The white-male perspectives that inhabit the narratives of both Gary Burns and Guy Maddin suggest that the cinematic cities of Western Canada are entities in which racial and cultural minorities have marginal roles. But Mina Shum, Canada’s first and pre-eminent Asian Canadian filmmaker, has been able to put her ethnicity and its culture front and centre in her feature films, beginning with *Double Happiness* in 1994. She has gone on to make subsequent auteur films that highlight her Chinese ancestry in a Vancouver context. She has positioned Vancouver as a multiracial and multicultural cinematic entity, moving well beyond the heterosexual white-male perspectives of her Western Canadian colleagues.
Shum’s films are rooted in the historical presence of the Chinese on the West Coast of Canada, which was established during the 1880s, when Chinese labourers were imported to help build the transcontinental railway. In spite of a number of barriers created to prevent Chinese settlement, including an Act of Parliament that sought to exclude them and the imposition of the infamous “head tax,” the community grew. Later in the twentieth century, immigrants from Hong Kong, who did not want to live under the communist control after the scheduled return of Hong Kong to China in 1997, swelled the community’s numbers to make it the single largest minority in Vancouver.

Shum’s work is a combination of diasporic and postcolonial thinking that recognizes the importance of formerly marginalized voices representing oppressed communities in Canada, including First Nations, African Canadians, and Asians (Japanese, Chinese, and Indian). Mina Shum’s films belong to the world of other minority-group films discussed in this book, such as Rude and Bollywood/Hollywood. In the case of the Chinese community, its social status evolved from early twentieth-century working-class poverty and racialized marginality to a centrality bolstered in the twenty-first century by the global economic power of a resurgent China and a new wave of mainland immigration. Born in Hong Kong in 1966, Shum came to Vancouver as a baby. But her family roots are on the mainland: she is the daughter of migrants who fled Maoist China to Hong Kong before finally immigrating to Canada.

In the early 1990s, as a young film graduate of the University of British Columbia, Shum was entering a local film industry that was dominated by American production. In the year she released Double Happiness (1994), the BC film industry was worth $400 million in total, of which 75 percent came from foreign productions. Canadian indigenous production, worth about $100 million, was funded by government agencies such as Telefilm Canada, BC Film, and the CBC, as well as by various Canadian television funds. The subordinate role of indigenous Canadian filmmaking has been one of the key components contributing to the emergence of an original, director-driven Canadian cinema. Shum became a part of that component’s Vancouver expression. Not having to indulge the generic fantasies and conventions of American made-for-TV and feature films allows Canadian filmmakers freedom for more esoteric statements. They can dream in a different colour.
One such colour, as has been evident throughout this book, is that of the city in which they live. Mike Gasher, in his book about filmmaking in British Columbia, makes the point that much of American film and television production in Vancouver transforms the city into American locations, which results in a “separation between narrative and environment.” Playing to American film audiences, who want to see films set in their own geographical and cultural realms, these hegemonic productions have “transnationalized” Vancouver. Gasher suggests that for American film producers, Vancouver (and Canada) lacks the “signifying power” that New York, Miami, or Chicago have for American audiences. Vancouver is not part of America’s cultural imaginings. Because the dominant mode of the city’s representation is as an American alter ego, Vancouver wears cinematic masks that hide its real identity. Cinematically, it is a city in disguise. But for Canadian audiences in which Vancouver plays itself, the city represents an important mythological identity, unknown to Americans, as the site of “Lotusland,” a laid-back place of dreamy physical beauty protected from the country’s harsh winters, as well as the location of some of Canada’s toughest, most nightmarish, drug-ridden slums.

In a major essay on the Vancouver film industry that details the complex and contradictory relationships between indigenous and foreign production, Diane Burgess of Simon Fraser University explains that in indigenous Canadian productions, “the pristine beauty of the British Columbia landscape is increasingly displaced by a consideration of the complexities of Vancouver as an urban space.” Since the Vancouver film industry is the second-largest English-speaking production centre in Canada, its depiction of Vancouver is a major component in Canada’s urban imaginary.

Of the three films discussed in this chapter, *Double Happiness* is the one that has drawn the most scholarly attention because of academe’s interest in new voices from the margins. The film became part of the canon of a new Asian American–themed filmmaking that appeared in the 1990s. It brought Vancouver’s Chinese fact onto the screen at the same time that Asian American literature and films were becoming popular. Mina Shum’s film, slotted by both journalists and academics as a film about Asian diasporic identity, was not discussed in regard to its exploration of urban life. Like Burns’s *waydowntown*, it was given a universal North American gloss. Shum used gender (female protagonist), generation (youthful protagonist), ethnicity (Chinese), and genre...
(romantic comedy) to break new ground in defining Vancouver and its post-modern identity as a city far removed from its British white colonial pedigree.

In contrast, Bruce Sweeney’s *Last Wedding* (2001) and Bruce McDonald’s *The Love Crimes of Gillian Guess* (2004) represent a Vancouver created by a white-male perspective. Still, all three films have a strong comic component (romantic comedy in Shum, black comedy in Sweeney, and satirical comedy in McDonald), an emphasis on youth, and a cast of powerful female characters. Sweeney is a Vancouver auteur who has situated most of his films in his home city.8 Bruce McDonald, however, is not a Vancouver filmmaker, nor is his film an auteur film like the other two. Associated with the Toronto New Wave, a group of young, iconoclastic filmmakers who emerged on the scene in the 1980s, McDonald represents an outsider’s understanding of Vancouver. *Love Crimes*, which never had a theatrical release but made the film festival circuit, was authored by a Vancouver writer, Angus Fraser. It is based on a true Vancouver story about Gillian Guess, who was a juror for a 1995 murder trial. In 1998, she was convicted of obstructing justice because she carried on a love affair with the accused during the trial. Since the love affair was an interracial one, McDonald’s campy film deals directly with the racialized communities of Vancouver that Shum also dealt with in an earlier form. While Mina Shum portrays life within her specific ethnic community, McDonald situates his narrative within a broader Vancouver population and its attitudes toward the South Asian community prominent in the city’s suburban neighbourhood of Surrey. His film contextualizes race and sexuality as the union of the old and the new Vancouver.

Together, these three films create a critical dialectic, beginning with Shum’s positing of an internalized Asian reality for the city, which is then confronted with Sweeney’s non-Asian antithesis. McDonald synthesizes these two worlds, combining the spirit of Shum’s internal community monologue with an external vision that gazes upon the city’s racialized minorities. His protagonist is a rebellious female like Shum’s protagonist, but she is a white single mother who lacks the diffidence characteristic of Asian culture. The male gaze of the director and his male screenwriter add to Guess’s construction as a sexual object, which is what she became in the media.9 While Shum’s film is autobiographically influenced, McDonald’s is definitely that of a spectator, with Sweeney’s somewhere in the middle.
Double Happiness offers a counternarrative to the patriarchal Confucian traditions embraced by an immigrant Chinese community in an effort to preserve its sense of self in an alien environment. The film features a young Canadianized Chinese female (based autobiographically on Shum) confronting a cultural legacy that she finds restrictive in relation to her life in Vancouver, the only place she has known. The film tells the story of Jade Li, a young woman in rebellion against a traditional father who seeks to impose his sense of duty upon her and the rest of his family. The film can be read as a feminist statement, but it also seeks to articulate a problematic ethnicity and heterosexual family life, while emphasizing the importance of a new, bolder, more liberated future. It embraces the universal theme of youthful rebellion as a necessity for casting off family-imposed roles and achieving a self-determined adult identity. In his discussion of Double Happiness, Czech scholar Tomáš Pospišil highlights the universality of this theme: “In her debut feature Mina Shum successfully transcended the narrow confines of the experience of her immigrant community. Her message was far more universal and spoke to a wide variety of people of diverse backgrounds and generations.” The film garnered its lead, Sandra Oh, a Genie for Best Actress; it also won a Best First Feature award at the Berlin Film Festival and continued to gain an audience with a North America–wide DVD release in 2007 through a leading US film distributor.

The issue of the ethnospecific versus universal dimensions of the film is an important one in determining whether Shum is a transnational filmmaker in the same way that Toronto’s Deepa Mehta is. The main distinction between the two filmmakers is the age when they entered Canadian culture. Having lived in Vancouver since infancy, Shum was formed by Canada, while Mehta came to Canada as a young adult, already formed by India. Shum’s “Chinese” experience was mediated through her family as well as her gender and her Canadian experiences in school and university. Shum herself emphasized the universality of the film’s theme when promoting the film. “Men and women of all ages have told me that this is their story,” she said, “whether they’re African Canadian, Russian or Italian.” In fact, the protagonist, Jade, addressing the audience at the beginning of the film, states that
the Chinese family story can be any family’s story. Shum has self-identified as an “indie” director so as to escape the Chinese Canadian label.14 This tension between subject matter and career identity is an issue that lies at the heart of *Double Happiness*.

The film immediately entered the canon of what is generally considered Asian American cinema, a phenomenon that was launched by the American Wayne Wang’s film *The Joy Luck Club* (1993), based on the best-selling 1988 novel by Chinese American Amy Tan.15 Shum’s film is regularly discussed as part of Asian American cinema by American scholars. They tend, however, to ignore the film’s role in Canada’s national cinema, which is just one of the “double” roles the film plays out. The Canadian aspect of *Double Happiness* comes from its participation in what has come to be labelled “Pacific New Wave” cinema, based in Vancouver.16 The name mimics the Toronto New Wave label of the 1980s, which references the emergence of a new phalanx of directorial talent. Shum is joined in the Pacific New Wave by Lynne Stopkewich, Bruce Sweeney, Carl Bessai, Greg Harkema, and Anne Wheeler, among numerous others. This doubling of the film as both a North American and a local phenomenon simply highlights the diasporic and hybrid nature of the film and the ease with which it can be read with a wider ethnic application and as part of a national cinema. It can be considered transnational in the same way one can consider Burns’s *waydowntown* as transnational or transborder.

Critic Edward O’Neill argues that the protagonist in *Double Happiness* performs “her assigned ethnic and gender role” in such a way as to reveal it “to have been a performance.”17 This role playing or acting is a form of impersonation that the narrative of the film seeks to expose, while at the same time embracing the disguises that further survival. This is similar to the “doubling” or masking that Vancouver is known for in its cinematic guise. It is so seldom itself; rather, it becomes what is required of it to survive in the cinematic world. At minimum, hybrid and diasporic identities are dualistic, but they evolve (through marriage, for example) into multifaceted realities. In the process of accommodating cultural differences and integrating values in an unfamiliar world, new cultural entities and attitudes emerge that both deconstruct and recombine different aspects of an inherited or assumed identity. The process of acculturation is continuous and the identities generated by that process are provisional, always in flux.
The City of Dysfunction

The postcolonial interest in hybridity and diasporic studies around the time of the film’s release meant that *Double Happiness* became a favoured text. The film’s hybridity is a complex one, involving both psychological and sociological dimensions. Likewise, the sense of diaspora in the film is problematic because those with singular identities, such as Jade’s father’s Hong Kong–based friend and a Chinese film producer looking for an Asian actress, are shown to have both liberating and restraining aspects. They live in and out of their singular cultural and linguistic reality, while the heroine and her family live in multiple realities, which they try to accommodate as best they can.

Little sense of longing, painful separation, or nostalgia for their birth home is exhibited by Jade or her parents, and Jade’s younger sister is so acculturated to Canadian society that she sounds positively mainstream.

The main mood of the film, however, is a sense of entrapment. Eleanor Ty, in *The Politics of the Visible in Asian North American Narratives* (2004), argues that Asian visibility is a racialized phenomenon that contributes, paradoxically, to its invisibility in the dominant culture. The theme of doubleness that permeates the film captures the paradoxes of generational and ethnic conflicts. The results are always uncertain. For example, when Jade seeks out a white boyfriend, who symbolizes her desire to embrace the dominant society, his understanding of who she is is limited and incorrect. While she uses him to break the bond with her family, she eventually ends up facing the world alone because the identity she creates is one that is different from his. Her identity as a Canadian is multicultural, while his is not.

Another contradictory duality in the film is its reading by non-Asian audiences, who are offered a glimpse of what may formerly have been for them a stereotypical conception of this specific Asian community. The film attempts to normalize the Orientalized Other through the strong autobiographical voice in the film. At the beginning, the film’s protagonist addresses the putative viewers, asking them to treat her family as “white.” By this, she means that her struggle against parental authority is a universal one, relevant outside the culture specific to a particular ethnicity. Speaking of her next film, *Drive, She Said*, Shum described it as “basically about how women conduct their lives in the late ’90s,” which is how she viewed *Double Happiness* in regard to the early 1990s.

Sandra Oh, who played Jade Li in *Double Happiness*, confirmed the feminism of the film when she said, “Any actor wants to play a character that is
relevant and truthful and big and important—especially for women. Especially for young women.”

She is speaking of all young women living in a patriarchal society, not just those of Asian heritage. This strong drive for universality has to be sourced in Mina Shum’s Canadian experience since the 1960s.

There is a partnership in the film between ethnic identity with its “constructed . . . codes of dress, setting and behaviour” and North American feminism and its claims to universal rights and aspirations for women. Shum marries the two in the figure of Jade. This is the film’s fundamental hybridity. Hybridity is an adaptive mechanism that accompanies diasporic living and allows a multifaceted expression that is both preservative and liberationist. The universal appeal of the film to young women, in particular, implies that coming of age, its rebellion and its search for an independent mature self beyond the projected desires of parents, is a constant across all nationalities and ethnicities. Shum claimed, “All you have to do is see my film and [you] get a real sense about where my heart is.” Her heart is in that space defined by the nonethnic, nonracial term “indie director.”

“A person’s identity is understood as shaped by the intersecting aspects of one’s class, education, gender, age, ethnicity, race, sexuality and religion, as well as by one’s relationship to the place where one is located,” writes Tomáš Pospišil in his comparative study of three major 1990s Canadian films about visible minorities: Sam and Me, Masala, and Double Happiness. The character Jade Li’s relationship to the space that is Shum’s Vancouver is fundamental to an understanding of how an Asian Canadian constructs an urban environment out of her experience. Because of the strong autobiographical sources for this film, one can conclude that its representation has a strong degree of authenticity. The Li family home is working class, cramped, older, and rather ordinary. It is undistinguishable from much of the housing stock that makes up Vancouver, in contrast to its newer suburban surroundings, which form different cities (Burnaby, Westminster, Richmond, and Surrey). The locale of the film suggests an older Chinese immigration (pre-1980s) but one that exists outside the even older generation of immigrants who created downtown Chinatown and who experienced decades of official racism. The film’s focus on social class and the pressures on the Li family are reminiscent of the class construction of the family in Léolo. Because they are so confining, both families face rebellion from some of their members.
The domiciles in both *Léolo* and *Double Happiness* are crucial to the filmmakers’ discussion of interiority (the psyche) and exteriority (the physical). The immigrant self fits better inside the home than it does outside because it can be more authentic indoors than when interacting with the dominant, nonimmigrant society, where it faces a variety of stereotypes. Diasporic identity is about distance and distancing, about being in the midst and also being apart, about having to live a double life that demands accommodation within and without. The title *Double Happiness* plays on the Chinese characters that express a “wish for twice-blessed good fortune,” but it also suggests duality in English. This pastiche of wordplay is the postmodern bridge that links the film’s serious intent and with its comedic patina.

A diasporic identity involves various levels of alienation both within and outside the home. Alienation for racial minorities results from conflicting cultural values inculcated during childhood, public acts of discrimination, a genuine nostalgia for a former life, or a frustrated desire to fit in. For those raised in an immigrant family, there are only three options: denying the relevance of the past, embracing that past identity as relevant and current, or returning anew to that past after having put it aside. According to Pospišil, this latter possibility occurs regularly because “identity is constantly in the making.” In the case of the fictional character Jade Li, there is a monumental difference between her father’s diasporic sense and her own. Her sense of emplacement comes from Canada, while his sense of Canada is one of displacement. His sense of being displaced becomes constricting for his Canadian-raised daughter because of its emphasis on Confucian family values that do not make sense to her in terms of her future in the diaspora. As in most cases of intergenerational conflict, what is central to parental identity is marginal to hers. His hybridity is a negative one, while hers is positive. She is open to an outside world that has been formed through peer identity, while he is closed to embracing the world around him other than in a utilitarian sense. He wants to live the success denied him through her, while she wants to deny him that pleasure.

Jade’s country of origin is factually Canada but culturally binational. This binationality results in her country being Vancouver as an Asianized city. Her cultural self is framed by an internalized Chinese family universe, an externalized Chinese community and its institutions, and a multiracial and
multicultural public otherness ruled by an Anglo-European tradition. Her father’s country of origin is China, and its cultural traditions and Confucian behavioural ideals ground him and give him a sense of self-worth and dignity. In contrast, Jade derives her sense of self-worth and dignity from imagining a positive career for herself in the broader society outside the strictures of parental demands. The struggle occurs in the present, where his past and her future battle for dominance.

Language plays a role in redefining a cultural milieu and expressing differing nuances of speech and understanding. *Double Happiness* contains both English and Cantonese, and this duality is part of the film’s hybridity. The two languages co-exist, flowing into each other and defining the characters in the film as assimilated or not. Of all the family members, Jade’s much younger sister is presented as the most assimilated and Canadian, a character who watches but feels no conflicts. She is the totally Canadianized side of the family, while Jade is pulled in two directions. Jade’s hybridity is symbolized by her linguistic limitations: she can speak and understand her parents’ native tongue but cannot read or write it, which is not uncommon in children of first-generation immigrants. Her limited skill in Cantonese produces a state of “in-betweenness,” of liminality, that associates her with hybridity. It also means that Jade prefers English. Her preference for the dominant language of the city in which she lives symbolizes her embracing of the non-Asian Other. The two languages operating in the film signify the two cultures and their oppositional values. In expressing her intentions for *Double Happiness*, Mina Shum captured her own experience of liminality: “Not only was I hoping to describe new lives in a new language and culture, but I was trying to offer a meaningful and compassionate portrait of what it means to live ‘in between’ and to move within the liminal spaces between Canadian and Chinese cultures.” Being in a liminal space, the natural home of hybridity, means that one is caught between two powerful entities that one is both attracted to and alienated from in various major and minor ways. This sense of displacement results in a desire to place the self in another context. When Jade Li leaves home and moves into her first apartment, it is symbolically empty. It is up to her to fill it. Shum suggests that creating a space in the city where one’s hybridity is “at home” is the foundational act of adulthood. But in leaving home, Jade is actually imitating her father and mother, who gave up their ancestral identity to
move to a new, non-Chinese space where their language was a hindrance rather than a tool for socioeconomic advancement, at least in 1960s Vancouver.

Eleanor Ty’s discussion of performativity and ethnic identity in *Double Happiness* stresses the importance of a woman from a minority culture creating a film that disrupts stereotypes, but in a way that appeals to audiences who are accustomed to stereotypical representations of that minority. Making Jade a universal female figure while situating her in an ethnic milieu is an important resolution of duality. That Shum can take the fundamental ethical principles of Confucianism (*lǐ, yì, and rén*), which emphasize the primacy of an individual’s responsibilities toward others and the need for social harmony, and marry them to a feminism that emphasizes individual self-fulfillment in an adversarial society is a perfect example of diasporic hybridity. But that does not make her a good example of transnationality in the way of Deepa Mehta, who was formed by living in India before coming to Canada. Analyzing the various cultural aspects of the film and how they interact with each other clarifies the differences between *Double Happiness* and *Bollywood/Hollywood*. While Mehta’s film suggests a positive outcome in which conflicts are resolved, Shum’s film suggests that resolution is much more difficult to attain.

The plot of *Double Happiness*—the protagonist’s rebellion in favour of individualism and self-definition—suggests that ethnicity is being subordinated to feminism, but in other respects the film suggests the opposite. The rebellion may be the linear driver of the film, but the context is almost totally ethnic: Chinese identity surrounds and envelops the characters. Although Shum seeks to expose Confucian values and their restrictive and patriarchal trajectories, she does so with a gentle hand. As Brenda Austin-Smith notes, “What could have been an overly earnest and predictable drama of intergenerational misunderstanding with a sentimental ethnic flavour is . . . refreshed by the filmmaker’s ironic yet affectionate approach to Jade and her family.” In addition, the narrative closure of the film suggests a powerful sense of aloneness and loss, the price of a divorce from one’s cultural roots. The film’s theme of liberation may be its prime selling feature to contemporary Canadian audiences, but ethnicity and a comedic touch are paramount in the film itself.

The focus on living a double life is what gives *Double Happiness* its appeal. Everyone, to a certain degree, lives a double life in order to survive, and the necessity to act out expected roles results in much pretense and hiding. At the
same time, that doubleness is always performed within a cultural context that strongly determines its form. The Canadian film scholar Jacqueline Levitin remembers that when she met Mina Shum in 1991, the working title of the film was “Banana Split.” This whimsical title, which signified a split personality, made reference to the term “banana” as it is used pejoratively inside the Chinese community, to refer to someone who is yellow on the outside but white on the inside, a term applicable to both Shum herself and the Jade Li character. Shum’s ability to turn a pejorative term into a comic and innocent delight confirms her power of hybrid representation.

Shum’s representation of Vancouver involves the three elements of visuality, spatiality, and orality. The visuality of the film is expressed in colour saturation. “Each of the family members should have a [distinguishing] colour,” Shum explains. One of the key colours in the film is red, which she associates with being Chinese because it is considered a good luck colour. Another is a deep fluorescent blue, which she uses to associate with the non-Chinese aspects of Jade’s personality. Likewise, the film is saturated in the wet dark light that is typical of Vancouver from late fall to late spring. Suggestive of Jade’s duality is the strong contrast between the gritty night scenes when Jade is dating and the daylight scenes, which have more distance and perspective. A comic example of this visualizing of the city as a psychological palette is a scene in which the family poses outdoors for a photo for a visiting friend from Hong Kong. The postcard-type mountain backdrop for the photo is subsequently drenched in a downpour, implying that the “happy land” view of Vancouver is all wet.

The spatiality of the city framed by the film emphasizes interior shots of the family home, restaurants, and bar scenes. But the exterior scenes with Jade and her white boyfriend, Mark, are set in industrial backdrops. Jacqueline Levitin suggests that these cityscapes, which are lacking in domesticity, are “fringe” locations paralleling lives exiled from the home. Jade’s world is definitely on the fringe. Another aspect of Vancouver’s space for Shum is the contrast between the interior (and so internalized) scenes, whether domestic or public, with their unkempt feeling, and the exterior (and so externalized) scenes, which represent the dominant society. In the daylight scenes, the lovers seem isolated and alone. In one area of Jade’s life, a strong claustrophobic sense prevails; in another, there is room to move under her own steam whether
by car or on foot, but that movement means a departure into a certain isolation and aloneness. Clearly, both the visuality and the spatiality of the city is one that fits the film's theme of doubleness.

Orality is also dualistic in *Double Happiness*. The film begins in English, with its protagonist speaking to the audience, and then switches to Cantonese in the first family scene. In that scene, set at dinner, the camera revolves in a circle following the family conversation in which the two daughters speak English while the parents speak Cantonese. The use of two languages throughout the film not only highlights the generational difference but also invites the audience into the family debates and discussions as “foreign” observers. The audience shares Jade’s sense of alienation through translated subtitles. In this linguistic battle of wills, the hybridity of Chinese Canadian life is self-evident to the viewer. When the father’s Hong Kong friend visits Vancouver, he speaks Cantonese with the parents, but he also speaks English and the father even responds in English, making the point that one can be Chinese while speaking English. The two identities are compatible, especially in a city like Hong Kong and, by extension, in Vancouver. Shum's impressive ability to highlight the genuine synthesizing power of a hybrid identity and the possibility of a diasporic sensibility that is not rooted in the past receives its due when Jade’s African Canadian casting agent promotes her to a female Chinese producer looking for an actor who speaks Chinese. In this three-way female universe, it is the African Canadian woman who offers Jade, the aspiring actor, hope and encouragement. She serves as the symbol of the new life that every visible minority aspires to—a universe where self-fulfillment is attainable. The African Canadian film agent is a sign of success for a woman from a visible minority community.

THE ARCHITECT OF FAILURE IN SWEENEY’S *LAST WEDDING*

Bruce Sweeney (b. 1962) is an Ontario native and a contemporary of Shum’s who has made Vancouver his career home. He is an auteur director with half a dozen feature films to his credit, his first being *Live Bait* (1995) and his most recent *The Dick Knost Show* (2013). As a writer, director, and even producer of his films, he has created a cinematic representation of Vancouver peopled
with youthful, urbane characters of his own generation. *Last Wedding* (2001) was produced by BrightLight Pictures Inc., which was co-founded by his fellow University of British Columbia graduate Stephen Hegyes, who had earlier produced Shum’s *Double Happiness*.

Sweeney is part of what the *Globe and Mail’s* Mark Peranson in 2001 labelled the “Pacific New Wave” when he described Sweeney’s film as depicting “the Vancouver left out of tourist brochures.” What the Pacific New Wave represents stylistically is a neorealist urbanity that is clearly part of independent, indigenous filmmaking. Using ensemble casts and offering themes and styles that appeal to a youthful, urban audience, the films of the Pacific New Wave portray a city of emotional energy and social dynamism emanating from a generation on the make, forging an identity for themselves and for the city. One of the distinguishing sociological features of Vancouver is its ability to attract Canadian migrants, many of them young. Almost one in five Greater Vancouver residents was born in another province, which is a higher proportion than in Toronto, itself a mecca for youthful talent. This makes Vancouver a city with a dual attraction, first for non-Canadian immigrants and second for Canadian migrants. Sweeney—one of those aspiring, young, male migrants—came to Vancouver and developed his professional film credentials there, just as Arcand did in Montréal and Egoyan in Toronto. Montréal, Toronto, and Vancouver are the key players in the Canadian film industry, allowing each of these filmmakers to engage with their adopted cities. Sweeney’s migration from industrial Sarnia, Ontario, to the West Coast to attend university allowed him to become an astute, external observer of his new surroundings: he had something with which to compare them. Mina Shum, in contrast, grew up in Vancouver. Sweeney and Shum belong to the same generation, but the world of a white Anglo-Canadian male from industrial Ontario is poles apart from the world of an Asian-born, nonwhite female. His is a different Vancouver.

Sweeney made a splash in Canadian film circles when his first feature, *Live Bait*, won the Best Canadian Feature Film award at the Toronto International Film Festival in 1995. *Last Wedding* represents his third auteur effort. It deals with three white, heterosexual, childless couples and their disintegrating interpersonal relationships. These are the faces of Sweeney’s migrant generation seeking success and fun in Lotusland. But the personal bonds
they have created unravel in Sweeney's imagination in a chaotic and humorous manner. “I thought I should make a film about something I don't totally understand.” Sweeney said, referring to relationship breakdown. “I wanted to have a person kind of like me suddenly thrown into a crisis.”\textsuperscript{40} The connection between his Vancouver and the film is evident in both the actors he chose and the sets he used. Sweeney used his own house as a set, and Tom Scholte, who plays a CanLit professor, is a University of British Columbia drama graduate who wrote the one-act play on which Sweeney’s earlier film \textit{Dirty} is based on; as an actor, Scholte has been a regular in Sweeney's films.\textsuperscript{41} Drawing on his own observations and the verisimilitude of an urban setting he has adopted, Sweeney offers a Vancouver that mainstream Canadian audiences can recognize as fitting their image of the city.

When Sweeney was asked how he would characterize Vancouverites, he answered, “After living in Vancouver for 20 years, I think I’ve learned the rhythms. We’re famously unfriendly people. . . . I think that’s why there’s so much door knocking in my films.”\textsuperscript{42} The Vancouver space that Sweeney represents in \textit{Last Wedding} is one that is highly internalized and not easily broken into. These inner domestic spaces are the sites of conflicts and neuroses where individuals seek to affirm their personal identities and career paths. They are not the typical retreats from a hectic public sphere. They are psychological dungeons where external dramas are internalized. Whatever the causes of Sweeney’s view of personal dysfunction, the situations and characters he has created in the film offer plenty of scope for black comedy.

The acclaimed Canadian film critic Geoff Pevere notes how \textit{Last Wedding} reverses “the traditional trajectory of the Hollywood romantic comedy in which people work their way through . . . to attain a sunny nuptial state of happy-ever-afterness.”\textsuperscript{43} Instead, the film begins with a wedding that goes downhill almost from the start. The newly married couple’s problems infect their friends, causing those relationships to fall apart as well. “Sweeney is obviously engaging with his own people here,” writes Pevere; he is sticking to what he “knows and cares about.”\textsuperscript{44} His characters are a compilation of experiences and people he has met, brushed against, and known as he established himself in the city’s film industry. \textit{Last Wedding} is very much in touch with the give and take of a thirty-something generation finding its feet in a stressful urban milieu. Sweeney was thirty-eight when he made the film.
Film and the City

*Last Wedding,* at $1.3 million, continued Sweeney’s low-budget approach. Working with low-cost, local actors in a familiar urban setting, he has been able to achieve “final cut” incorruptibility in this film by preserving certain disturbing scenes, such as a sexual encounter next to a dumpster. He sees himself as following in the footsteps of Egoyan and Cronenberg, two auteurs whom he admires for forging distinct cinematic identities. Although he has not achieved anywhere near the stature of these two directorial stars, he has been completely true to his vision and subject matter. Unlike Shum, who can feature her ethnicity and build a personal brand on it, and Maddin, who can offer his distinctive retro style, Sweeney’s films have to fight to rise above the crowd. Initially, this lack of distinctiveness made it difficult to find funding for the film from the usual Canadian sources, but eventually, he was able to make a film that characterizes Vancouver from the perspective of a white male Canadian migrant.

David Spanner, reviewing the film for Vancouver’s *The Province,* made the startling claim that “*Last Wedding* is the best movie ever made in Vancouver.” While the film itself has a problematic narrative structure with characters who are difficult to bond with, there must be something in it that raises the bar on urban authenticity for a Vancouver reviewer to make this claim. The film revolves around the drive to build new downtown accommodation to house the constant in-flow of migrants, who have made the city a place with the highest residential real estate costs in the country. At the time the film was being made, high-rise condo living in Vancouver made national headlines because numerous newly built condos were found to be leaking and full of mould. One of the male protagonists in the film manages a waterproofing business, a characterization that Vancouver audiences could relate to, and Vancouver reviewer Malcolm Parry remarked that the film is “so city-rooted it is set in a leaky condo.” Vancouver audiences would understand this film, and the local appeal of the film was evident in the attendance in the city. The film played on seven screens in Vancouver but only a few in Toronto, where it opened the Toronto International Film Festival. It won Best Canadian Film in 2001 from the Toronto Critics Association.

Among reviewers both inside and outside Vancouver, the specificity of place in the film garnered its share of comment. A film reviewer in neighbouring Victoria pinpointed the film’s “regional humour” as bound “to coax
chuckles of recognition from British Columbians.”50 Glen Schaefer, writing about Sweeney’s depictions of his hometown in Vancouver’s The Province, claimed that Sweeney makes “Vancouver a recurring character”; Schaefer quotes Sweeney as saying, “Everything I do gets processed through this lens of Vancouver life.”51 But that lens is provided by the experiences of a married, middle-class, professional, white male whose acerbic wit on heterosexual relations is far from the ethnic family dramas favoured by Mina Shum. Both are speaking from their own confinements.

The desire to grasp Vancouver and its people as real entities rather than as stand-ins for an American city is rooted in the goals of Pacific New Wave filmmakers. The city’s cinematic history as a facade in which it gets passed off as one American place after another demands an authentic response. In fact, Vancouver’s major contemporary literary and cultural icon, Generation X author Douglas Coupland, wrote the screenplay for a film about the city titled Everything’s Gone Green (2006), in which he ties the city’s identity to fakeness and the superficial makeovers of consumer culture. Sweeney, too, plays with the concept of Vancouver as a facade by exposing what he sees as the hidden, raw emotions of its inhabitants, who are driven by jealousy, lust, and contrivance. For example, in one scene, the architect intern played by Molly Parker is at a party high in an office tower, where she works for a mainstream firm. Behind the cocktail crowd bubbling with conversation is a superb mountainscape that is postcard Vancouver, but the nasty interaction between the partygoers exposes the struggle between glitz and honesty, between upward mobility and personal integrity. The contrast between image and reality that Sweeney accentuates also appears in the personality of the young bride, Zipporah (played by Frida Betrani), an aspiring country-and-western singer who fills her condo with thematic kitsch. Her new husband, Noah (Benjamin Ratner), finally flees the place because of the triviality and absurdity of her aspirations. Sweeney paints a Vancouver filled with characters out of tune with their cultural and physical environment. Noah, who manages a waterproofing firm, may be able to fix leaky condos, but his own condo is beyond his power to alter since his wife is lost in her country-and-western fantasies and doesn’t care what is happening to her world. She has barricaded herself with make-believe. This could be Sweeney’s comment on the fantasies of those in the Vancouver film industry, who play minor roles in American productions.
Sweeney creates a dialectical movement between three couples who represent the three basic units of Freudian psychology—the libidinous couple, the superego or rational couple, and the couple that is the ego seeking to balance the rational and the irrational. All three couples operate in a secular universe where professional advancement and success is paramount. These couples typically spend a great deal of time in restaurants eating out. They also spend most of their time indoors in rooms and hallways, which represent their interior psychological space. This is where urbanites build their identities—in small, private living spaces. The external world of public space—streets and sidewalks—plays a small part in their existence. Only in the final scenes when the rampaging women in cars chase their former partners does one see Vancouver streetscapes. The closing scene has the three males sitting silent, unhappy, and naked in a hot tub, soaking their battered egos. Whether in frantic motion or utter stillness, Vancouver is an emotional cesspool.

Because of the proximity of the mountains that co-exist with urban space (West and North Vancouver) and of the ocean that penetrates part of the urban space (False Creek and English Bay, for example), the city can be viewed as a facade or an illusory presence, hanging like a paper-thin mask over the face of nature. Most often, the city is presented in postcards with either a mountain or an ocean backdrop. In addition to the concept of a facade (linked to performance), a very strong water theme permeates the film, but the water theme is not archetypal (Jungian), as it is in *Léolo*. Instead, it represents a rainforest sense of deluge, of a threatening flood, against which the built city must defend itself. That Sweeney uses water as a grounding metaphor only adds to the film’s Vancouver identity with the city’s own garrison mentality, surrounded as it is by either oceanic or mountain majesty. Sweeney uses water as a metaphor for the mould and decay that destroys the protective walls of the psyche.

More importantly, Sweeney treats the built space of the city—its buildings, its roads, its sidewalks—as a symbol of orderliness and outward facade that is meant to contrast with human disorder and deceit. Beneath the city’s approved superficial identity, which is built on a glance and nothing more, lies another city—the one whose inhabitants have sex next to a back lane dumpster or offer fellatio to a deviant academic carrying on the pretense of professional duties. The theme of hiding and exposure that Sweeney plays with relates to
his quip, quoted earlier, that because of the hidden side of Vancouver, his films are filled with door knocking. It could be that as an “outsider,” he senses the hiding of Vancouverites behind cultural and economic walls. This impenetrability, however, is overcome through the persistence of nature and rain, which expose the decay that is actually there.

While Shum exposes the generational tensions in a normal immigrant Chinese family in her film, Sweeney exposes the dysfunction in the lives of childless, white, professional couples who are caught up in a certain viciousness that he associates with a hedonistic, secular city like Vancouver. For example, he makes a point of having Noah, the new husband, forsake his Jewish ancestry for a secular wedding to fit the norms of the wider society. Noah’s turning his back on his heritage mirrors Shum’s protagonist, Jade Li, turning her back on her family roots. Jade wants to succeed in precisely the world that Sweeney paints in such a negative light. One can see her becoming a character in a Sweeney film, where all the hope and promise of personal and professional success turns into a false ambition. The generic differences between romantic comedy (Shum) and black comedy (Sweeney) mark a progression from Shum’s feminist hope to Sweeney’s despair. What these films share is their spirit of critique, of exposure, and of indeterminate narrative closures.

THE MULTIRACIAL WORLD OF MCDONALD’S THE LOVE CRIMES OF GILLIAN GUESS

Torontonian Bruce McDonald uses a media-laden story for his explanation of Vancouver’s dynamics. He takes Shum’s ethnic theme and Sweeney’s sexual focus and shows how a racialized South Asian persona involved in interracial sex is portrayed in a white-dominated media. The Love Crimes of Gillian Guess (2004) is a statement on gender politics, race, media, celebrity, and public discourse as hypocrisy. The theme of facades is probed even more deeply in this film than in Sweeney’s or Shum’s. McDonald is the ultimate outsider, whose experience or knowledge of Vancouver is primarily media-based. His critique and construction of Vancouver becomes a deconstruction of that media and its purveying of images.
In 1995, Gillian Guess, a juror for a murder trial, had an affair with one of the defendants, Peter Gill, who was subsequently acquitted. Three years later, she and the freed defendant were convicted of obstructing justice because of their liaison and its impact on the verdict. In the process, her case became a cause célèbre and garnered her copious attention on talk shows. This story became the focal point of Bruce McDonald’s surreal treatment of her life and the infamous episode itself. McDonald is a Toronto director who had only worked on one previous film on the West Coast, the acclaimed cult mockumentary *Hard Core Logo* (1996).

*Love Crimes* represents a non-auteurist understanding, in contrast with the auteurs discussed throughout this book. Vancouverite Angus Fraser—who had shared screenwriting credit for Lynne Stopkewich’s debut sensation, *Kissed* (1996)—wrote the original screenplay, but McDonald made the film his own by raising it to the level of a satirical surrealist romp. His portrayal of the city has parallels with *Desperanto*, Patricia Rozema’s short film about Montréal discussed earlier in this book, but while Rozema gave her film a generic happy ending, McDonald’s satirical tone sinks and never lifts.

In an interview with Vancouver film critic Katherine Monk, McDonald praised the freedom that the Vancouver film scene offered him as director compared to his Toronto experience. “You can feel the freedom . . . the freedom to re-invent yourself,” he said. “That’s not something you readily find in Toronto . . . and that’s so refreshing and liberating.” The film represents McDonald’s interpretation of Vancouver in the grip of sensationalism. He includes a dysfunctional family à la Shum and the dysfunctional psychology of relationships represented by Sweeney. To those dysfunctions, he adds the dual dysfunctions of the law and the media. In a sense, he builds a pyramid of neurotic, abusive, and ever-hypocritical attitudes fostered by the media’s construction of scandal as entertainment. The whole film pursues this theme of mediated existences proffered for public entertainment.

The film stars Joely Collins, a Vancouver-born actor, as the notorious Gillian Guess; Hugh Dillon, a McDonald favourite from *Hard Core Logo*, as Bobby Tomahawk, a devilish late-night television talk-show host; and Ben Bass as the accused Peter Gill, an Indo-Canadian from the Sikh community. Sexual and racial politics are deeply intertwined in the film. McDonald is able to produce a narrative that is disconcerting for Hollywood-attuned (read Canadian)
audiences because of its conflicting genres and styles (animation to musical to drama) and its undermining of narrative as a completely imagined construction; the film contains every mode of cinematic storytelling from naturalistic realism (flashbacks to Guess’s childhood) to comic representations of serious crime shows and courtroom dramas. The film is a series of discontinuous and conflicting fragments that challenge the integrative power of the audience. He uses different colour schemes to establish various periods and events in Guess’s life and different genres to express emotions and destabilize the viewer. This is a film that wears cinematic modes on its sleeve. And whereas hybridity is a prominent theme in Double Happiness and nonexistent in Last Wedding, in Love Crimes it becomes a parade of mismatched elements masquerading as pseudo-unity. There is no integrative factor. For McDonald, the case of Gillian Guess shows Vancouver to be a deeply divided city that not even love can overcome. While Shum and Sweeney speak out of a personal authenticity, McDonald speaks the way media speak—as a fabricator of acceptable narrative filled with simplistic stereotypes. His film does not allow the normal suspension of disbelief for the audience because of its emphasis on artifice in every scene dealing with the way the story was reported.

The film emphasizes the clichéd nature of media representations and the ways in which media stereotype people and situations. The courtroom is shown to be a movie set and the planting of listening devices in Guess’s home by the police is accompanied by the replay of an old police television series, Dragnet, which serves as a satirical commentary on their actions. The film is so media saturated in its imagery that viewers cannot escape the overpowering mediation they are watching. They are unable to suspend disbelief to engage with the narrative. McDonald has tried to subvert the audience’s dependence on various forms of media, but this only leads to the audience’s alienation. By being shown the constructed nature of their media-generated imaginings, viewers are left emotionally disengaged and therefore alienated. McDonald himself claims that his reading of Guess is that she is a woman who “imagines herself in a movie.”

McDonald wants us to disidentify, to stand back and acknowledge our alienation from the story as it unfolds, which also represents his own stance as an outside filmmaker who cannot identify himself with Vancouver or its stories. His reference point is always Toronto. His positioning of the viewer
as a self-conscious spectator rather than as a participant identifying with the action of the film is meant to make us critical of how the world is created for our consumption rather than as some pathway to truth. *Love Crimes* is presented as a mediated universe whose narratives alienate us from the truth.

The Gillian Guess character represents both a feminist and an anti-feminist figure. Her eroticization is both confirmed and challenged by the actor Joely Collins, who reads Guess as a person “very much in control and confident in her sexuality.” That McDonald played up this aspect of the character suggests that a female protagonist as both vamp and cougar (prey and hunter) fits the male directorial gaze. When Guess appears on “The Bobby Tomahawk Show” (with distant echoes of David Cronenberg’s celebrated scene in his 1982 auteur film *Videodrome*), Tomahawk goes after her in a salacious manner in order to titillate his audience, a significant number of whom are matronly Indo-Canadian women in saris, and she rises to the occasion with her expert verbal sparring. The debate continued in real life when Collins praised Guess’s “strength” while Hugh Dillon, who plays Tomahawk, claimed that Guess had a diva complex that “people couldn’t believe.” McDonald turned the Guess character into a sex goddess figure because he felt that Guess “leaps out because most Canadians like to keep their heads low on the radar screen.” Her provocative attire (red dress, red shoes), her driving around in a fantasy white convertible wearing sunglasses like our image of a doomed Hollywood celebrity actress, and her constant display of ankle and limb make her seem truly American. At one point, Tomahawk introduces his show with a fake American accent, which he immediately drops, calling the accent “American shit.” It is clear that the extravagant persona of the “fallen woman” (Tomahawk calls her a nymphomaniac) that McDonald constructs for us is meant to be non-Canadian, but this persona is nevertheless in harmony with our contemporary postmodern urban fantasies driven by the media. McDonald is saying that Guess, as the American cinematic femme fatale, is a figure who is us and not us at the same time.

In satirizing the courtroom drama genre, McDonald turns the stock figures of American courtroom dramas into salivating male bumpkins; the proper Vancouver Anglo Guess family home of the 1960s into a site of alcoholism, deceit, and bitterness; and public discourse about crime and morality into a system of coded language that hides racism and hypocrisy. How the
media-saturated imagery that we grow up with feeds prejudices with stock characters is the bull’s eye of his satire. By exposing that imagery for what it is—a facade (a female villain who is a scandalous affront to public virtue)—he takes the film in the direction of martyrdom for St. Gillian of Vancouver.

McDonald’s satirical sophistication is so intense that the film never received theatrical release. His overintellectualized construction of cinematic art and the film’s carnival of contrapuntal genres and flippant mood is simply too postmodern for mainstream audiences, who become overwhelmed with McDonald’s buffet of film styles, from Bollywood song-and-dance numbers to emotionally drenched, dramatic dialogue about suicide. The Bobby Tomahawk character as a kind of tempting devil and Guess as a conflicted Barbie doll, manipulative and innocent at the same time, are recognizable only as campy constructs without emotional attachment. All of the film’s characters are presented not as “real” but rather as figments of the media’s, and therefore our, imagination. Vancouver becomes an obvious film set, a facade where dramas are re-enacted and where certain generic formulas replace reality. For McDonald, the mediated image is a false image and the presentation of its absurdity is meant to offend rather than attract the “everyman” audience.58

To highlight how a city becomes a film image that can be manipulated, enhanced, and reconstituted to fit whatever message its creator wishes, McDonald juxtaposes external shots of leafy streets or Edenic forests to internalized human cruelty hidden behind the walls of homes and television studios. The basic contrast is between idyllic landscapes and dysfunctional psyches, a contrast that has overtones of Sweeney’s representation of Vancouver. When the voice-over announcement introducing The Bobby Tomahawk Show comes on, it uses the province’s licence plate cliché, “Beautiful British Columbia,” as the location of the show, but the ads that appear later refer to the studio’s location as “Hastings and Main,” which audiences will recognize as the centre of Vancouver’s drug-ridden and impoverished East Side. McDonald also uses the real facade of the former Vancouver courthouse stairs to imitate the stereotypical courthouse images of American cinema and television. This blending of the real and the imagined into a single emblematic representation expresses the lack of distinction between the mediated image and reality that is now an integral part of public consciousness. For McDonald, as for Sweeney, Vancouver is an arena of false roles, delusional
games, and destroyed personalities. This negativity fits with the satirical genre, but it also turns Vancouver into a caricature, a comic-book city.

Of the three films discussed in this chapter, McDonald’s is the most postmodern. His protagonists are thoroughly different from his own identity: he is not a woman and he is not South Asian, nor is he a Vancouverite. So he has to treat these identities as separate and distinct from himself. He does so by mediating them through the stereotypes created by the media, thereby removing himself from the film’s characterization. *Love Crimes* is a meditation on how we live in media-constructed narratives, which is not an issue for Shum and Sweeney, to whom Vancouver is a real entity in which they live and work. Of the three films, only *Double Happiness* has received significant scholarly study. This suggests that the films are not distinctive enough to warrant scholarly comment. Shum’s identity as a female filmmaker of Asian descent fits the postcolonial interest more than the creative work of two white heterosexual male directors does. McDonald’s construction of Guess, while trying to be sympathetic, is so over the top and so mired in sexual imagery that it cannot escape its male gaze. The lack of subtlety in his film may be why it has not been studied. Another possible reason is its lack of theatrical release: it may simply be too obscure to be worth analyzing.59

All three films contain a strong theme of alienation and of life roles as performance. While Vancouver’s identity is highly differentiated as an imagined entity in the three films, they retain some linkages. Whether it is a woman wanting to escape her traditional home (Shum), or a woman dreaming of a singing career (Sweeney), or a woman performing to the media (McDonald), Vancouver is represented as a female psyche torn by having so much natural beauty that she is forced to live life as a facade that hides her real self. The contrast between the imagined, the desired, and the real creates a schizophrenic city. The conflict between Vancouver’s Edenic natural beauty, on the one hand, and its constructed concrete jungle, on the other, makes the designation of being a facade poignant. When one puts the ocean sunsets of English Bay, the dense high-rise jungle of the West End that borders it, and the rain-fed forests of Stanley Park into one entity, one can sense the conflict within Vancouver’s urban psyche about what the city really is.

Mike Gasher, author of *Hollywood North: The Feature Film Industry in British Columbia*, deserves the last word on the role of the indigenous
The filmmaker in British Columbia: “Indigenous films . . . render the province a distinct historical, political, social and cultural entity,” a place “where filmmakers and audiences can work through the various meanings this place evokes for the people who make their lives there.”\textsuperscript{60} The same applies, of course, to films set specifically in Vancouver. That films such as \textit{Double Happiness, Last Wedding,} and \textit{The Love Crimes of Gillian Guess} are so poorly known to Canadian cinema audiences represents the perennial marginality of Canadian film in English-speaking Canada. If these audiences were to see the three Vancouvers represented in these films, they would realize that Vancouver’s urbanity is as diverse and complex as that of Montréal or Toronto and is filled with an equal amount of dramatic tension.