

The Silent Rhythms: Trans-visualization of Taiwan in *Millennium Mambo*, *Café*

Lumière and Three Times

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Abstract

This paper studies the three films of Hou Hsiao-hsien - *Millennium Mambo*(2001), *Café Lumière*(2004) and *Three Times*(2006) to explore the “absent voices” in Taiwan under different forms of normalizing order: whether it is concerned with politics or economics. Through the visual presentation of personal history and memory, the spectators cross from the post Japanese colonial period to modernized time; from Taiwan to Japan, and even to China. They also respectively bring forth different social issues: diasporic colonial and postcolonial situation, youth culture, single mothers, etc.

The question I would like to ask at the outset can be formulated this way: If art, such as film can reflect the singularity of experience, then how these silent voices are unconcealed (or re-concealed) through audiovisual images? Could this process of exposure/enclosure also reveal the interaction between the excluded and the community? In particular, with the development of modernization and globalization, a sense of displacement is strengthened. The issue of cultural pluralism is not only limited to national or ethical borders, but could be individuals.

“Rhythm” thus will be a starting point of this paper. In terms of its etymology, rhythm refers to a regular or an irregular movement or procedure. Here I mean an insignificant but existent singularity in this modern era. Combining Jacques Rancière’s concept of aesthetics and politics with Trinh T. Minh-ha’s notion of “interval,” I attempt to find out how these “absent voices” flow underneath the images and the society. By this research, hopefully, more light can be shed on a more complex relation of singular space to other singular spaces or collective powers in quotidian life.

Keyword: Hou Hsiao-hsien, Rhythm, Diasporic Experience, Quasi-bodies,

Singularity, Silence

Preface

Literature itself was constituted as a kind of symptomatology of society, and it set this symptomatology in contrast with the clamour and imagination of the public stage. (*The Politics of Aesthetics* 33)

In practical terms, therefore, the question of the difference between real life and reproduced life, that is, between reality and cinema, is a question, as I was saying, of temporal rhythm. (Pasolini, "Is Being Natural?" 241)

Writing has been a way to endow us with a new perspective on the world. Juxtaposed with the traditional medium of writing, film further blurs the line between reality and fantasy. How the singularity of experience is unconcealed or concealed via film becomes more interesting. To explore this issue, I would like to re-examine the latest three films by the Taiwanese film director Hou Hsiao-hsien—*Millennium Mambo* (2001), *Café Lumière* (2004) and *Three Times* (2006).

Hou Hsiao-hsien has been one of the pioneers of Taiwan's New Wave Cinema from the early 1980s.¹ This movement is noted for a preference for long takes, telephoto lensing, non-professional actors, and the quotidian space. Yet, a more

¹ The film *In Our Time* (1982) is usually regarded as the rejuvenation of Taiwanese cinema: the New Wave Cinema. There are four filmmakers involved in this project, including Edward Yang, Ke, Yi-Zheng, Tao, De-Chen, and Zhang Yi.

intense engagement with Taiwan's history and identity of this movement, such as in *City of Sadness* has aroused profound anxieties among critics (Shen 165). The culmination of the criticism surrounding it can be exemplified in the 1991 anthology *Death of the New Cinema (Hsing-tien-ying chih si)*.² Perceptive as these criticisms are, they sometimes may run the risk of falling into "repressive hypothesis" (Chow 1393).³ On the other hand, those severe criticisms against Hou can be considered as "an important exercise of the post-revolutionary cultural critique" (Yeh 65). As a whole, the long-term discussion over his works does imply their crucial roles in discovering the interaction between the aesthetics and the politics in film. This interaction becomes more sophisticated in Hou's three latest films.

Instead of retracing a grand history, the three films reveal a closer relationship between the filmmaker and the society he lives in. Combining documentary-like elements and a contemporary backdrop, each of them shows how a specific group of people are situated in the society, and throughout the history. For instance, *Millennium Mambo* and *Café Lumière* inspect respectively the younger generation in modern society. Despite the fact that the first two sections depict personal memories, *Three Times* consistently reflects how personal emotion tracks down the political situation

² There have been several responses to the criticism on Hou in *Death of the New Cinema*, such as Yeh Yueh-yu, "Why can't woman enter history: re-viewing City of Sadness" (Yueh-yu 181-213).

³ In this hypothesis, critics keep their attention on what is behind the image (going through all hidden ideologies, that is), but ignore the transcultural aspect of it. "What are on the screen are not people but images," which "liberate us from the constraints of literal, bodily identification, while reminding us of the undertheorized relation between economics, on the one hand, and fantasy and identity, on the other" (Chow 1386-95).

from the past to the present. At the same time, it is worth exploring how the singular experience is interpreted through the singularity of film. Here the concept of rhythm would be applied to my analysis of the issues above.

In terms of its etymological meaning, rhythm is connected to the “feature of musical composition, which depends on the systematic grouping of notes according to their duration.” Another definition is the “movement marked by the regulated succession of strong and weak elements, or of opposite or different conditions.”⁴ In filmmaking, “rhythm” has been historically associated with the motion, which is as essential as the photographic element. This characteristic has been explored and developed by different directors since the 1930s. For instance, Dziga Vertov’s “Kino-Eye” seeks to incorporate the movement within the images that contain “the internal rhythm of each object” (8). The French film theorist Germaine Dulac also states that: “the integral film which we all hope to compose is a visual symphony made of rhythmic images, coordinated and thrown upon the screen exclusively by the perception of an artist” (41). More specifically, the rhythm can be seen from two dimensions - “internal rhythm” and “external rhythm” (Oumano 161). Internal rhythm refers to the diegetic space within the scene such as camera movement, lighting, action, dialogue and music. On the other hand, external rhythm refers to the

⁴ “Rhythm”, *The Oxford English Dictionary*, 2nd ed., CD-ROM (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1992).

non-diegetic elements, like editing, which links the frames and controls scene length. In this regard, my purpose in this paper is to study whether the singularity of experience is indistinctly presented or concealed via the interaction between the two rhythms. In other words, I would like to study “the equal, multiple interactions of diverse presences on film” (Trinh 198). Simultaneously, I will search out what a context in the film itself is generated by that interaction. Moreover, if the author of a film is also a part of the singularities presented in the film, I will then ask how these three films represent the filmmaker’s singularity, instead of a voice for the public, or an everlasting truth (Huang 18). In other words, the singularity of experience here relates not only to the individuals in the films, but to the medium, cinema itself and the filmmaker. It is the complex relationship among the three aspects that becomes the pivotal point of this paper. To further explore the conceptual issues at stake here, I would like to apply Jacques Rancière’s idea of “quasi-bodies” in *The Politics of Aesthetics* and Trinh T. Minh-ha’s “interval” in *Cinema Interval*. The ensuing discussion will be divided into three parts to examine the three different aspects of singularity in the three films.

The Absent Rhythm

Like *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996) before it, *Millennium Mambo* depicts the life of the contemporary youth. The protagonist is Vicky (Shu Qi), a young woman

who is torn between two men, Hao-hao (Tuan Chun-hao) and Jack (Jack Kao). Adapted from real-life events, *Millenium Mambo* combines such elements of instability and fantasy as mise-en-scène, background music, and its temporal storylines. Simultaneously, *Millennium Mambo* is like a documentary recording the night life of the youths in modern Taiwan society under Vicky's gaze (Huang 146). However, the extremely elusive narrative and a repeated viewing of the film seem to make the film less powerful and less satisfactory than Hou's earlier films (Chen 102; Lin 71). It may be regarded as a gap between Hou's perspective toward life and the young men's. Ultimately, the gap makes the rhythm between the film and its context absent. Absent as it is, the rhythm unconceals another heterogeneous space.

In the beginning of this film, what is presented to our eyes first is a number of lights hung above Vicky, who walks and smokes in a breezeway. With distracting blue lighting, throbbing techno music, slow motion and the hand-held shot, the viewers seem to be introduced into a strange world. The slow-motion shot keeps following Vicky until she runs down the breezeway and disappears in the dark. This prelude, in fact, has sets the tone of the film, and signals the relation of Hou to the young people, that is, close as well as distant. Instead of the habitual long shot used before, Hou utilizes a lot of medium shots and close-ups. However, the visual elements in the movie often appear hazy and obscure. On the one hand, it reflects the hollowness of

the youths in Taiwan. The consistently afloat smoke from the cigarettes, the marijuana in the pubs, or other drugs testify to the rootless state shared by the young generation. On the other hand, the smoke implicates the abstract relationship between the filmmaker and the subjects he shoots. The gap results from the different pace of life each generation lives at.⁵ Consequently, it registers an ever-disappearing focus on the contemporary world from the camera. The alienating atmosphere is especially put to the extreme in the end of the film.

After those sparkling and brightly colored visual elements in the previous scenes, the last scene returns to a paler color and to a stabilized situation without any voice-over. Simultaneously it begins as an unreadable frame comprising an empty street in the winter. There is no dialogue, action, or camera movement, except for a few birds flying in the snow, and an ambient Folktronica song. In this extremely long take, it presents a quiet street with some old movie posters hung above.⁶ The film at this point resembles the purest of actualities, in which the camera aims simply at a street scene and is left to record whatever happens before it (Doane 181). The historicity of the past, the immediacy of the present, and the unpredictability of the future, all seem to be mixed, as affected by the hybrid style of the soundtrack.

On the other hand, this long take makes the scene photo-like without any action

⁵ According to Hou Hsiao-hsien, the life cycle of the young people nowadays is much shorter than his generation, notably the young women. Here, it means that many young people nowadays easily get astray (Lin 71).

⁶ The last scene lasts for over one minute without any camera movement.

and dialogue. With its suspended meaning, the frame becomes a “void” or an “interval”. As the way an image breathes, it is not merely the opposite of fullness or objecthood. Instead, it is the very site that makes forms and contents inseparable (Trinh, “From” 142). The process has hence more to do with a “revelation” than with a “symbolization” (Doane 183). Moreover, with the hybrid and trance-like background music, a kind of heterogeneity arises. It brings out a brute presence, which “remains a deaf and silent obstacle to all forms of signification” (Rancière 92). This absent presence is implied by the absence of Jack near the end of the film. Like Vicky’s search, the spectators are driven to keep searching for something in another space with a dim clue.

As a whole, in *Millennium Mambo*, the interaction between the filmmaker and the characters seems to be lost. Nevertheless, it is the lost correlation that subtly echoes the rootless youth, who fool around different pubs. Besides, it is suggestive of the sense of emptiness and alienation felt by the young people nowadays. In this way, the lost interaction subtly forms another rhythm between the film and the characters. It is absent, but not insensible. By problematizing our sensibility, the viewers are situated at an active position through a force of multiple dissociated elements, whether from within or outside of the film.

The External Rhythm

Hou's next film is *Café Lumière*, which is Hou's first directed film abroad. As a homage paid to Yasujiro Ozu on his 100th birthday, *Café Lumière* succeeds in echoing Ozu in spirit, presenting a new version of his *Tokyo Story* (1953) for the 21st century. Due to its more impromptu way of filmmaking⁷ than before, *Café Lumière* encompasses a more impressive documentary style. With the long expressive tracking shots, it is more like a story directly snapped from one part of the daily life in modern Tokyo. On the other hand, unlike the fashionable and avant-garde life depicted in *Millennium Mambo*, *Café Lumière* captures a strong sense of vintage aura through its mise-en-scène. Consequently it forms a juxtaposition of the past and the present. The past becomes the external rhythm of the present action in the film. This external rhythm can also be seen between the protagonist, Yoko (Yo Hitoto) and her past being inside and outside of the film; Yoko and the musician, Jiang Wen-ye.

In the story, the protagonist Yoko is a Japanese young woman, who often travels between Taiwan and Japan to do research on a documentary film on the Taiwan-born composer Jiang Wen-ye. She interviews Jiang's ex-wife in Japan, and sees the photos

7 Hou openly admitted that he concentrated more on the images than the mise-en scène when shooting *Café Lumière*. In addition, it was partly because he did not understand Japanese. See Hou Hsiao-hsien's interview with Zhu Tien-wen, "Who Entitles the Good Weather?" (Hou, "Who Entitles the Good Weather?" 57).

of Jiang. She also goes to the old bookstore and the old café to track his legacy, though she fails due to the rapid of the places caused by modernization. The recollection of the past seems to be impossible in the modern society. However, this impossibility is subtly turned to be a possibility through the singularity of the film. This is most obvious when Jiang's music is used as the background music of *Café Lumière*. As an invisible character passing between the images, Jiang is sensible through the piano music composed by him. This paradox is particularly exemplified at the moment when Yoko and her friend Hajime (Tadanobu Asano) try to find out the location of the café that Jiang used to frequent. While they find out that the old café has been replaced by a new building and they wander in the street, a section of the piano music by Jiang ironically looms out of the scene.

The implicit relationship between the onscreen and offscreen spaces also echoes that between Yoko and Jiang in terms of their similar in-betweenness, and the oscillation of their identification. As a soon-to-be single mother, she drifts between the two men, Hajime and her boyfriend; between Taiwan and Japan; between her apartment in Tokyo and her hometown in Takasaki. Here the sense of displacement parallels with her research subject, Jiang Wen-ye. He is a typical example of the Asian diasporic experience during the Japanese colonial and postwar era (1910-1983).⁸

⁸ Jiang Wen-ye was born in Taiwan, and studied engineering in Japan. At last, he was forced to settle down in Mainland China due to political persecution during the Cultural Revolution. Nevertheless, he always considered Taiwan as his homeland and frequently expressed his homesickness in his musical

Later in the film, we know from Yoko's words that her boyfriend in Taiwan also has a similar experience of displacement: he goes to America for further study and then helps his family manage an umbrella factory in Amoy. As a result, through *Café Lumière*, the past diasporic experience in the off-screen space turns into a latent rhythm underlying the modern life. The oscillation of one's identification is also implicated through Yoko's future child in the future. As a result, the child's mixed nationality forms an inter-textual relation to the lead actress, Yo Hitoto's.⁹

Through the elliptical narrative, the film reflects the two social phenomena that Hou is concerned about in the present social conditions. One is the rise of single mothers who choose to raise their children without the restriction of marriage. The other is the increase of young Taiwanese studying abroad and preparing for careers in family-owned industries overseas (Leary B20+). Additionally, the passion for religion shown by Yoko's biological mother implies a general sense of aimlessness and uncertainty felt by people nowadays.¹⁰ In *Café Lumière*, Yoko and her father were abandoned by her mother when she was only four years old. This childhood memory is transformed into a weird dream, which frequently comes back to Yoko.

Invisible as it is, the dream always underlies Yoko's life, and is drawn forth by the moment when Yoko is going to be a mother herself. Her childhood memory and

composition.

⁹ With a Taiwanese father and a Japanese mother, she came to Taiwan shortly after being born. And Taiwan was where she lived until moving back to Japan before reaching seven years old.

¹⁰ This resort to religious comfort is also revealed in Edward Yang's film, *Yi yi* (2000).

unexpected pregnancy make Yoko stop to reflect upon her life and to decide what to do next. It is also her pregnancy that gradually changes the relationship between Yoko and her parents, as well as her best friend, Hajime. In some sense, the original life is perturbed by the two events as “quasi-bodies, which reconfigure the map of the sensible by interfering with functionality of gestures and rhythms adapted to the natural cycles of production, reproduction, and submission” (Rancière 39). The way they modify the social relationship and sensory perception coincidentally is juxtaposed with the ambient soundtrack—Jiang’s music.

In particular, the contrast between life and death is unconcealed respectively through Yoko’s baby and Jiang. Eventually, like what the title of the children book in the film suggests, everything is outside over there.¹¹ Their unusual position of enunciation challenges not only the characters’ inside of the story, but also the viewers from the outside.

The Latent Rhythm

Diverting from the style before, Hou’s latest film, *Three Times*, comprises a trilogy in three distinct ways. Nevertheless each tale is presented by the same pair of

¹¹ The title of the children book is *Outside Over There* by Maurice Sendak.

actors: Shu Qi and Chang Chen. Each segment is set in Taiwan at different points of time in the past 100 years. Although all segments are love stories, a certain kind of political aura has always been latent throughout the three ages. Moreover, the three social contexts echo each other through their influence upon individuals.

In the first chapter 'The Time for Love', the backdrop is set in 1966. It was this year that the Cultural Revolution occurred in China, whereas Taiwan served as a short-term military base for the U.S. during the Cold War. Instead of stressing the transient political scenes, Hou dwells more on the quotidian space, the chores and activities of daily life. We consistently see May opening and closing the pool hall; May eating with her boss' family or with Chen; and people ceaselessly playing billiards. Yet from the clothing, the background music ('Smoke Gets in Your Eyes' and 'Rain and Tears'), the impact of western culture is implicated. With the lack of information concerning the social turbulence on the other side of Taiwan Strait, the ambient atmosphere of serenity in the pool hall also implies the segregation between China and Taiwan at that time. Simultaneously, the lack of information and the unstable politics forms a sense of uncertainty that saturated the society at that time. The scene where Chen keeps traveling to reunite with May exemplifies it. The rootless feeling is reflected in the transient nature of May as she looks for work.

The second segment 'A Time for Freedom' is presented as a silent movie except.

The characters' dialogue is conveyed by the intertitles. This time it is set in 1911, when two revolutions occurred in China, the Wuchang Uprising and the Xinhai revolution. Simultaneously, the awareness of the need to resist the Japanese rule were also arising in Taiwan. However, the activities of the individuals are still restrained by the social conventions. It is particularly testified by the courtesan's (Shu Qi) lose of freedom. The contradiction between restriction and freedom can also be observed from the love between the political activist, Mr. Chang (Chang Chen) and the courtesan. Under the political atmosphere at that time, the personal affair is subordinate to the national one. The unspeakable love subtly registers an echo in the silence of the images. It is not until the end of the segment that this love becomes halfly speakable through a poem in a letter.

Written by Mr. Chang in Japan at the end of the film, the poem writes about the political situation at that time, while implicitly expressing his regretful feelings for the courtesan. After reading the poem, the courtesan cannot but shed her tears over the meaning between the lines. At this point, another space of enunciation opens up for the love between Mr. Chang and the courtesan. Besides the unspeakable emotion between the characters, the voiceless images also understate a repressed Taiwan. In 1911, Taiwan was still colonized by Japan. Despite the increasing awareness of democracy and freedom, speeches and activities in Taiwan were still restricted by the

Japanese government. Nevertheless, in terms of spectatorship, the return to the form of early silent films enables the viewers to change from a passive position to an active one. In other words, the spectators actively produce the meaning of the images and have a dialogue with them.

The finale, “A Time for Youth,” was adapted from a real-life bisexual rock star, who has many physical deficiencies due to her premature birth, such as epilepsy and the near blindness in one eye. Moving into modern Taipei, the story depicts how the heroine Jing shuttles between the male photographer Zheng and Micky, a lesbian. Unlike the limited space that the courtesan lives in from the previous chapter, the female rock singer seems to be afloat everywhere. As a bisexual woman, Jing oscillates between different places and various lovers. Moreover, instead of letters, text messages, personal blogs, and emails become the major means of communication between individuals in the modern world. However, an emotional distance is enlarged between people, and everything seems to be transient. In the film, this includes love, life, and memories. It is quite telling, for instance, when we see the love between Zheng and Jing develops much faster than the couples in previous chapters. Yet, it also fades more quickly as exemplified by Jing’s relationships with various lovers.

Moreover, due to the modern-day changes, life nowadays seems to be more vulnerable. This is particularly emphasized with a close up of the words on Jing’s

blog: “The cost of being a premature infant is high, including fractures, the hole in the heart, the soon-to-be blind right eye, and epilepsy.” The ephemeral life is also depicted through the suicide of Micky, who is tired of Jing’s affair with the amateur photographer. Except for a thud on the soundtrack, the suicide happens entirely off-screen. There is no deep sorrow, but a little sadness and numbness shown on Jing’s face. The story ends with the photographer and the singer driving a motorcycle over a bridge, just like the beginning of “A Time for Youth.” Saturated with apathy, everything becomes routine in this final segment. On the other hand, the third section reveals a more complex environment individuals live in nowadays. Apart from the night life as depicted in *Millennium Mambo*, “A Time for Youth” describes the saturation of technology via devices, such as lomography and downloaded music. Efficient as they are, these technologic devices increase the distance between people. Moreover, it shows the number of nameless diseases increasing with the development of economy. This phenomenon is particularly characterized by Jing’s several physical deficiencies.

Then despite the change of the age, an underlying political implication is still observable in the finale. Like the political situation in the preceding years, the year 2005 is still significant in terms of the cross-strait relationship. The sporadic attitudes of the Taiwanese toward mainland China parallel the sense of the oscillation in “A

Time for Youth.” Moreover, the inter-connection of island and mainland has never disappeared throughout the three different years.¹² In a sense, the social contexts of the three segments resonate with each other, as the other presences in *Three Times*. For instance, the three stories echo each other with the common subject, that is, love. Characters and the lamp imply in each story, like love itself, appear differently in three ages.¹³ Nevertheless, being neither consonant nor dissonant, they resonate with each other.

Conclusions

In this chapter, I study the three dimensions of the singularity expressed through the films, that is, the director, the film and the characters in the stories. Each singularity is presented through a specific context in each film. And the context, in my view, arises from an interaction between an external and an internal rhythm of film. The interaction refers to a relation between the filmmaker and the reality. On the other hand, it means a negotiation between the filmmaker and the medium. In the discussion above, this interaction is regarded as another rhythm, a breath each film has of its own (Oumano 162).

¹² In 2005, two formal leaders of the older generation of Pan-Blue camp visited mainland China. This event shows the obvious opposite attitudes toward mainland China between the Pan-Green camp and the Pan-Blue camp. In the same year, the Chinese government passed an “anti-secession law” that outlaws any declaration of independence by Taiwan (“Cross-Strait”).

¹³ Through the camera movements, the viewers can specifically observe the different lighting techniques used in each story: the electric ceiling lamp in the first segment, the oil lamps of the second one, and the manually-operated neon light in the finale.

From Hou's three films, *Millennium Mambo*, *Café Lumière* and *Three Times*, the rhythm appears subtly and differently. Consequently with three kinds of rhythms, the three films point out individual displacement and generation gap in the contemporary world. In *Three Times*, it particularly displays three resonant political situations in three distinct ages, and how the individuals react through their love stories. Insignificant as they are through the elusive narrative, those singularities keep passing through the onscreen space in the form of silent speech. Nevertheless, different from lacuna or emptiness, their silence is a different sound, a "soundless space of resonance, and a language of its own" (Trinh, *Cinema Interval* 38-9). The temporal rhythm between reality and cinema in Hou's films thus appears more contradictory.

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