality in EuroAtlantic states with an alternative vision of the good, one that rejects *homo oeconomicus* as the norm of the human and rejects this norm's correlative formations of economy, society, state and (non)morality. In its barest form, this would be a vision in which justice would not center upon maximizing individual wealth or rights but on developing and enhancing the capacity of citizens to share power and hence, collaboratively govern themselves. In such an order, rights and elections would be the background rather than token of democracy, or better, rights would function to safeguard the individuals against radical democratic enthusiasms but would not themselves signal the presence nor constitute the central principle of democracy [...]. The development and promulgation of such a counter-rationality—a different figuration of human beings, citizenship, economic life, and the political—is critical both to the long labor of fashioning a more just future and to the immediate task of challenging the deadly policies of the imperial U.S. state. (16-17; original emphasis)

Despite its serious tone of justice and radical politics, however, Brown's solution raises more questions than she could possibly answer. How to challenge neoliberal governmentality? In what venue to challenge? It is not that intellectuals have not previously done anything to counter the ubiquitous market rationality. Raymond Williams and his cultural studies colleagues have actively sought to improve the masses' literacy level and to preserve a little space for culture apart from economic behavior. Michel Foucault searched for cultural power against capitalism through the dominant power's inner gaps and chasms. Edward Said battled American imperialism and the "othering" of non-Western cultures through his effort to "popularize humanities." Gayatri Spivak and Homi Bhabha vow to speak for the subaltern and the underprivileged. Fredric Jameson has called for a somber understanding of the complete picture of the late-capitalist system. Slavoj Žižek demands to "be political" in every sphere of social and individual life. Yet the intellectual space keeps shrinking while the public intellectuals become popular academic stars and are paid like stars. Does it ever occur to them that they could have become an inherent part of the neoliberal governmentality in general and of the corporatization of the higher education in particular?

Brown's critique of neoliberalism is eye-opening, yet her proposed solution is at best utopian and at worst mono-cultural since she only sees neoliberal govern-

mentality in “EuroAtlantic states.” If we follow her solution, we will have run a full circle from what Simon During criticizes as “a drift to affirm both culture’s Utopian force and those forms of resistance only possible in the cracks and gaps of the larger, apparently impregnable, system.”

#### **IV. Literature as the Auratic Event**

To counter neoliberal governmentality, we must attack from what matters most to the logic of the free global market. Re-establishing agency—individual capability to be responsible for not only oneself but also the social good—is important for reversing the mentality based on calculation of personal gains and losses. Calling for the return of the aura—the non-conforming, the non-practical, the non-chalant, the not-so-orderly, the distanced—is essential for subverting the imagination and rationalization of an autonomous and smooth-running market. Pluralizing and historicizing cultures is necessary for toppling Western cultural hegemony that is at the core of neoliberalism.

In practice, there are multiple ways to re-establish agency, to call for the return of the aura, and to pluralize cultures. We may involve ourselves in active community building, which is not for gaining recognition of—thus mainstreaming—group identities, but is based on clear political agendas for downward wealth distribution and for historical justice. The Asian American group 80/20 in general and the author Iris Chang in particular are representative of this kind of community building. They address historical and individual traumas they have suffered, and they actively seek to write Asian Americans into American history—not just “Asian American history”—and to form a coalition with all groups representing the underprivileged. We may also engage in what Arjun Appadurai calls “grassroots globalization” or “globalization from below,” which uses “strategies, visions, and horizons for globalization on behalf of the poor” to “create forms of knowledge transfer and social mobilization that proceed independently of the actions of corporate capital and the nation-state system (and its international affiliates and guarantors)” (3). This grassroots globalization requires a transnational imagination as a social practice, and realizes its goals of downward distribution of wealth through NGOs.

Appadurai’s transnational imagination begins at college campuses, where intellectuals must rely on pedagogy and a strong sense of social responsibility to

bridge the gap between “the vocabulary used by the university-policy nexus” and that used by activists working for the poor in such organizations as Doctors without Borders and the Red Cross. The gap bridging, although laudable and potentially effective, also has its limits: as much as cultural diversity has been used by the right to promote their conservative agendas, helping the poor and underdeveloped has become the perfect excuse for such organizations as the World Bank to clear all obstacles for a homogenized world market. To prevent this from happening, it might be worthwhile to consider re-establishing literature as one of the core subjects studied and researched in higher education.

Literature—world literature in particular—has no doubt been under siege. Benjamin’s words about the disappearance of true art in the age of mechanical production have been proven by the cultural history of the late twentieth century. The masses are increasingly content with bringing things closer “spatially and humanly,” with getting hold of “an object at very close range by way of its likeness, its reproduction.” Literature is thus being replaced by visual culture, and the habit of reading by viewing pre-programmed materials. If Western literatures such as English literature and French literature have become cultural heritage projects into which governments pour resources in order to preserve national identities, foreign literatures such as Chinese literature have been conveniently relegated as part of foreign cultures. Studying foreign literatures is not for understanding them as literature, but for peeping into the big cultural and political pictures. Consciously or unconsciously, cultural studies treats foreign literatures as no more privileged, sophisticated, or interesting than popular cultural artifacts and, by so doing, effaces the significance of foreign literatures altogether.

My *preliminary* proposal is to teach literature as the auratic event. The “event” is a concept I borrow from Nicolas Mirzoeff, for whom it means “the effect of a network in which subjects operate and which in turn conditions their freedom of action” (6). The author is “dead” after deconstruction, but there is no denial that the author is still the central agent of creativity and imagination in any work of literature. By emphasizing that the author operates in a network that simultaneously defines her/his cultural/political/historical positioning and is being modified by the subject’s positioning, we draw attention to two politically significant facts. Firstly, governmentality may be able to condition the networks in which each individual conducts his/her social and personal lives, but it cannot efface a subject’s creative imagination based on the subject’s informed ethical and political choices. Secondly, the author’s perspective may no longer be the most privileged, but to understand the network in which the author operates requires careful research and comprehensive

view that combines most of the relevant perspectives—in order words, the student’s intuitive reading needs to be compared to and combined with other perspectives and with learned information before a judgment can be made. Through literature, we teach informed multi-perspectivism, which does not privilege any single perspective except one—the comprehensive.

The literary event also must be an auratic one. Being auratic signifies nostalgia for the lost aura and represents a profound melancholia lamenting the unfilled human desire for justice, genuine happiness, equality, and social democracy. The True, the Good, the Beautiful—these conventional values of literature have long lost their validity at universality during capitalism’s marching to global victory. However, the feeling of the loss of these values, even if they were never purely present in literature, is ever more acute in literature at the age of neoliberalism. Emphasis of this feeling of loss should be a more effective strategy for countering neoliberal rationality than direct opposition. The reason has to do with the trickiness of direct engagement that has been repeatedly discussed in this article: the more directly involved one is in oppositional politics, the more possible the opposition is manipulated by the dominant power for its own rhetoric and its own cause. We are all part and parcel of the neoliberal governmentality. To keep a distance from the most immediate temporal and spatial orders, or to discuss “what could’ve been”—the non-fulfillment of past potentials, is to strike from within.

This auratic literary event has other qualifications as well. First of all, it must be much more than Harold Bloom’s Western canons—only to understand literature from a world perspective can launch effective attacks against neoliberalism’s global homogenization of cultures. Second, it does not have to be literature in the traditional sense—written (or originally orally spread but eventually stabilized in printing form) works which are of artistic or aesthetic value. Literature is now more dispersed than ever, found in everything from cellular phone text messaging to visual art forms that include the film. Although the concept of literature has never had consensual definition, in English or in Chinese, I am tempted to say—for countering neoliberal market rationality—that the original word for “literature” in Chinese, *wen*, conveys precisely the implication of literature being the auratic event: elaborative, creative, distinctive, allegorical, networked, morally charged yet independent of popular beliefs. This *wen* can be written, but it can also be of visual material. In fact, if we think of *wen* as those decorative yet deeply meaningful lines crisscrossing the bronze ritual vessels, it is fair to say that *wen* has always had an inherent visuality. To include the visual culture as part of the literary field is to build on what has been achieved by cultural studies. In this way, cultural studies

becomes a sub-field of literary studies, not the other way around. We thus draw attention to literature through the popular, and we also avoid the danger of effacing world literature in subordinating literary studies to cultural studies.

## V. Coda: 2046 and 2046

By way of conclusion, I provide a brief reading of Wong Kar-wai's recent film *2046* (2004) as representative of the auratic event *and* as an allegory of dispersed literature in the age of calculation and neoliberal rationality. I am not implying that this film is literature—it provides an allegory of the lost aura, which can be read as literature in order to counter neoliberalism's claims of immediacy and homogeneity.

No one is more of a true auteur in world cinema today than Wong Kar-wai. He never uses a screenplay, shooting films in the most impromptu and intuitive way. He disregards the commercial interest of the investors of his films—the production of *2046* dragged along for more than three years, long enough to put the investors into insolvency. He also tends to destroy movie stars' egos but is still able to attract the brightest of them all to work for him. Maggie Cheung, his long-time faithful supporter and collaborator, had all but one shot of her cut from *2046* despite being on the set for almost the entire process. But this did not prevent Nicole Kidman from joining Wong for his next project. Maybe Wong is merely performatively idiosyncratic, but he clearly frames his performativity in a complex global web of cultural production and consumption that includes the film festival culture and Europe's love-hate relationship with Hollywood. This "network" in which Wong operates has generated obvious effects on his films: ever increasing moodiness, intense lyricism based on slow motion and nostalgic music, lavish—almost decadent—decorativeness in the pictures filled with such details as breathtakingly colorful floral curtains, gloomily glistening parquet floors, and fetishized cheongsam worn by the female characters. All these elements have been designed to bring us back not only to 1960s Hong Kong, but also to the golden years of European cinema—that of youthful Godard, Truffaut, De Sica, Antonioni, among others. That Wong Kar-wai was tapped to co-direct *Eros* (2004) with Antonioni and Steven Soderbergh in commemoration of Antonioni's film career speaks volumes about Wong's position in the European guild of world directors. Wong himself, however, also reveals a dark side in his films that defy convenient and conventional reading

in the context of European cinema tradition or competitions within world cinema. He almost dares the audience and critics, in film after film, to come up with a comprehensive view of his artistic creation and of himself. This side can be only grasped by placing Wong as a creative agent against the background of Hong Kong's special position in global capitalism and against the making of history in the most improbable circumstances.

*2046* begins where history has ended—in both senses of personal history and collective human history. Zhou Muyun (Tony Leung), the same character from *In the Mood for Love* (2000), has already buried at the end of *In the Mood for Love* his deepest secret and memory in the ruins of Cambodia's Angkor Wat. His travel to Cambodia took place in 1966, which, as the documentary clip shows at the end, coincided with Sihanouk's return to power that was followed by a long period of bloodshed and brutality. Not only Cambodia, but also its neighbor Vietnam, the United States, the Soviet Union, China, and Taiwan were all at war or experiencing domestic unrests. Zhou's little sealed secret seemed ultimately trivial when it was impossible to imagine a peaceful world beyond all the confrontations. In Jamesonian terms, the late 1960s ushered in the postmodern era that began the end of history—history, as it were, could be foreseen and periodized in linear fashion before the 1960s; it was no longer possible to imagine, in calendrical time, what would become of the world after all forms of representation were commodified after the 1960s. Yet Zhou Muyun returns, to Hong Kong and to the film that follows *In the Mood for Love*.

The ruins are significant to a Benjaminian understanding of history. For Benjamin, history is petrified and in ruins due to the global triumph of capitalism, but its petrification does not lead to the "end of history" so that a new and rejuvenated history can be envisioned; rather, the petrification becomes an end in itself. It is allegory that arises from the ruin of history. As a schema, allegory is, "in its visual character, not merely a sign of what is to be known but it is itself an object worthy of knowledge" (Benjamin, *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* 184). In other words, allegory points to not only the underlying significance of linguistic symbols, but also its own physical form, which, through its inherent visuality, does not so much "allegorize" as bear witness to the irreversible process of decay and fragmentation of history. The entire film of *2046* is such an allegory, pointing to the disappearance of the aura and the desperate clinging to the reduplicated after the loss of the original. The very desperation, in the meantime, speaks of the possibility of imagining history—what could have been, not what was or what will be—after the end of history. The film is in this sense an auratic event.

The most allegorical element in the film is of course the number “2046.” It simultaneously signifies three things: Room 2046 in “Oriental Hotel” where Zhou Muyun takes up lodging after returning to Hong Kong; the pornographic novel Zhou Muyun writes to both support himself financially and to imagine the fate of the people he has encountered; and, last but not least, the year 2046, when Hong Kong is scheduled to end its capitalist status and to fully become a part of the socialist China. All three signifieds converge on a sentence repeated several times by the voiceover: “Everyone who goes to 2046 is searching for the lost memory, because nothing changes in 2046. No one knows if this is true, because no one returns from 2046.” Zhou Muyun lives in Room 2047, but he constantly peeps into 2046 for he had an unforgettable experience there in *In the Mood for Love*. His voyeurism turns into desire toward the guests in 2046. However, none of the liaisons, including one with Bai Ling (Zhang Ziyi), could possibly compensate for the sense of loss. Zhou Muyun then imagines in his novel that he is a Japanese returning from the train leaving 2046. On this train of eternity, stewardesses are robots so as to prevent romantic attachment between the passengers and the stewardesses. The Japanese nevertheless falls in love with one of the robots; or, more precisely, he falls in love with the idea of telling the darkest secret to an unresponsive body. The robot, however, does have feelings and reactions, except that the reactions are always delayed. She would have orgasm hours after being caressed by the passenger; she would shed a tear years after hearing a heart-wrenching story. In this futuristic sequence, time is bent through the delayed reaction into a spatial dimension, that which separates the auratic event and the perception: the uniqueness of individual experience will never be fully duplicated for unimpeded perception; accepting this fact is what paradoxically gets one closer to the aura—catching the mountain in the distance.

Along the same vein, the year 2046 can be only perceived and imagined through the mediation of spatiality. At the end of the film, lights and clouds fly through light-years over Hong Kong’s skyline; the radio waves, announcing the arrival of 2046 thus Hong Kong’s “second death”—after the “first death” of 1997—are visibly frozen and materialized in the waves of vicissitudes. Time and space are compressed into this frozen picture in which “nothing changes”—the frozenness, or petrification—is what makes this film an allegory of the loss of the aura. To visualize and perceive this frozenness, however, is probably one of the most effective ways for countering the logic of neoliberal rationality.

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### About the Author

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In literary, visual, and cultural studies, aura has become synonymous with the traditional work of art, whose contemplative experience is progressively eroded with the advent of modern media technology. Even in Benjamin's time, then, aura described a state which had already become obsolete. Aura is thus a concept coined with hindsight, describing an elusive phenomenon from the perspective of its disappearance. Duttlinger & Walter Benjamin and the Aura of Photography. the aura beckons from early photographs for the last time. In Benjamin's initial reflections on the photographic medium, aura appears in an intriguingly complex capacity, even though this is subsequently undercut by the political agenda of his later writings. There are more than 200 countries in the world and even more nations. The world is open now and at your work, during your business trips and studies or just through the Internet you can be involved in the multicultural communication. Someone thinks that for efficient conversation good communicational skills and language proficiency (usually, in English) are enough. However, it's not so easy. Know. This exchange of "auratic" experiences can also be seen in switching the roles between traditional sacred spaces (churches) and modern (secular "sacred") museums: modernity turned museums into the places of silent worship of sacred objects (artworks), while churches became exhibition spaces, where most of the visitors go to see artworks, not to celebrate the Eucharist. How can we think of the "aura" of (sacred) contexts and (sacred) works? This Special Issue aspires to contribute to the growing literature on contemporary art and religion, and to explore the new ways of thinking of art and the sacred (in their aesthetic, ideological and institutional dimensions) in the context of contemporary culture. More generally, neoliberalism has become a keyword across the social sciences, including development studies, sociology, anthropology, and political studies. It is also widely used among policy makers and activists resisting the general move to market-based policies. Neoliberalism is an economic, political, and it can be argued, cultural paradigm, which is all but hegemonic at the governmental scale across the globe. Echoing back to early capitalist thinking, neoliberalism argues that governments fail inherently. Neoliberalism is a political ideology, promoting negative liberty (freedom to pursue individual goals without intrusion from others), which seeks to optimize welfare through operation of what neoclassical economists called the "invisible hand".