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"Revealing Reality": Four Asian Filmmakers Visualize the Transnational Imaginary

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**"REVEALING REALITY":
FOUR ASIAN FILMMAKERS VISUALIZE THE
TRANSNATIONAL IMAGINARY**

by

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DISSERTATION

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation posits that four Asian filmmakers engage in “revealing reality” in unique but interconnected ways that employ innovative narrative and cinematic/visual techniques, including a direct address to the senses and an augmenting of their vision with fantasy or surrealism. My study argues that Hou Hsiao-hsien (Taiwan), Jia Zhangke (China), Tsai Ming-liang (Taiwan), and Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Thailand) mobilize this visual and narrative strategy to participate in debates about globalization and to comment on the state of their respective nations, the concept of the nation, and the transnational. The films of each artist are examined in detail; I investigate their stylistic choices and their works’ cultural significance on local and global terms in relation to critical theory, particularly postcolonial theory. The dissertation argues that these filmmakers’ works both constitute and conceive the transnational imaginary, the space within which border gnosis and subaltern pasts are produced. It counters arguments that one cannot posit cultural explanations for a filmmaker’s stylistic choices and argues that there is

a way to read a filmmaker's style and films as politically significant. Overall, the project posits film as an analytical tool, and employs interdisciplinary methods used by scholars in film or cultural and media studies who engage with these lenses and frames. By analyzing the technique and the political implications of several films by each filmmaker in a transnational context, it expands the boundaries of American Studies, charting a nexus of border gnosis, subaltern pasts, and the transnational imaginary. Together, this dissertation supports the argument that the varieties of realism developed throughout this region during this period have expanded the transnational imaginary and have contributed to discourse on globalization, postcolonialism, and the multicultural project. Each artist's modification or manipulation of the tenets or rules of realism are suited to their purpose and their aim to "reveal reality," and this revelation is aimed at twin goals of beauty and political truth.

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*The white lines are tracers
For the facers of the aftermath
Positioned in the situation
Lost in battles of love
Still yearning--not learning
Unborn...unhatched
Yet, but wait! It's time to collide
To decide, if you will, a purpose for the
Marchers in orange
And still a circus for the children in disguise
Throwing bones to the drug-sniffing dogs
Protecting what we've come to know as ours
For the colors we wear in our dreams
For the flags we fly in our films...*

—Jim Pollard and Robert Pollard, “Marchers in Orange,” 1993

Chapter 1 – Introduction

We have a wish behind filmmaking, which is to emphasize the problems and difficulties Chinese are facing in life. The use of actual locations, non-professional actors and other strategies help the filmmakers face a happening in China. This common aesthetic is related to our shared life experience and shared filmmaking purpose. Additionally, in the history of the state studio system, traditionally their films are very artificial. After watching these films, you realize they have little to do with Chinese people. Moreover, they carry very strange moral values. They are upholders of Communist ideologies on screen. Therefore, as an opposition to these films, revealing reality is urgent for Chinese filmmakers.

—Jia Zhangke, 2010

Jia Zhangke, who is sometimes called the most important Chinese filmmaker working today, maintains a political imperative alongside his cinematic style. In the interview quoted above he goes on to link his cinematic strategies to Chinese “phases of aesthetics,” which progress from a concept of “realness” to one of “beauty.”¹ Jia then asks, “If your art cannot even portray real emotions and real life, how can you possibly reach ‘beauty’?”² These links between realism, political truth, and aesthetic goals form the perfect introduction to my argument that “revealing reality,” or the way each filmmaker uses or augments the realist style that emerged in Southeast Asian cinema from the 1980s through the 2000s reflected and shaped conversations about nation, transnationalism, and globalization. Jia and contemporaries Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, and Apichatpong Weerasethakul all work within the tradition of cinematic realism, but transform it to produce alternative narratives about their respective nations. Their films redefine our understanding of the historical nation by commenting on its current state and,

paradoxically, by using realist techniques to transcend conventional narrative forms and conventional ideas about history and the nation.

My dissertation posits that each of these filmmakers engages in “revealing reality” in unique but interconnected ways that employ innovative narrative and cinematic/visual techniques, often including a direct address to the senses or augmenting and enhancing their vision of “reality” with moments of fantasy or surrealism. Moreover, I argue that the filmmakers mobilize this visual and narrative strategy to participate in debates about globalization and to comment on the state of their respective nations, the concept of the nation, and the transnational. I investigate these filmmakers’ stylistic choices and their works’ cultural significance on local and global terms in relation to critical theory, particularly postcolonial theory and theorizations of those concepts (nation, globalization and the transnational). Specifically, I argue that their work both constitutes and conceives of the transnational imaginary (the conditions for which were created by globalization), the space within which border gnosis and subaltern pasts are produced. I contend that the films do this by using cinematic techniques to “restructur[e] the ways that knowledge is produced” to create Walter D. Mignolo’s “border gnosis” and Dipesh Chakrabarty’s “subaltern pasts” in cinematic terms.³ That is, the form and content of the films in my study narrate the theories of Mignolo, Chakrabarty, and their precursors in postcolonial studies. I counter arguments that one cannot posit cultural explanations for a filmmaker’s stylistic choices and argue that there is a way to read a filmmaker’s style and films as politically significant. Rather, I posit film as an analytical tool, and I employ and endorse the methods used by scholars in film or

cultural and media studies who engage with these lenses/frames. By choosing to study these filmmakers from China, Taiwan and Thailand, I follow Chakrabarty and Miriam Hansen's suggestion that we instead need to "provincialize Hollywood" in the study of film history, in contemporary world cinema, and in American Studies. These arguments constitute the themes that flow through what follows in this chapter and the rest of my work. Because they interconnect and overlap so closely, at times they are addressed simultaneously.

These cinematic critiques of nation also enact what Michel-Rolph Trouillot calls "tracking power," beginning with the power of the nation or the *narrative* of the nation and extending to the colonial, postcolonial, and decolonial, as well as the power dynamics of globalization and transnational capitalism.⁴ The films are histories, often including the present, that deploy specifically cinematic tools to engage with theoretical frameworks that expose the workings of power. By pushing at the boundaries of realist filmmaking, these filmmakers and their work contribute to what Ella Shohat and Robert Stam call the multicultural project, which "entails a profound restructuring of the ways knowledge is produced through the distribution of cultural resources and power."⁵ "History is the fruit of power," writes Trouillot, "but power itself is never so transparent that its analysis becomes superfluous. The ultimate mark of power may be its invisibility; the ultimate challenge the exposition of its roots."⁶ Trouillot wants a history that makes power visible, and I argue that these films' methods of "revealing reality" in fact reveal power, even if—*especially* when—they must bend the rules of realism to do so. In their unorthodox ways, they resist hegemonic national narratives or economic and cultural forces of globalization, but

their intervention is also more subtle and more complex. Dennis Lim argues that “resistance can take the form of a few small, stubborn gestures of the imagination”⁷ and is not always an active or direct political protest. Changing the way we see or experience things is a necessary component of resistance and always a component of the production of knowledge and history. Revealing reality often means uncovering the contested nature of history, the negotiated positions of people living in the intersection of culture and power.

Because I read these films (their content along with their technique or form) to show how they “track power” or create histories that disclose the workings of power, the theoretical background for my study includes debates surrounding globalization: nation and transnationalism, decolonization, and postcolonial theory. Postcolonial theory was initiated by scholars and theorists like Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, Trinh Minh-ha, and Homi Bhabha, who extended Michel Foucault’s practice of deeply examining the links between power and knowledge in discursive formations to colonial and postcolonial situations.⁸ While the traditionally understood period of colonialism and imperialism emanating from a European center has ended, postcolonial scholars have continued to unravel the legacies of these relationships and their accompanying interlocking negotiation of knowledge and power. Understood broadly, in this realm of academic theory the question is less *whether* but *to what extent* imperialism has “lingered,” as Edward Said puts it, “where it has always been, in a kind of general cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic, and social practices.”⁹

The narratives, viewpoints, and histories these films present cinematically also share an affinity with discourse on globalization and transnationalism, including theorizations of nation, nationalism and the colonial and postcolonial process. The work of scholars in postcolonial studies has challenged many of the central concepts of these debates (e.g., Eurocentrism and issues of cultural imperialism and homogenization, the global and “universal” versus the local and particular, center versus periphery), and the films in my study interact with their ideas. As a process and effect of globalization, transnationalism has also challenged conventional notions of nation and the national project’s relationship to modernity. Considering these films as representations of the “alternative modernities” that the transnational makes possible is another dimension of my study. These topics, while not referencing film directly, help us to understand film’s capacity for meaning. With this theoretical heritage as the thread, my work asks and attempts to answer questions such as: How can these patterns of power that are entrenched in cultural practices and understood as imperialism be defined more broadly? That is, how can we see globalization mirroring the imperial power dynamic?

At the same time, my argument incorporates several conversations within film studies concerning the place and usefulness of critical theory. Beginning in the 1980s and continuing through the 2000s, scholars questioned the use of so-called grand theory in film studies, despite the changing nature and adaptive approach of much cultural studies theory in the same period.¹⁰ Led by film scholars David Bordwell and Noel Carroll, this movement called for what was later referred to as “neo-formalism” and eschewed what Bordwell called “subject position theory and

culturalism” in favor of “empirical studies of filmmakers, genres and national cinemas.”¹¹ However, culture and media scholars like Miriam Hansen, Ella Shohat and Robert Stam, Stephanie Dennison, Song Hwee Lim, Lucia Nagib, and many others have responded to the question of how to study film in the contemporary moment by repositioning film studies as a tool for analyzing globalization and transnationalism and by revisiting methods for close cinematic analysis in context. They have answered Hansen’s call to “provincialize Hollywood” by asserting that not all film studies need to position Hollywood or the United States as the default “center” of the cinematic universe and arguing that what were seen as marginal are actually major contributors to these cultural discourses.¹² I intend to contribute to these efforts by demonstrating how a critical interpretation of select films creates a meaningful dialogue about the roots and workings of power in the present moment. I employ an interdisciplinary approach, aligning with the postcolonial project, like the one Bergen-Aurand and colleagues call the “embodiment model.” The films themselves “embody” this model by placing “national, local, and translocal contexts... international, transnational, and regional relationships” at their center and emphasizing “language, culture, history, geopolitical contact zones, and sites of contest—all as they are depicted in relation to the deployment of bodies on screen and at the cinema.”¹³

As film scholarship engages with postcolonial, globalization and transnational theory, we can view my work from another angle regarding the contemporary film landscape. That is, I argue that we can see the resurgence of a more “universal” film language, similar to the process film underwent in the early twentieth century. I posit

that this universal language corresponds to the dominant Western knowledge production referred to by some postcolonial theorists. In *Babel and Babylon*, Miriam Hansen argued that the modern cinematic spectator emerged at a point of transformation of the public sphere during that period of early film, that early Hollywood's codified and more homogenous style emerged because films had to appeal to a wide range of peoples from a variety of nations and cultures who were migrating to the large urban centers of the United States.¹⁴ And yet, this attempt at assimilation had unpredictable results, producing anomalies that created connections across "particular" cultural lines that the national forces were attempting to homogenize. Homogenization of style and address has become more prevalent in recent years as global migration has been on the rise but also as consumer capitalism migrates, and Hollywood cinema with it. In today's international film market, in order to make the largest possible profit Hollywood films must have "universal" appeal across nationalities worldwide. What is more, while for Hansen's study the concept of the consumer-spectator was shaped by the film market's desire to integrate a diverse American population into a homogenous spectator-position from which cinema could be seen as the universal language, more recently we have witnessed Hollywood's style get exported to many different nations and cultures successfully. Due to this market expansion, studio executives are keenly aware of the need to universalize the content. In a recent panel on the Chinese film market, one studio executive noted that American films were more suited for export to China than the reverse, even though the Chinese film market has successfully created domestic blockbusters that have not been globally recognized. "Because we're an

amalgamation of many different cultures, if an American film has enough universal themes, it can export to other countries," Bob Simonds, CEO of STX Entertainment explained. "Americans have conditioned the world to consume a story a certain way. The key is to merge or create a new syntax that's equally global."¹⁵

Part of my argument is that there are forms of filmmaking based in localities that are working from the other direction, touching on but not assimilating with that universal style, and that still manage to have an impact globally. Simonds distills part of Hansen's argument unintentionally, but brings it to bear on the twenty-first century. One of the fascinating things about his statements is that it seems clear that despite the goal of a "new syntax," the sum of his words implies the "merging" of elements into the already proven way that American film has already "conditioned the world to consume."¹⁶ That is, "the key" for Simonds means the key to financial success in that expanded market, whereas the key for the filmmakers in my study is to increase awareness, communication, and knowledge. That is, the demands on international film's claims to universality are greater than ever, and at the same time the diversity of voices continues to expand, contributing to the vision of a cinematic "pluriversality" rather than a *universality*.¹⁷

While the previous paragraphs place my work within critical theory and film studies, the significance of my work for American Studies is three-fold, and takes into account that my research concerns cultural products originating outside the United States or the Americas. To begin with, my work is a call to expand the horizons of American Studies itself by challenging the centrality of its eponymous nation and continent. My work asks what would happen if we placed international

cinema at the center of American Studies?¹⁸ Given its roots in American exceptionalism, American Studies as a discipline has had a difficult time living down the prominence of its name, especially through the period when the United States was reaching another point of global ascendancy in the latter half of the twentieth century. However, the discipline has evolved into a multifaceted, interdisciplinary critical toolset that has assisted in the analysis of American power, and has aligned this with the missions of cultural, area, ethnic, and gender studies. In the newest phase of globalization in the last several decades it seems especially important to continue to expand horizons and perspectives. My study encourages what Natasa Āurovičová encourages for film studies: an “upgrade” to a transnational perspective, “broadly conceived as above the level of the national but below the level of the global.”¹⁹

At the same time, these filmmakers are not always critical exclusively of their home nation, but at times relate their films to American power as well. Therefore, the second area of my work’s significance to American Studies has to do with cultural imperialism or American dominance in the era of globalization. In some cases, the home nations of the filmmakers have had influence over or even intervention into their national definition by the United States in the past, and all continue to live within and around evidence of American influence world-wide. Underneath their criticism of their own official nationalism can be detectable criticism of American power as well, as when a character in Jia’s 2001 film *Unknown Pleasures* hears a loud noise outside and wonders if it is the United States attacking China. Similarly, a longtime collaborator of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s 2005 lamented what he called America’s “cultural

colonialism” in Taiwan.²⁰ Thus, the notion of undue influence flowing from the US to other nations is never far from the subject of these films.

Finally, I argue that due to the transnational nature of their work, these filmmakers are operating within and simultaneously contributing to the notion of the transnational imaginary. To begin with, the works in my study are transnational cultural products that are therefore available for interpretation within our own cultural context, allowing these films to be seen not only in relation to their local national contexts, but in relation to or as “translatable” to our own. It may be possible to find inspiration in or alignment with in their national critiques—ways of narrating “around” an official nationalism that is not inclusive or flexible enough. However, I use the phrase transnational imaginary to convey something beyond this. I use the word “imaginary” to signify the collective mindset created by certain social or cultural conditions, and contributed to by cultural producers and works. I follow Arjun Appadurai’s concept of “the imagination as social practice...The imagination is now central to all forms of agency, is itself a social fact, and is the key component of the new global order.”²¹ It allows space for possibly disparate communities to imagine a different way of thinking, living, or forging communities. It is a close relative to what Emma Perez calls the “decolonial imaginary,” the space within which individuals forge paths to imagining their lives outside the colonial framework or narrative. Film, as Wilson and Dissanayake point out, is “the crucial genre of transnational production and global circulation for refigured narratives [and] offers speculative ground for the transnational imaginary and its contention within national and local communities.”²²

Film is a primary contributor to this process due to its ability to convey Appadurai's notion of "imagined worlds," which relates to how each artist creates an alternative vision.²³ These worlds help us to envision the world and or history differently by presenting it as an interplay between the national imaginary or official history and individual memory and experience, with a focus on the everyday and sensory experience. Appadurai describes the "disjunctures" in the old models of global culture, such as center and periphery, consumers and producers, surpluses and deficits. In "the new global cultural economy," however, these oppositions break down, and energy radiates and permeates via "deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors."²⁴ Each of the filmmakers in my study has worked to break through old constructs to show how they are imagined—that in "real" life the relationships between these "things" flow unpredictably and in all directions. Baumgärtel suggests that Asian filmmakers actively engage with the building of these worlds since their films have a potentially transnational audience, but can also paradoxically transmit local ideas on that global scale: "As [these filmmakers] circulate their works in the international '-scape' of global film culture rather than the cinemas of their home countries—whether by choice or by the lack of opportunities to do otherwise—they withdraw to the sphere where they are not bound by the regulations of their respective nation states (their 'official minds') anymore."²⁵ I make evident how these filmmakers, by changing the rules of cinematic realism by including unusual scenes or elements of their films, represent a crisis in representation itself that mirrors the

crises they depict on screen: the unprecedented upheaval and inequality that the current state of the world engenders.

A short analysis of Jia Zhangke's 2004 film *The World* as performing this kind of commentary or critique on nation and will serve as an introduction to my arguments and methodology. The film depicts workers at a theme park in contemporary China that includes miniature recreations of famous landmarks from around the world such as the Eiffel Tower and the World Trade Center. The mundane lives of the workers and performers depicted reveal an existence of struggle in this new burgeoning economy, a decidedly un-glamorous one in contrast to the performances they participate in. Jia's film enacts a critique of a national and global narrative in several ways, both in the content of his film, that is, what he chooses to depict or focus on, but also in the way that he depicts it. It serves as a small example of what I explore in subsequent chapters, each filmmaker's narrative subject and style, and their cinematic style, and how these function to create this commentary or critique. Of course, narrative and cinematic style inevitably overlap, but at times focusing on one or the other reveals different aspects of meaning.

For example, the narrative subjects and style of *The World* focuses on the personal narratives of his characters, allowing their everyday lives to be set in contrast to the grand sweep of a national narrative. The characters' supposed economic opportunities evokes China's emergence as a new global economic "center" yet the more we see or the longer Jia allows us to look, the more might see a criticism of the false promises inherent in such economics. In addition, setting the

film in such an unusual place against the backdrop of a facade of western cultural landmarks makes the title of the film itself provocative and ironic, but also creates several more ironic layers about China's cultural relationship with "the world." As such, another idea that *The World* depicts is that the US has not cornered the global market on spectacle; there may be multiple centers of the economic globe, and therefore competing notions of what "nation" means in that context.

Combined with this narrative focus is the notable cinematic style that Jia uses to emphasize these personal stories and the spaces they occupy. Using long, unbroken shots filmed with a more mobile digital camera casts a prolonged gaze at the everyday lives of his characters and insists on the reality of their particular situation in the falsely universal "world" they inhabit. This experiential, immersive technique depicts events in an even flow with very little editing as if we were with the characters, allowing us to live a day in their shoes, so to speak. Using what Tiago de Luca calls a "direct address to the senses," this kind of technique allows us to experience another subjectivity in a way that is different from typical narrative identification. It offers an alternative point of identification, a way to be in the space of the film with the characters rather than just watching them and seeing what they do and say. It engages with us not just intellectually but experientially, allowing us to connect with their subjectivity on a different level. Rather than looking at them, Jia invites us to experience life with them, providing an opportunity for identification across geographic, national, or cultural divides.

Another unusual aspect of Jia's cinematic style is his addition of several unusual animated sequences depicting the characters' interactions with each other

via text message. Jia uses this surprising shift to a more expressive or abstract cinematic language from an austere realism to emphasize his characters' inner lives and their interaction with this new technology. This alteration of traditional realism is something that each artist I discuss employs in a different way: a need to modify, frame, or augment their realist style in a particular way that assists the artists' vision of "revealing reality." For these artists, the rules of "realism" might be as restrictive as a nation's national narrative. For them, realism is a component of classical narrative film form to be transformed or transgressed just like their respective national and transnational narratives.

Using these methods, *The World* challenges China's official nationalism and the narratives that uphold it, as well as the sites of knowledge production that support nationalism. It also evokes the transnational nature of "the world" by depicting the idea that non-Western nations might want to exoticize Western landmarks as a way of exercising cultural power over them. The performers in the park are often shown depicting other cultures, and are even joined by several Russian dancers who seem to be exiles from their homes. By portraying the relationships between the local and Russian performers Jia challenges the concept of nation as well, suggesting that affiliations or alliances can be forged on a different level than just the national, a condition created by globalization. If modernity is one of the central underpinning narratives of nation, Jia and the filmmakers in my study challenge that by showing that "multiple modernities" and alternative narratives of history and nation exist and by providing unique ways to experience those narratives with immersive visual styles. What *The World* and the films in my study show is that

these alternative narratives use visual culture in unique ways to tell our stories to ourselves. Tempering this with the transnational, they might also be redefining who “we” are—across different borders than might have previously been assumed. These narratives may not contradict the normative “master narrative” but they might be skewed from that narrative's assumed center.

This short analysis is a preview of my four following chapters, and begins to demonstrate how, as Trouillot points out, filmmakers are one example of the group of the “artisans of different kinds...who augment, deflect, or reorganize the work of the professionals,” and who help to produce “a more complex view of academic history itself.”²⁶ This is one of the ways in which film helps to shape discourse, history, and reality.

Film as a Tool for Critical Analysis

Cinema has a unique ability to “arrange events and actions in a temporal narrative” and has the power to “shape thinking about historical time and national history.”²⁷ As such film can become an analytical tool. Geoffrey Nowell-Smith begins his essay “From Realism to Neo-realism” by walking through several ways in which film studies sees the role of film and the world, what the “realist” representation of the world on film means, and what the worlds that cinema creates mean. Philosophers Stanley Cavell and Slavoj Žižek acknowledge the inherent “unreality” of film (i.e., no matter what it looks like or how closely it resembles reality, it is still something other), while still seeing the potential in these worlds to reflect interesting

ideas about reality and the social world. Though Nowell-Smith points out that Žižek sees film as a “paradigm of *psychic*” rather than *social* organization, the way he paraphrases Žižek is useful: “the apparent unreality of the worlds encountered in cinema – or even their apparent reality – touches us because they put the spectator in touch with what is normally invisible.”²⁸ It recalls Christian Metz’s idea of cinema as a doubled absence: we watch because it appears real, when to some degree we know it is not, and this provokes an intense response in the viewer and scholar. “Cinema looks real, and yet it is obviously unreal; but, to the extent that it finds desire for us [or reveals something of the “real” social world that we didn’t previously know], this unreal creation is real after all.”²⁹ This may be an effect we can observe in many different forms of culture, but it is particularly so with film, “the world’s storyteller par excellence,” due to its appeal to aural and visual senses and its ability to mimic or represent our experience of life.³⁰

However, this kind of approach has been criticized in David Bordwell’s arguments about film study and its relationship to critical theory. Bordwell’s position in academic film studies is based on his extensive research into the development of early film style and then a continued emphasis on the specific qualities of the medium, a focus on film technique and prolific writing on international cinema. At the same time, his is one of the primary voices in the “neo-formalist” movement in film criticism that came about in the 90s as a reaction to the rise of what he terms “Grand Theory” in the 70s and 80s. He and others have criticized scholars who use film (and artist’s motivations and changes in style and technique) to “prove” post-structural, postmodern and other “Grand Theory.” Unfortunately, in his writing this sometimes

implies a ban of theory of any sort (not just the admittedly limited and somewhat outmoded schools he mentions) or cultural influence. It also goes against the views of Nowell-Smith, Žižek and others that argue that film can be a useful tool for understanding our social or psychological condition.

Contrary to Bordwell, I see Nowell-Smith's view of film as a valuable reason for investigating film form and content as a means of understanding the "real" world. For Nowell-Smith, "In opening up this possibility, neo-realism, as a form of filmmaking which uses the cinema apparatus to remind us in a material way how reality makes us, rather than us commanding reality through our ability to make fictions about it, still has a lesson to impart."³¹ The films I am examining definitely owe a debt to Italian Neo-realism, but I posit that to some degree all film as cultural products carry with it this capacity for revelation. "What is normally invisible" are those interlocking power/knowledge relationships that partially make up "how reality makes us." Therein lies the value of cinema's lesson and its shared goal with postcolonial studies. As Trouillot implores us to do, these films help us to expose the roots of power, knowledge and how individuals live in relationship to those roots.

Walter Dignolo and Dipesh Chakrabarty have informed my thinking on the dynamics of these relationships and form some of the theoretical foundations of my research. These scholars of the postcolonial acknowledge the role of culture in their theorizations of decolonialization, but not film specifically. However, when I encountered their work in the early stages of this project, it was their concepts that spoke directly to these filmmakers' accomplishments or helped to explain the meaning of their achievements. Their work has been formative on my thinking about

these films and filmmakers and helped me see that there was something more to the unusual narrative structures and cinematic techniques, which is what first drew me to their work as a cinephile.

Mignolo's extension of Immanuel Wallerstein's world systems theory into some of the fundamental concepts of postcolonial theory has created a unique way of seeing the processes that connect culture and economics and therefore knowledge and power. Mignolo's is an analysis of the inseparability of modernity and coloniality; he emphasizes that one does not exist without the other and that "the coloniality of power underlines nation building in . . . local histories of nations that devised and enacted global designs," whether or not those nations were involved in the creation of those designs.³² In *Provincializing Europe*, Chakrabarty proposes a way to surpass some of the binaries that bind a historian in the postcolonial situation. He minimizes the emphasis on Europe as the assumed center of history, thus allowing "subaltern pasts" to provide alternative narratives that restructure the fundamental building blocks of knowledge.

Mignolo locates in the etymologies of *epistemology* and *gnoseology* different uses of the word *knowledge* that have been superseded but that he sees returning in the kind of "border thinking" that emanates from postcolonial contexts.³³ He introduces the concepts of *gnosis* and *gnoseology* in order to think outside the idea of knowledge as referring to either science (epistemology) or the realm of meaning and interpretation (hermeneutics). Mignolo revives *gnosis* as a term for knowledge in general, covering both of those areas, but also including types of knowledge that could be considered secret or hidden: knowledge on a spiritual level or a special

knowledge of God.³⁴ Mignolo also identifies one of Chakrabarty's primary concepts, calling it "Chakrabarty's dilemma," referring to the postcolonial historian's predicament of writing history from "within" a subalternized culture. "If, then, Chakrabarty's dilemma is the fact that to write history implies remaining under European disciplinary hegemony, his proposal to go beyond it is to 'provincialize Europe,' and doing so implies, at its turn, going beyond the disciplines and producing a trans- instead of an interdisciplinary knowledge."³⁵ "Border gnosis" is the result of this process of provincializing Europe while narrating history, of producing transdisciplinary knowledge that spans multiple localities and represents multiple perspectives without necessarily passing through or affirming the center. Mignolo describes border gnosis as the otherwise hidden knowledge that forms of Western knowledge leave out. His concept of the border refers to the borders of nations and the figurative borders of cultures, but also to the barrier between colonial knowledge and subaltern or indigenous knowledge. That is, the knowledge produced by people living within and after colonialism in order to survive, endure, and transform themselves.

Applying Mignolo's concepts of border gnosis and gnoseology to film generally and to the filmmakers in my study in particular will explicate his ideas further. First, consider his statement, "border gnosis as knowledge from a subaltern perspective is knowledge conceived from the exterior borders of the modern/colonial world system."³⁶ If we can see this within the context of international film, with Hollywood as its proverbial center doing work on the ideological front for the "modern/colonial world system," then the style and subject matter of these

filmmakers are on those exterior borders.³⁷ Mignolo then distinguishes border gnosis as the knowledge itself from gnoseology as the *process* of producing that knowledge. That is, he defines “border gnoseology as a discourse about colonial knowledge [that] is conceived at the conflictive intersection of the knowledge produced from the perspective of modern colonialism and knowledge produced from the perspective of colonial modernities in Asia, Africa, and the Americas/Caribbean.”³⁸

Chakrabarty’s ideas of “provincializing Europe” and “subaltern pasts” are compatible with Mignolo’s and also particularly useful in helping to define the strategy of the filmmakers in my study. Chakrabarty’s theory is also a critique of modernity, but specifically a critique of the discipline of history as it relates to former colonized states. “The idea [of “provincializing Europe”] is to write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it.”³⁹ Foregrounding the dilemma that the subaltern historian faces (and which Mignolo commented on), and writing partially as a response to his fellow members of the Subaltern Studies Group, Chakrabarty examines the writing of history in a number of ways in an attempt to locate tools for such historians to transcend the dilemma. One key concept in this process is the production of what he calls “subaltern pasts,” which he differentiates from “minority histories.” The latter concept simultaneously places such a historian in a minority position to history and yet compels use of the European concept of history to tell her own story. Alternatively, “subaltern pasts” refers to accessing “nonmodern relationships to the past which are made subordinate in the moment of historicization.”⁴⁰ That is, the

moment of historicization, which assumes that the event or actions described are the result of a developmental process leading up to those events, is again tied to modernity as a teleological narrative, which might not include nonlinear, extra-causal explanations for the events. As such, subaltern pasts offer an opportunity to envision different notions of time and thus influencing culture, history, and power. Subaltern pasts, which Chakrabarty is quick to define as not exclusively the domain of the marginalized or disenfranchised but can also be developed by the elite or ruling classes, make visible an implicit assumption behind the writing of history, “the disjuncture of the present with itself” and “help bring to view the disjointed nature of any particular ‘now’ one may inhabit.”⁴¹ Like the films in my research, subaltern pasts help us to see “the limits to modes of viewing enshrined in the practices of the discipline of history...Because the discipline of history...is only one among ways of remembering the past.”⁴² I intend to show how “revealing reality” using uniquely cinematic tools is another of these methods of remembering the past and producing knowledge and history.

Though Mignolo and Chakrabarty are not talking about globalization explicitly, their ideas apply to analyzing film in this era of advanced globalization. As a global cultural product, international cinema exemplifies the ironies of globalization. On the one hand, global travel, migration, and instantaneous communication have made the world seem smaller and more “multicultural,” which is evidenced by the proliferation of film and visual culture throughout the globe. On the other hand, the popular film-going landscape in many areas of the world looks fairly similar to the way it does in the United States, due to Hollywood’s increasing dependence on international

markets.⁴³ Similarly, advances in technology have made more people able to create visual culture; however, the rise of the technology that has created this access is also partially responsible for cinema's decline as one of the central cultural forces in our society. At the same time, globalization has opened the door to unprecedented levels of communication and avenues for film art to thrive in (e.g., China's film market in the last ten or even five years). By February 2016, China's box office grosses had increased 70 percent from the previous two years and had twice surpassed North America's one-month grosses.⁴⁴

The films in my study constitute border gnosis, but in making the films the filmmakers engage in border gnoseology. That is, these filmmakers use a toolset of the presumed global power (film) but adapt and bend cinematic rules to produce histories that represent the subaltern or historically unrepresented. The border gnosis and subaltern pasts that these films produce is borne of the intersection between conventional film style and challenges to those techniques. Border gnosis and subaltern pasts are a result of conflict, not necessarily violent or radical, but in the crossing, standardization, regulation, and negotiation of form and discourse. As I have noted before, film is an ideal tool for "making visible," literally and figuratively, workings of power that have made it their business to remain invisible.

Film Studies in the Transnational Era

For my argument, this capacity to expose the roots of power is the strongest link between critical theory and film studies; the intersection between postcolonial

and cultural studies is where the enduring connection between those fields lies.⁴⁵

Ella Shohat and Robert Stam provided one of the most enduring connections between postcolonialism and the critique and study of cultural manifestations of power/knowledge in the context of globalization with their concept of “polycentric multiculturalism” and their continued foregrounding of “the interrelated questions of nation, transnation, postcoloniality, and globalization.”⁴⁶ First introduced in their influential *Unthinking Eurocentrism*, Shohat and Stam continued their effort to “multiculturalize and transnationalize media studies” in *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media* by collecting an anthology of essays that contribute to this effort and by providing a framing introductory essay that serves as a sort of update to *Unthinking Eurocentrism*.⁴⁷ In it they first distance the term “multiculturalism” from its popular overuse in the 90s and the backlash that followed, and then distinguish between the *fact* of multiculturalism (due to the global exchange of capital and ideas as well as large waves of immigration; the world as more culturally heterogeneous) from the multicultural *project*, referring to the academic study of the effects of this fact on culture and society. This project involves no less than “reinvisioning world history and contemporary social life from a decolonizing and antiracist perspective” and “entails a profound restructuring of the ways knowledge is produced through the distribution of cultural resources and power.”⁴⁸ These two goals are directly aligned with the goals of Mignolo and Chakrabarty; the anthologists focus on rethinking the way knowledge is produced by and within cultural production.

Postcolonial theory informs the study of global culture today, whether there is a history of colonialism or not, since there are few places untouched by it, and in many cases this is due to globalization. While acknowledging that their aims are nearly the same, the multicultural project's debt to postcolonial theory or postcolonialism is to investigate, recognize, and expose the deep roots of colonialism entrenched in contemporary culture. I follow Shohat and Stam in their preference for the "multicultural project" or "polycentric multiculturalism" as a name for this work because they are inclusive of situations where, though there was not historically a formal colonial relationship, there are always power/knowledge dynamics across different venues and taking different forms within a culture. "Postcolonial theory has highlighted the cultural contradictions and syncretisms generated by the global circulation of peoples and cultural goods in a mass-mediated and interconnected world," and these syncretisms and contradictions within globalization continue to work at the groove that colonialism began.⁴⁹ Just as there is risk in depicting a people or a nation as always inhabiting a non-modern past, "by implying that colonialism is over... 'postcolonial' risks obscuring the deformative-traces of the colonial hangover in the present."⁵⁰ The multicultural project recognizes that patterns of power established in the colonial era run so deeply that they are not shed easily with the passage of time and leave traces in culture as it moves swiftly across the globe.

While Shohat and Stam argue that cultural products should be read and analyzed against the backdrop of the multicultural project, the foundations of Bordwell's argument against the overuse of theory in the study of film is that style

and technique should become more central to academic film studies, and that the aforementioned trends that propose cultural foundations for cinematic styles are baseless and working from the top down (i.e., from the theory first). Bordwell contends that style can more often be explained simply by a filmmaker's experience and how he or she approaches each "cinematic problem." Certainly there are instances where scholars have gone too far in posing cultural explanations for artistic style, and it is not the close focus on technique that I take issue with. Parallel to Mignolo and Chakrabarty's views, what I find problematic about the effect of Bordwell's approach is that it makes Hollywood cinematic style an international norm that is "universal" because of its reliance on conditions of human experience that transcend culture and local specificities. This relates directly to the issues outlined above that the multicultural project challenges. Bordwell's position appears to be an attempt to re-secure the center.

Bordwell's history of cinema proves Chakrabarty's theory that Western European history is always the subject of any history. In some passages Bordwell recenters Hollywood by making essentially circular arguments and by tying it to other historical conditions that he sees as fixed.⁵¹ That is, in these passages Bordwell represents history as a fixed document of the past, rather than an inquiry into the conditions of the present. His dismissal of inquiry elides a history of film that is still under investigation and which, like academic history and historiography in general, continues to assume a Western-European center. Echoing earlier descriptions of Eurocentrism, Chakrabarty notes that in "'history' as a discourse produced at the institutional site of the university...[Europe] remains the sovereign, theoretical subject

of all histories.”⁵² He continues, “there is a peculiar way in which all these other histories tend to become variations on a master narrative that could be called ‘the history of Europe.’”⁵³ Transpose “Hollywood cinema” for Europe, and one gets a sense of what Bordwell’s short history of cinema expresses. Rather than answering Mignolo’s call for a “global diversity,” we find Bordwell insisting that innovations in style coming from international filmmakers are simply differences within the universal norms and conventions of classical cinematic style, which not only leaves their cultural particularities unacknowledged, but also disarms their potential to undermine or reconfigure those norms themselves.

Compare this approach to Miriam Hansen who, transposing Chakrabarty’s idea to the film world, looks toward “provincializing Hollywood.”⁵⁴ Just as Chakrabarty heralds the hidden power of the ‘minor,’ so can the local development of cinematic difference change the understanding of that particular medium’s history. In his conception, the “minor” also “functions to cast doubt on the ‘major.’”⁵⁵ For Chakrabarty, to “provincialize Europe” is to resist assuming Europe as the center of history and sole source of modernity. In my conception, Hollywood claiming itself as the center of the cinematic universe and the subject of all cinematic history is a similarly limiting discursive field. To provincialize Europe is to issue a challenge to what Mignolo calls “Chakrabarty’s dilemma:” the position of the subaltern historian who must tell his culture’s history while using tools that are complicit in his culture’s and history’s subalternization.

To provincialize Hollywood is to see cinematic style as contested and not an inevitable development of capital and culture based in the US. It writes over the

privileged narratives rooted in national histories or perspectives, and allows subaltern past narratives to flourish. If we re-read Bordwell with Chakrabarty's dilemma in mind, with Hollywood standing in for "Europe" or "the West" as the point from which all styles emanate, Bordwell's conception would fit this paradigm, with many filmmakers' local innovations facing the same challenge as Chakrabarty's subaltern historian. However, my work shows that there are ample examples of filmmakers resolving this dilemma. Consider the following passage, again substituting "Hollywood" for "Europe" and "the history of film" for "the modern": "To provincialize this 'Europe' is to see the modern as inevitably contested, to write over the given and privileged narratives of citizenship other narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures where collectivities are defined neither by the rituals of citizenship nor by the nightmare of 'tradition' that 'modernity' creates."⁵⁶ That is, the privileged conventional narratives of belonging that many films convey or support are challenged by different types of narratives (form and content) such as those in the films in my study.

In the 2000s and 2010s cultural studies scholars and particularly film studies scholars continued to build on the call to investigate the connections between the power structures in the post-colonial globalized world, with an eye toward how culture can perpetuate, negotiate, mediate, and resist those sedimented power/knowledge relationships. They tackle these issues in many different ways, but certain themes recur regularly and correlate closely with the concerns of postcolonial studies. To begin with, there is a resounding call to "decenter" Hollywood and its history from the discipline of film studies. Too often "world cinema" is thought of

collectively as any non-Hollywood production,⁵⁷ and this serves to cover over the multicultural fact, in a way, by perpetuating the myth of Hollywood's dominance,⁵⁸ which plays a part in "centering" study of film. To think of international film as purely the antithesis or oppositional to Hollywood film can prevent an understanding of the film in its own context and on its own terms, and it "[disregards] the diversity and complexity within both cinema in the US as well as cinemas from the rest of the world."⁵⁹ Instead, we should attempt to "think in terms of comparative and transnational multiculturalism, or relational studies that do not always pass through the putative center."⁶⁰ The titles of several volumes reveal the issues that cultural and film studies are grappling with: *Remapping World Cinema*, *Theorizing World Cinema*, *De-Westernizing Film Studies*, *World Cinemas*, *Transnational Perspectives*. These volumes have continued a dialog aimed at including multiple perspectives and multiple frames of analysis.

Furthermore, the models that these collections utilize proceed from Shohat and Stam's interdisciplinary approach that they call "methodological cubism."⁶¹ This "deployment of multiple perspectives and grids" in the study of cinematic texts has become a recognized necessity, with film scholars borrowing methods and theory from multiple disciplines and deploying different theoretical lenses when analyzing texts.⁶² Methods such as including the circumstances around a particular film's production alongside the socio-political context informing the reading of a film, analyzing how the film is produced—the circumstances that brought the creative and financial forces together—have become common in film studies, as exemplified by these anthologies. These anthologies go against the methodology advised by

Bordwell, who sidelines any use of theory in favor of what he calls “transcultural” components. In addition, Bordwell, like Simonds, argues for the primacy of Hollywood’s universal style alongside its transcultural attributes.

At the same time, some have criticized Shohat and Stam’s original statement against Eurocentrism as still succumbing to the discourse of resistance by praising “moralistic” and possibly elitist films against “Eurocentric global media forces.”⁶³ At the level of style, their approach is often similar to that of the Third Cinema movement, which called for a stylistic opposition to dominant cinema to match its political opposition, but in doing so reaffirms the same entrenched dichotomy. This discourse was a useful starting point, but it continues to reinforce the binary of “the West vs. the rest.”⁶⁴ From there, the focus should be on evening out that binary, and on “the interconnectedness of cinematic practices and cultures in the age of globalization,” allowing the definition of “world cinema” to include, but not focus on or center Hollywood.⁶⁵

As such, Stephanie Dennison and Song Hwee Lim push the practice of applying polycentric multiculturalism to film forward by defining “world cinema” itself “as a discipline, a methodology, and a perspective.”⁶⁶ Beyond simply a genre classification in the way that “foreign film” or “world music” has often become, Dennison and Lim redefine the phrase “world cinema” to encompass a multi-dimensional approach to film studies. This approach begins with the notion that world cinema has been carving out its own place in academia and could provide a space in which to foster true interdisciplinary film studies. Similarly, world cinema provides an opportunity to more thoroughly integrate the study of both text and

context while blending in the advances in critical theory in the last 30-40 years. Finally, they note the importance of perspective, meaning in part Chakrabarty's dilemma and the position of historians or creators of knowledge and culture from outside a dominant culture, but also the notion that when a viewer's vantage point changes, the meaning of a film changes. In the era of globalization, the possibilities for differing, competing and even simultaneous perspectives are abundant. Like the notion of placing film at the center of American Studies, Dennison and Lim's definition can help us understand how film can give us new perspectives on global culture rather than being the object of study itself. When interpreting film or any cultural product, we must be certain we situate or ground ourselves, describing the perspective from which we interpret meaning.

Lúcia Nagib, Chris Perriam and Rajinder Dudrah's "polycentric approach to film studies" aligns with the multicultural project and call for "polycentric multiculturalism" to think around the binaries left by the legacy of colonialism that the multicultural project continues to debate.⁶⁷ This approach "is the moment in film theory that allows us to move away from the uniformizing, oppositional and negative understanding of world cinema, and a starting point to question Eurocentric versions of the world and of cinema's place within it."⁶⁸ Again, this avoids situating international films as not necessarily oppositional to the dominating "center" of Hollywood film but as works to be seen on their own terms in their own contexts. This is a positive inclusion of the world's cinema into "world cinema" without placing it as a "victim" in relation to Hollywood, but rather establishing it on equal footing with any other film for analysis on its own terms. The filmmakers they analyze "do not

depend on paradigms set by the so-called Hollywood classical narrative style, and in most cases are misunderstood if viewed in this light. In multicultural, multi-ethnic societies like ours, cinematic expressions from various origins cannot be seen as 'the other', for the simple reason that they are us. More interesting than their difference is, in most cases, their interconnectedness."⁶⁹ Rebecca Weaver-Hightower and Peter Hulme agree, stating in the introduction to their collection *Postcolonial Film: History, Empire, Resistance* that although each essay focuses on a particular locality, "when viewed as a whole [the collection] draws connections between spaces, films, histories, themes, and perspectives...a range of parallels and interconnections."⁷⁰ Indeed, the filmmakers and films I analyze form a web of similarities and build on and create dialog with each other.

Nagib emphasizes the importance of problematizing the binary of West/rest, but also of fiction and documentary, narrative and non-narrative, and mainstream as opposed to peripheral cinema. Primarily she recommends breaking down or ignoring the binary that places "world cinema" as the other, signified by difference, opposed to the central normalized cinema of Hollywood which places it in a subordinate role or even maintains the colonial perspective that it hopes to critique. Indeed, "unthinking Eurocentrism," as much as it functions as a critique of such culture, still reaffirms Europe as the default or "center" of culture. Alternatively, Nagib's approach is to place all cinema including Hollywood on the same level, which allows for the notion that "different cinemas of the world can generate their own, original theories."⁷¹ My work posits that this approach creates the opportunity for using film as an investigatory tool for understanding power/knowledge relationships and for

criticizing how we understand the world. Nagib connects this to cinematic style, challenging the tendency to call differences from Hollywood norms “other.” Mignolo also challenges this, proposing notions of creolization, hybridization and other concepts in conjunction with film in order to strengthen these notions. As I have argued, these films and filmmakers make interesting contributions to these concepts and philosophical debates, providing a unique avenue for addressing them.

Films from around the world could be a starting point for all manner of social or cultural investigation around economics and class, race and gender, the politics of the postcolonial, and other common topics in these fields. Such investigations might use film as a tool to enter their arguments, or allow films to participate in the debate. What Emma Perez calls the “decolonial imaginary” uses alternative sites in order to build knowledge and culture not beholden to the colonial. I posit that film can be one of those sites and these sites need not reaffirm Hollywood or the US as the center. In fact, that is the reason I prefer “transnational imaginary” as the space within which they do their cultural work. As Shohat and Stam emphasize, studies that focus on comparing cultural products that avoid that reaffirmation “would go a long way toward deprovincializing a discussion that has too often focused only on United Statesian issues and Hollywood representations.”⁷² For them, this transnationalization of media studies “has become a political and pedagogical responsibility.”⁷³ On the international scale, the “decolonial” are those forces that resist the homogenizing forces of the “universal” or globalized culture. This is what Walter Mignolo calls the notion of the decolonial border gnosis, meaning “the subaltern reason striving to bring to the foreground the force and creativity of

knowledges subalternized during a long process of colonization of the planet, which was at the same time the process in which modernity and the modern Reason were constructed.”⁷⁴

As such, in the postcolonial world, the filmmakers in my study also contribute to the “transnational imaginary.” Using this concept, Rob Wilson and Wimal Dissanayake locate a space outside a Western framework. For them the transnational imaginary “comprises the as-yet-unfigured horizon of contemporary cultural production by which national spaces/identities of political allegiance and economic regulation are being undone and imagined communities of modernity are being reshaped at the macropolitical (global) and micropolitical (cultural) levels of everyday existence.”⁷⁵ Cinema is one of the spaces where this reshaping occurs, and in many cases attempts to breach the gap between global and local. In doing so, these films refigure the assumptions and discourses that underpin Western knowledge: “The global/local tracks the space of disorientation, the rendering and deforming local of Western universality as standard, center, and dominant knowledge.”⁷⁶ For Wilson and Dissanayake, the spaces opened up by transnational migration, economics, and culture dislodge the usual national affiliations and create new opportunities for political and cultural affiliation. As such, their conception of the transnational imaginary also contributes to the project of decentering Western thought as the center of that imaginary. The transnational global-local synergy aligns with the decolonial in the way that it contests the national and reconfigures subjectivities in a globalized landscape.⁷⁷ Put another way, the transnational imaginary and these films are both a product of and a response to globalization. As

Lisa Lowe points out, the effects of globalization create new workforces, alliances and imaginaries “that express themselves in movements articulated in terms other than the ‘national.’”⁷⁸ By operating within the transnational imaginary they narrate the zones where individuals come into contact with national and global narratives.

Along with the transnational imaginary, a few more concepts regarding nation and nationalism will be themes throughout my work. The nation-state and nationalism as components of modernity are building blocks of globalization; culture, including film, play a role in either supporting or antagonizing that power structure. One of the fundamental historical narratives in Western thought, *modernity* is generally meant to evoke the intellectual innovations of the post-Enlightenment era, including the rise of science and rationalization and their application to political and social thought. Modernity is also tied irrevocably to the rise of industrialized capitalism in the late nineteenth century and technological advances in work, language, economics, and culture, including film and other recorded media.⁷⁹ It is important to note that modernity is a teleological narrative, one that assumes development toward a particular goal.⁸⁰ For many scholars in the twentieth century, nations and nationalism were products of, or were contingent on, the same political and social thought that underpins modernity. Thus, modernity and its narrative interact with culture, identity, and economics to shape the contours of nationalism.

Film contributes to this process by helping to shape a national subjectivity, both directly and indirectly.⁸¹ In the era following formal colonization, there was often direct state support for “national cinemas,” but my emphasis for this study resides in the realm of the imaginary. Benedict Anderson, in his milestone book *Imagined*

Communities, argues that the “state of mind” of nationalism could only be conceived *through* culture, from transformations in spoken and written language. Film also contributes to this state of mind.⁸² Ernest Gellner’s modified perspective on Anderson’s theorization of nationalism points out that nationalism was also constructed by the necessity for a common language and homogenous culture in the industrial economy of the early twentieth century. Film also contributed to the development of this common culture.⁸³

At the same time, I am arguing that cinema not only contributes to the “imagined community” of the nation but that it also contributes to the postcolonial project by offering a model of subjectivity for the subaltern. Indeed, some postcolonial scholars have taken issue with the centrality of “print-capitalism” in Anderson’s work because it is dependent on literacy and might not account for those who could not read yet were also bound to the national subjectivity created by it. In addition, despite references to many other nations around the globe, Anderson’s history still assumes Western Europe as the center from which print-capitalism emerged. As Partha Chatterjee observes, this even problematizes his catchphrase:

If [according to Anderson] nationalisms in the rest of the world have to choose their imagined community from certain ‘modular’ forms already made available to them by Europe and the Americas, what do they have left to imagine? . . . Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance and postcolonial misery. Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.⁸⁴

As Chatterjee points out, however, Anderson's narrative cannot quite account for the fact of anticolonial nationalisms of the postcolonial era. While Chatterjee is more concerned with the political philosophy of this problem, I am arguing that the filmmakers in my study also contribute to Chatterjee's larger project, which echoes postcolonial theory: "to claim for us, the once colonized, our freedom of imagination."⁸⁵

The key to transforming the discourse of nationalism is narrating "alternative modernities," and film plays a role in that.⁸⁶ By including film as an active element in this flow of communication, Aihwa Ong's work affirms that film contributes to a critique of modernity itself by narrating "alternative modernities" that differ from the Western/US version and break down divisions between global and local. Ong writes that with the recent economic growth in Southeast Asia, she can perceive "an alternative definition of modernity that is morally and politically differentiated from that of the West."⁸⁷ That is, she can see in their adoption of some Western capitalist practices locals' ways of making these practices their own, based on local notions. The "global" is modified by the "local, made possible by globalization." It is clear that Ong is defining modernity mostly in reference to the political and economic realms, but she is aware that culture is active here as well. She describes the role of Confucianism in the new Chinese economies and the rise of karaoke bars in China as evidence that localized versions of Chinese modernity challenge some postcolonial discourses that see non-Western nationalism as always dependent on Western ways of thinking and a goal of assimilating to that way of thinking in order to be modern. As an anthropologist, Ong wonders "in what ways can anthropology as a

form of Western knowledge enact a decentering by attending to other narratives of modernity that are neither wholly derivative of the West nor based entirely on the interests of Western democracies?”⁸⁸ I argue that film, with its traces of “alternative modernities” in cinematic representations of both global and local, is capable of this same kind of decentering.

Because film can span these perspectives from global to local and create new perspectives and subjectivities, it should be seen as an agent in forming communities and allegiances across traditional conceptions of nationalism. Film constructs “formative narratives” that pose an alternative to the master narratives of modernity. Giroux and Dirlik point out that while postmodernism was useful in breaking down master narratives, it runs the risk of breaking down “formative narratives” that provide the basis for alliance and community building. That is, a formative narrative in the form of film is able to build allegiance and unity but also is able to “[analyze] difference within rather than against [that] unity.”⁸⁹ Citing Ghandi’s model of enacting political activism, Dirlik proposes that the local be the site of “collective experiments” that can then be made “translocal.”⁹⁰ Film can offer the imagined space for opportunities for political change that might transform “the nation” into something outside of what has been envisioned historically and define the transnational as a chain of dotted “localisms” that share strategies and tactics for remaining vital and for creating communities of belonging.

It is not my aim to erase the contexts that Chakrabarty and Mignolo refer to, which take place in and result in much more grave material conditions for peoples than does the status and reception of a handful of movies. But by engaging in border

gnoseology, creating subaltern pasts, and contributing to and creating the transnational imaginary, film can affect those conditions, offering sites where new narratives can be conceived or remembered. These effects could be direct; they might give voice or reflect a subjectivity, or could change political consciousness.⁹¹ Earlier I noted Chakrabarty's emphasis on "narratives of human connections that draw sustenance from dreamed-up pasts and futures."⁹² I do not think he intended "dreamed-up" to have the connotation of "made-up" or false, but rather as something closer to the "imaginary" (i.e., the decolonial or transnational imaginary). He refers here to notions of being and community that are not indebted to the normalized narratives of nation and modernity. He continues to note that it is difficult for these "dreams" to flourish and continue in academic history because that framework is itself part of those narratives. "Yet they will recur so long as the themes of citizenship and the nation-state dominate our narratives of historical transition, for these dreams are what the modern represses in order to be."⁹³ I argue that these filmmakers attempt to do what Chakrabarty characterizes as the impossible: create histories that "deliberately [make] visible, within the very structure of [their] narrative forms, [their] own repressive strategies and practices, the part [they] play in collusion with the narratives of citizenships in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity."⁹⁴ These filmmakers and films make this collusion visible and therefore seek to "track the power" of the nation, but also plant the seed of alternative forms of narrative. If popular culture—and specifically Hollywood—is complicit in recapitulating the narratives and themes of the nation-state, it is also in cinematic sites that alternative dreams can be conceived.

My engagement with these films and filmmakers is not guided by any particular affiliation or connection to them based on my own identity. In many ways, however, this is part of the point of my work: I feel connected to these artists' work and my strong response to it has motivated my writing. My work has been propelled by a life-long curiosity about subjectivities other than my own and a desire to understand them, and I have found in film and popular culture sites that allow me to see beyond my own vantage point and where understanding can occur.

The chapters that follow will continue to engage with and explicate the arguments, themes, and theoretical lenses I have outlined in this chapter. I begin this process in Chapter 2 by analyzing Hou Hsiao-hsien's 1993 film *The Puppetmaster* to explain Hou's style of "revealing reality" to re-cast Taiwanese identity and nationalism. Hou does this by locating the point of friction between his representation of Li Tienlu's life and his own, between verbal and visual, and between versions of history. I offer a political economy of film form by analyzing *The Puppetmaster's* formal and stylistic aspects and putting them in conversation with both the cultural and political history of Taiwan and with innovative thinkers on the postcolonial like Chakrabarty and Mignolo. Because the film participates in both colonial and decolonial thought in its own unique way, Hou's cinematic representation of the life of the puppetmaster goes beyond East/West or colonial/postcolonial dichotomies by addressing the ways that people live in transitional, transforming, and transnational positions.

Similarly, Jia challenges the conventions of realism and China's recent national narrative by threading the narratives of everyday life through it and by

inserting moments of unreality that disrupt that style. Chapter 3 will highlight Jia's unique cinematic documentation of China's emergence as a global economic power since the 1980s. His style of realism is very close to documentary style and employs realist techniques like location shooting, nonprofessional actors and long takes, yet his films have increasingly offered artifices of different types and some moments of outright fantasy. Jia has said that realism is urgent for Chinese filmmakers today, yet points out that the change happening in his nation is so extreme that reality itself is fantastic or unbelievable. In his films Jia continues to experiment with ways of documenting that paradox by intertwining personal narratives with the nation's narrative of economic development. His films locate irony in observing the effect of one narrative on the other, and examine very closely the more extreme changes the Chinese have endured.

Chapter 4 will focus on Tsai Ming-liang who, working in the wake of Taiwanese New Wave directors like Hou and Edward Yang, carved out his own niche in Taiwanese and international cinema by modifying his elders' methods and taking them to an extreme. Tsai's method of revealing reality is to create a sense of drift with a focus on corporeality, an address directly to the senses, and an emphasis on slowness, stillness and silence. This chapter focuses primarily on Tsai's 2003 film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* to show how his brand of protracted gaze stretches the boundaries of narrative cinema to the limit, queering film norms by failing to meet them. In so doing, Tsai challenges underpinning concepts of Western modernity and knowledge by envisioning drifting as knowing.

While Tsai stretches the limits of narrative film, the films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul seem to leap right over them or turn their backs on them. Tsai seems to push the limits of cinematic narrative from the inside, stretching its boundaries, Weerasethakul's approach seems to originate from the outside looking in, observing some narrative techniques casually and borrowing them, but centered from its own imaginary space. On the surface Weerasethakul's films seem to share many characteristics of Tsai's: an address directly to the senses, a focus on corporeality, a queering of realism with a touch of the surreal or magical realism. But added to this is an alignment with Hou and Jia, with a narrative focus on personal narratives, memories, national history and geography. In Chapter 5, I investigate how Weerasethakul's films do not so much push narrative cinema to its breaking point as they do ignore those limits as if they existed only in a parallel universe. The result is a sublime transcendence from everyday cinema that charts out a different nexus of border gnosis, subaltern pasts, and the transnational imaginary, specifically in relation to "Thai-ness."

Together, these chapters support my initial thesis that the varieties of realism developed throughout this region during this period have expanded the transnational imaginary and contributed to discourse on globalization, postcolonialism, and the multicultural project. Each artist's modification or manipulation of the tenets or rules of realism are suited to their purpose and their aim to "reveal reality," and this revelation is aimed at twin goals of beauty and political truth.

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- ¹ After researching this, I was not able to find a correspondence to what Jia refers to here. This could be due to a translation discrepancy, but what interests me is Jia's use of the idea to explicate why he is embracing the style that he does.
- ² *Filmmaker Jia Zhangke on the Realist Imperative (at Asia Society)*.
- ³ Shohat and Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, 7.
- ⁴ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 25.
- ⁵ Shohat and Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, 7.
- ⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xix.
- ⁷ Lim, "Apichatpong Weerasethakul," 341.
- ⁸ Some of the best examples of this are: Rony, *The Third Eye*; Kazanjian, *The Colonizing Trick*; McAlister, *Epic Encounters*.
- ⁹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 9.
- ¹⁰ I am thinking here of my initial coursework in American Studies in the mid-2000s, which struck me as grounded in an interdisciplinary rigor preserved from both the social sciences (anthropology and sociology primarily) and balanced it with more interpretive practice from the humanities, which previously had perhaps gone too far into the purely theoretical.
- ¹¹ Quoted in Nagib, Perriam, and Dudrah, *Theorizing World Cinema*, xxii.
- ¹² Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," 66; Also used in Song Hwee Lim's article on Ang Lee in Nagib, Perriam, and Dudrah, *Theorizing World Cinema*, p140.
- ¹³ Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 11.
- ¹⁴ Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses."
- ¹⁵ Sun, "Hollywood and China: A Fad or Future of the Film Industry?"
- ¹⁶ *Ibid.*
- ¹⁷ Mignolo, "On Pluriversality:" "Pluriversality is not cultural relativism, but entanglement of several cosmologies connected today in a power differential."
- ¹⁸ See Washington, "'Disturbing the Peace.'" Notably, Washington uses the film *Lone Star* as a site where her thought experiment takes place.
- ¹⁹ Āurovičová and Newman, *World Cinemas, Transnational Perspectives*, ix.
- ²⁰ Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 313. Given that more recently, Taiwan has been placed to be in the middle of disputes over trade between the United States and China, indicates a new chapter in this dynamic will be written in the future. See "Taiwan Fears Becoming Donald Trump's Bargaining Chip."
- ²¹ Quoted in Naficy, "Phobic Spaces and Liminal Panics: Independent Transnational Film Genre," 119.
- ²² Wilson and Dissanayake, *Global/Local*, 11.
- ²³ Appadurai quoted in Baumgärtel, "Imagined Communities, Imagined Worlds: Independent Film from Southeast Asia in the Global Mediascape," 24.
- ²⁴ Appadurai quoted in *ibid.*
- ²⁵ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ²⁶ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 25.
- ²⁷ Shohat and Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, 9.
- ²⁸ Nowell-Smith, "From Realism to Neo-Realism," 147–48. My emphasis.
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*
- ³⁰ Shohat and Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, 9.
- ³¹ Nowell-Smith, "From Realism to Neo-Realism," 157.
- ³² Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 43.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 12.
- ³⁴ Mignolo follows historian Valentin Mudimbe, who realized he felt challenged when he was asked to write "a survey of African philosophy," which seemed to him a contradiction in terms due to the fundamental differences between African "traditional systems of thought" and the European notion of philosophy (Mignolo, 10). For Mudimbe, gnosis became a term to capture that tension and negotiation as a whole.

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- ³⁵ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 205.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 11.
- ³⁷ I only make this distinction because one couldn't say that Tsai's characters are 'subalterns' in Mignolo's or Spivak's conception, but they do appear marginalized. His latter films (*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006) and *Stray Dogs* (2013) do depict figures who appear to be homeless. If nothing else his characters seem to be left behind or on the margins, or from another time, particularly in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, where even the setting is from another time.
- ³⁸ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 11.
- ³⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 43.
- ⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 101.
- ⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 109.
- ⁴² *Ibid.*, 106.
- ⁴³ See Walls and McKenzie, "The Changing Role of Hollywood in the Global Movie Market."
- ⁴⁴ Close, "China's Influence on Hollywood Movies Just Kicked into a Higher Gear."
- ⁴⁵ Exposing power's roots has always been the connection between film studies and critical theory, but this began in the 70s with psychoanalytic models, and has shifted more to an emphasis on postcolonial theory.
- ⁴⁶ Shohat and Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, 9.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 1.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 7.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 15.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 14.
- ⁵¹ See Bordwell, "Transcultural Spaces: Toward a Poetics of Chinese Film," 144. "Local film industries around the world developed approximate equivalents of Hollywood's division of labor. And this should not surprise us: on the basis of what we know so far, classical continuity became a lingua franca of film style for all the world's mass-market cinema." "...Had history been different, some other formats...might have endured longer."
- ⁵² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 27.
- ⁵³ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁴ Hansen, "The Mass Production of the Senses," 66; Also used in Song Hwee Lim's article on Ang Lee in Nagib, Perriam, and Dudrah, *Theorizing World Cinema*, p140.
- ⁵⁵ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 101.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 46.
- ⁵⁷ It could also be seen as non-English speaking or non-European-language-speaking. Take for example the "Best Foreign Film" category of the Academy Awards, whose entries are typically not nominated for the top "Best Picture" prize, while other British and European films often are.
- ⁵⁸ As opposed to the still thriving Indian and North Korean film industries today as well as those of China, Japan and others throughout different points in film history.
- ⁵⁹ Dennison and Lim, *Remapping World Cinema*, 7.
- ⁶⁰ Shohat and Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, 4.
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 2.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*
- ⁶³ Dennison and Lim, *Remapping World Cinema*, 6.
- ⁶⁴ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁷ Nagib, Perriam, and Dudrah, *Theorizing World Cinema*, xxii.
- ⁶⁸ *Ibid.*
- ⁶⁹ Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*, 1.
- ⁷⁰ Weaver-Hightower and Hulme, *Postcolonial Film*, 5.
- ⁷¹ Nagib, *World Cinema and the Ethics of Realism*, 1.
- ⁷² Shohat and Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, 4.

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- ⁷³ Ibid., 5.
- ⁷⁴ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 13. I want to be careful when using the term “subaltern” in reference to these filmmakers’ work. That is, I do not want to claim a marginality for them that he does not (nor does he claim to) occupy, thereby drawing too close a parallel between a world-renowned filmmaker who has been the toast of Cannes and those who are truly marginalized. However, I am following Dipesh Chakrabarty’s notion that “subaltern pasts do not belong exclusively to socially subordinate or subaltern groups, nor to minority identities alone. Elite and dominant groups can also have subaltern pasts to the extent that they participate in life-worlds subordinated by the ‘major’ narratives of the dominant institutions” (101).
- ⁷⁵ Wilson and Dissanayake, *Global/Local*, 6.
- ⁷⁶ Ibid.
- ⁷⁷ While Wilson and Dissanayake champion the local, some critics take issue with the common equation of the local with the “culturally creative and resistant.” Ong criticizes Arjun Appadurai in this regard, writing that the model he uses “does not quite capture the horizontal and relational nature of the contemporary economic, social, and cultural processes that stream across spaces” (Ong, 4).
- ⁷⁸ Lowe, “Globalization.”
- ⁷⁹ By “culture,” I refer loosely to the notion as defined by Raymond Williams as a set of practices that encompass intellectual and artistic life.
- ⁸⁰ For example, post-Enlightenment political thought could be considered to have *culminated* in the rise of representative democracies like that of the United States.
- ⁸¹ See Shohat and Stam, *Multiculturalism, Postcoloniality, and Transnational Media*, 9.
- ⁸² For Hans Kohn, nationalism was “first and foremost a state of mind, an act of consciousness” (Kohn, *The Idea of Nationalism*, 10.). While Kohn saw nationalism as the *source* of culture, from Anderson’s perspective, our ability to perceive events occurring simultaneously in a novel’s narrative or in the assemblage of a newspaper enables the study of the subjectivity of nationalism. He links the continuity of a novel’s narrative, or the imagining of events occurring simultaneously in “homogeneous, empty time,” to the continuity of the nation. This continuity allows the national subject to imagine herself as one member of a large community that no one can see, much less fully know. Thus, like the continuity of the novel’s narrative, there is “continuity editing” that helps to ensure continuity of space and narrative. It is also important to point out Anderson’s emphasis on framing and linkage in the creation of this continuity since framing and linkage (what we might call “montage”) are also important concepts in cinema.
- ⁸³ See Hansen, “The Mass Production of the Senses”; Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*; Gellner (Gellner, *Nations and Nationalism*.) understood the development of nationalism in a similar way to Anderson as a modernist theory of nationalism, but he saw this constitutive linkage of culture to economics and capitalism differently. Both saw a common, relatively stable shared language as foundational to nationalism, but while Anderson favors the rise of “print-capitalism” in the form of commodities like books and newspapers that effectively interpellated its subjects as members of the imagined community, Gellner found the roots of nationalism in industrialization and its link to progress and “continuous improvement,” and importantly the need for an accessible, shared language and homogenous culture to convey those concepts. The educational system was the center of this culture because it provided the most universal, generic education possible, which could then be applied to any number of specializations within the industrialized economy.
- ⁸⁴ Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments*, 5.
- ⁸⁵ Ibid., 13.
- ⁸⁶ See Gaonkar, *Alternative Modernities*, Knauff, *Critically Modern*, and Lau, *Multiple Modernities*. These collections build on the ideas in Eisenstadt, *Multiple Modernities*.
- ⁸⁷ Ong, *Flexible Citizenship*, 29.
- ⁸⁸ Ibid., 32.
- ⁸⁹ Giroux is quoted in Dirlik, “The Global in the Local,” 42.
- ⁹⁰ Ibid., 41.
- ⁹¹ For some examples of films that changed laws, see O’Kane and Farrelly, “FGM”; “‘Honour Killings.’”

⁹² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 46.

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 45.

Chapter 2 – Life as an Ocean: Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Puppetmaster*

I always tend to use long shots since I prefer to show what is happening behind the characters, meaning the objects behind the actors, the landscapes. When you use a long shot, you can better capture reality. I am in favor of realism in movies and am against the theatricalization of action. I hate explanation in films, especially anything related to psychology, preferring instead that the movie help audiences to bring their own imaginations into the story.

—Hou Hsiao-hsien

In this chapter I illustrate how the content and technique or form of *The Puppetmaster* relates to philosophical debates surrounding the postcolonial, decolonization, globalization, and the transnational imaginary. These debates about universal and particular or center and periphery are important in postcolonial theory but are also crucial to the process of a nation and a peoples' emergence from a colonial past, both politically and culturally. That is, Hou's films also participate in the discourse of the nation—including how the people of Taiwan approached their own process of decolonization that extended through the 1980s and 1990s. At the same time, the international reception of his films has an effect on that same discursive terrain. The content and particularly the form have an even greater effect on that reception. Using my analysis of Hou and *The Puppetmaster* I argue that even the positive reception of Hou's work might unintentionally limit *how* it is seen, in effect preventing Hou's film and the decolonial message it contains from participating fully in the global debates that reflect his nation's postcolonial dilemmas.

At an early point in Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien's 1986 film *Dust in the Wind*, a grandfather, played by Li Tien-lu, gives one of his youngest grandsons a bowl of food to eat. Though Li scolds the boy, telling him that he will not grow up and might die if he does not eat, the boy refuses. Several scenes later, Li returns with a different offering. "This is not the ordinary bowl of rice," he tells the boy, and the boy does not immediately refuse. "Grandpa got this from Taipei, in a fancy restaurant," he says. "There were only foreigners eating there. This is Western food." Still hesitant, the grandson eyes what appears to be a bowl of rice with green sticks poking out. To these Western eyes it appears no more "Western" than Li's first offering, and his noting that "there's an egg in there" does not make it more so, yet these exotic aspects are enough to interest the boy, who, in the last seconds of the scene, accepts chopsticks from his grandfather and looks intent on eating his "Western food."

This moment is surely meant to be humorous to anyone who has tried to convince a child to eat. In retrospect, it could also be seen as a joke on some of Hou's detractors, who later implied that Hou played up the "traditional" aspects of his films in order to make them more "exotic" to film-festival crowds. Though these accusations came later, and this film was mostly intended for a Taiwanese and Chinese audience, the scene seems to poke fun at the idea of exoticism for the purpose of "selling" something. With this scene Hou displays an awareness of both his potential audiences and the postcolonial world they live in; that is, "the West" is what you make it.

This static shot and the following sequence, which shows us other scenes of the household while we listen to Li speak, exemplify many of Hou's techniques and can be seen as an early experiment that he developed further in *The Puppetmaster* (1993). The initial shot of Li and the boy is one of the first in which Hou uses what I call his "layered framing" technique, where the camera is distant from the action and doorways or other openings within a set create a frame within the frame. In the scene following this Li continues to lecture the boy though the *mise-en-scène* does not necessarily align with what is being said. As a whole, the sequence is the perfect starting point for discussing Hou's techniques, their critical reception in the West, and their relationship to postcolonial studies and the transnational imaginary. This sequence serves as an introduction to Hou's method of "revealing reality," even if what he depicts is the reality of the past.

Taiwan's history of multiple colonizations has created a dense and complex setting in which "life-worlds subordinated by the 'major' narratives of the dominant institutions" manifest themselves.¹ Like many other places, Taiwan has an uneasy relationship with the word "postcolonial" due to the unusual kind of *recolonization* that occurred there. After a period of Japanese rule from 1895 to 1945, the Chinese national government (called the Kuomintang or KMT) kept in place the political and economic structures of Japanese colonialism. Darrel Davis writes, "Taiwan is an unusual, perhaps unique, case because, although the colonizers were expelled, the country never got its independence."² Hou and his fellow filmmakers came to artistic maturity in the late 1980s, at the end of forty years of martial law.

Even in this context, however, Hou and his collaborators felt the effects of a power relationship that was once classically “colonial” but that we might now call neocolonial and that originates in yet another center. In an interview Hou explained that many of the politically sensitive topics in his most famous films are still very much taboo subjects in Taiwanese culture and that some documentation is still censored by the government. Younger Taiwanese people, according to Hou, are “totally clueless” about their country’s history, but he does not fault them: “I blame the government entirely. The subject [of the February 28 Incident or the White Terror] can’t be found in any secondary school text books, or if it is there, it’s been dressed up in a nice version.”³ Similarly, Wu Nien-jen, the prolific screenwriter and director who co-wrote the screenplays for several of Hou’s films, lamented in 2005 the ongoing “cultural colonialism” in Taiwan, stating that the Taiwanese are almost more uniformly “American” than Americans themselves: “President George W. Bush’s views are often challenged in his own country, no one here in Taiwan dares to disagree with him. Taiwan has already been culturally colonized by America without even knowing it—not only that, they even feel proud of it. We do not maintain our cultural autonomy or even hold on to our own independent views. America fought this cultural war very well.”⁴

It is this cultural war that Hou’s films have, even if indirectly, fought in, and in doing so they have added to a discourse about subaltern knowledge and histories in the era of globalization. They represent “border gnosis” and also what Mignolo calls the “colonial difference”: “the space where the restitution of subaltern knowledge is taking place and where border thinking is emerging.”⁵ I argue that despite the ways

in which critics and academics who support Hou's work frame it—always in relation to a colonial “center,” specifically Hollywood—Hou works in a space where “local histories inventing and implementing global designs meet local histories, the space in which global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored.”⁶ In other words, I contend that Hou's films occupy and depict a space that is neither wholly complicit with colonial power, nor entirely opposed to it. Instead, his cinema attempts to represent the lives of people negotiating those two extremes.

Popular and Academic Reception of Hou

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh's study of Hou's evolving aesthetics and style adroitly summarizes very questionable statements made by some critics, who have essentialized Hou's unusual narrative and cinematic strategies by describing them as oppositional. Rather than seeing how Hou engages with many traditions at once as he negotiates his own unique place within several different discourses, these critics describe him only as oppositional, as working in a mode that rejects Western culture in favor of a “Chinese” sensibility. Yeh writes that words like “‘emptiness,’ ‘antimontage,’ ‘indirect,’ [and] ‘essentially Chinese’ define Hou's film language as a precious option outside the norms of Western cinema.”⁷ She shrewdly pinpoints the underlying meaning of these critics' praise when she observes that to them, “Hou Hsiao-hsien is great, but this is because he is Chinese.”⁸ For these critics Hou is an *objet a*, an object upon which their own vision of reality is projected.

A notable example of this tendency can be found in the *Film Comment* survey of the best films and directors of the 1990s in which French critic Jean-Michel Frodon writes that Hou “is one of the best directors presently at work, because . . . he is deeply Chinese, Chinese culture being the strongest potential alternative to the Hollywoodian aesthetic hegemony.”⁹ Frodon’s reference to Hou as simply “Chinese” erases the specificity inherent to many of his films, which are made and set in Taiwan, including the relationship of Taiwan to the People’s Republic of China (PRC), which would claim cultural authority over it. But as *Village Voice* critic J. Hoberman shows, even this specificity can be placed within a cultural hierarchy: “New French or German directors are taken as a matter of course; one almost has to apologize for introducing a major talent from a backwater like Taiwan.”¹⁰ Hoberman’s comments might have been meant as a tongue-in-cheek chastisement of the Western film critic community for their Eurocentrism, but he still manages to reestablish an East/West binary as the foundation of his discussion. As Yeh points out, Hoberman’s comment suggests a sense of surprise that such a place as Taiwan could produce an artist in the sophisticated realm of art cinema—whether in jest or not. “Is it really so difficult to come to terms with Hou Hsiao-hsien,” Yeh asks, “that a hackneyed East versus West needs to be reenacted?”¹¹ Clearly, the answer is yes, as Hoberman and his peers, unwittingly or otherwise, enable such colonial-era dichotomies to persist in the postcolonial period.

I would claim that Hou’s films challenge the notion that he deliberately makes his films more exotic for consumption elsewhere, and that his formal style critiques that assertion by engaging with alternative modes of writing history using film. His

technique should be seen as “difference within rather than against unity.”¹² That is, his style is not purposefully oppositional (i.e., like a Third Cinema approach), but includes elements that resist and conform. His methods demonstrate an intervention into the East/West binary as well as other binaries that underpin colonial and post-colonial thought and, following Chakrabarty, become a kind of subaltern past.

The Puppetmaster, Subaltern Pasts, and the Decolonial Imaginary

Hou’s 1993 film *The Puppetmaster* makes clear how his cinematic techniques both challenge the limits of history and write a subaltern past (as opposed to a “minority history”) as Chakrabarty conceives it. That is, a history told from within the perspective of its subject and not exclusively using the tools of the oppressor to write history. We can see it in alignment with Mignolo’s “border gnosis” or knowledge that comes from the in-between spaces that occur when people negotiate the forces that constrain and enable their lives. This alternative knowledge production and/or history production becomes part of the transnational or decolonial imaginary, which in turn contributes to the larger project of “provincializing Hollywood.” Aligning Chakrabarty’s and Hansen’s notion involves evaluating the film within its own historical context and divorcing it from any universalizing tendency. It involves treating it, as Lim suggests we should all cinema, including Hollywood, as “particular, peculiar and provincial, while not discounting their abilities to communicate and connect beyond their cultural, linguistic and formal specificities.”¹³

The Puppetmaster ostensibly narrates the early life of Li Tien-lu in the first half of the twentieth century during the Japanese occupation of Taiwan. As a young man Li is drawn to the theater and quickly becomes skilled in the art of traditional

Chinese puppetry. After traveling the Taiwanese countryside to support his family, Li is eventually hired by the Japanese to perform propagandistic programs depicting Japanese heroism in World War II. As the war winds down, he returns to his hometown of Taipei to participate in his community's celebration of the Japanese leaving Taiwan. Beyond the facts of its narrative, however, *The Puppetmaster* is a remarkable hybrid film that blends modes of address to tell the "true" biography of Li Tien-lu, continuing the formal innovations and techniques that Hou had begun to experiment with in previous films like *Dust in the Wind* and *City of Sadness*.

Hou begins the film with what had by then become one of his typical scenes: a deep, static shot lasting two minutes and twenty seconds and showing a birth celebration around a dining table. After a minute, Li joins the shot in a voice-over, telling the story of his naming and describing the familial complexities and controversies that surrounded it. The film continues in this mode (a representational re-creation of scenes from Li's past, accompanied by Li's narration of the events) for the first fifty minutes. At this point the film takes an unusual turn: Hou allows the subject of his film to step into the diegesis to represent himself. Li Tienlu sits within a representation of his own life built for Hou's film (Figure 2.1), but tells his own version of the narrative that is distinct from Hou's visual version. Suddenly, we remember that we are watching a film. Scenes of puppet shows and other stage shows also intervene in the narrative of the film; these scenes are usually presented in one statically framed, uninterrupted take, as if the film viewer were sitting in the puppet-show audience. The scenes are cut to show the stage from a side angle from which we can see the performers behind the stage. Scenes of landscapes punctuate

the puppet shows, serving as transitions between them and the episodes from Li's life, whose focal points are human interactions.

The entire film is made up of these four modes: the landscape shots; the performance scenes; the dramatizations of episodes from Li's life, with and without voice-over; and the scenes of Li on camera, telling a story. However, they do not remain discrete or appear in a certain order. In addition, Hou does not always provide transitions between the narrative scenes, and the landscape scenes in particular form a kind of ellipsis between the stories told. As a result, the audience does not always know when or where a scene is occurring, nor which cinematic mode to expect. Hou utilizes the interplay between these four modes not only to construct an alternative narrative but also to question the limits of history and the notion of authority over narrative and history.

The disjuncture between what we hear from Li and what we see on the screen has a disorienting effect similar to Hou's transitions between scenes, and contributes to the film's functioning as a subaltern past. It is worth noting that Hou himself was born in China in 1947; his parents immigrated to Taiwan during the liminal 1945-49 period after the Japanese rule. Thus, the "dramatizations" of Li's life are constructed by a person who never knew the world in which Li grew up yet often narrated by a person who grew up knowing nothing but that world. The film becomes complexly layered with these two perspectives: Hou is the director, but he defers much of his authority over the film to Li's uninterrupted stories. By drawing our attention to the contrasts not only between what is represented, but also how and by whom, the film problematizes representation. In addition this technique reminds us

of Chakrabarty's assertion that "the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together, a disjuncture of the present to itself."¹⁴ Subaltern pasts like this film make this disjuncture visible.

Nick Browne sees Hou's landscape scenes not simply as transitions but as one of several "dialectic[s] of space" in the film, which in turn signify thematic dialectics, such as biography versus autobiography, vernacular Taiwanese tradition versus Taiwanese "official nationalism," or narrative versus non-narrative.¹⁵ For Browne, the landscape scenes form a counterpoint, a nonhuman backdrop, to the central narrative. I find Browne's "dialectics" useful, but their elements are multi-vocal and therefore cannot really be easily formulated—to extend the Hegelian analogy—into a single "synthesis." I see these elements as interlocutors in a conversation, functioning in a mode more dialogic than dialectical. Rather than moving through the formal stages of a dialectic or clearly moving back and forth from thesis to antithesis, the various modes overlap differently at different moments. Chu Tien-wen, Hou's screenwriter, says that editing the film was "like putting together passing clouds."¹⁶ The idea of the editing as somehow organic or following the logic of nature fits the notion of dialogism versus dialectics, as in the sequence where Li describes the events leading up to the death of his grandmother. It's difficult to identify when the sequence begins, but it seems to follow a scene where a young Li is performing (Figure 2.2), which fades to black. After a fade-in, there are several scenes of him and his grandmother (whom he has not spoken of yet), eating at a marketplace, and a scene depicting someone working in a field (Figure 2.3). During the latter, Li's oral narrative begins. This continues through a scene of a group of

people working on the roof of a house (Figure 2.4), and then to one of the contemporary Li sitting in that same film set (Figure 2.1). I have assumed the scene of building precedes his story of taking his grandmother to live with him in the mountains before she dies. After she dies, Li's story concludes, and there is another fade to black, and another fade-in on a small music group playing a tune, after which another sequence begins unfolding. This sequence demonstrates how the narrative seems to drift from vignette to vignette, through different time periods and different modes of storytelling, mostly without the viewer even noticing on the first viewing.

Hou has said that his use of ellipses came from watching his fourteen-year-old daughter argue with her mother and remembering how attached the two were ten years before. "Between the ages of four and fourteen, I could extract a section, and omit everything else. Things would still be clear."¹⁷ In *The Puppetmaster*, the time between shots or between what is depicted visually and what Li describes in direct address is unknown, and we must infer what occurred in between. We should also understand how such ellipses play a role in the formal strategy of the film as that which is *not* represented—or strategically removed. What remains unseen, unfiled, or unrepresentable is an important part of Hou's films, and the layering of shots and gaps in the narrative speak to the overlapping colonial situations and therefore versions of Li and Taiwan's competing histories in the film.

This attention to representation and the borders of things extends to the very frame within which Hou composes his shots. *The Puppetmaster* contains myriad examples of the framing I noted in the "Western food" scene from *Dust in the Wind*, in which the frame is dramatically divided both by the geometric space of the frame

and by its planes of depth (Figure 2.5). David Bordwell describes several examples of Hou's characteristic framing as akin to the "planimetric" framing that developed with the rise of many European New Wave filmmakers of the 1950s and 1960s. A planimetric shot looks more "flat" than one in which space appears to recede along a diagonal line through the frame. "Flat' as they look," writes Bordwell, "these shots still represent depth . . . [they] present depth as a series of parallel planes."¹⁸ The recurrence of these kinds of shots—in which the frame is divided up into two or three distinct planes so that the action occurs within as little as one-third to one-half of the entire frame—in Hou's work calls for further analysis.

Emilie Yeh calls this technique "delimitation of the frame" in her analysis of the different cinematic strategies that Hou employs in *City of Sadness*.¹⁹ According to Yeh, this strategy works alongside several others to create a formal system that, using a different set of limits and constraints, is significantly distinct from conventional narrative continuity or classical narrative style. For example, Hou's choice in *City of Sadness* and *The Puppetmaster* to repeatedly film the same setting from the same angle but from different points along an axis (making the camera seem at times closer to and at other times farther away from the same central point) complicates one of the organizing principles of the conventional system. There are many sets that we see several times over, but from different places on an axis (note the railing in Figures 2.6, 2.7, and 2.8) Each time Hou places the camera in the same basic vantage point but at a different point along an imaginary axis extending from the viewer to a focal point near the horizon.²⁰ In Figure 2.6, Li's mother administers a punishment, and for several moments one or both figures are almost

out of view behind a wall in the foreground that takes up more than a third of the left side of the screen. Hou's camera never moves, and he never cuts to show the full action.

Another formal strategy that Hou uses to restrict his representation revolves around his breaking the cinematic rule of what is known as the "axis of action." In "Continuity Editing," a section of his textbook *Film Art: An Introduction*, Bordwell describes one of the primary principles by which space is organized in conventional filmmaking. "Called variously the 'axis of action,' the 'center line,' or the '180 line' . . . this axis of action determines a half circle, or 180 area, where the camera can be placed to present the action."²¹ Bordwell's axis places a line between the camera (standing in for the audience) and what is filmed. Maintaining this line "ensures a common space from shot to shot" within one scene.²² However, many of the discrete scenes in Hou's work contain no cuts, so while there could be said to be an axis of action, its existence is inconsequential. Instead, Hou's camera sometimes crosses what might have been the axis of action within a conventional editing strategy, ignoring the axis and replacing it with a different and perpendicular axis along which the camera moves. Recognizing these crossed axes, Yeh writes of *City of Sadness*, "If the stageline is the cornerstone of classical montage—the imaginary line that organizes all cinematic space—then the camera axis replaces that organizing function in Hou's narrative system . . . this 'uncinematic' shooting strategy produces playful variations of *mise-en-scène* and amplifies the powerful impact of the film's violence."²³

Hou's fascination with geometric architecture in sets, use of a fixed-camera axis, and delimited frame compositions change the cinematic system's relationship to its narrative project. Yeh and Nornes note that "not only does the space of *City of Sadness* become fractured into a graphic plane, but the size and shape of the screen itself (at least what is available to the narrative) varies."²⁴ That is, Hou's framing continually reminds the viewer of the limits of narrativity. This blocked or empty space does not signify any one meaning, but as part of Hou's visual lexicon it imparts something to the meaning: something is always hidden from view. The empty space reminds us that, both literally and figuratively, we are never seeing the "whole" picture. Hou's framing limits our view just as discursive formations limit social actors and their points of enunciation.

Hou's delimited framing also adds to the disjuncture between Li's narratives and Hou's dramatizations, thus making *The Puppetmaster* even more complex. The differences between the two are not jarring; in fact, it is rather easy to drift from one "cloud" to another, and only when one reflects on some of Li's accounts can one begin to see how the two narrative threads differ. Often, his narratives proceed from the same relative time frame as the visual track but go on to tell a completely different story. For example, while the visual narrative in one section of the film tells the story of Li's relationship with a courtesan and her test of his fidelity, he tells us his own story of how they met and how he later cured her of a sore on her lip. The former could easily have been dramatized in the framework of the film; the latter (as we will see) would have been more difficult.

Hou creates more and more fractures between the visual and vocal narratives of his film by letting the time frames of the two slip past each other. Often, the visual narrative and the oral narrative nearly coincide but just miss a common point of intersection. When, for example, Li tells how his mother died, the viewer has already been watching the visual accompaniment for a full minute. We see his mother being led to her room, appearing upset and unwell, before Li's story informs us that she is ill. By the time he reaches the point of her death in the story, the viewer is watching a scene set outdoors at sunset in which two rickshaws pass on a road with a village in view to the left. This scene gives us no immediate information related to the story we are hearing but instead has its own small narrative thread, the larger framework of which remains ambiguous to the viewer.

In another example, we hear Li's story of how he came to work for the Japanese only after we have seen one of his performances. After this performance, during a scene in which the puppet troupe walks through a lush green field, Li's voice-over begins, telling us how he met the Japanese officer who offered him the job. The next scene shows the troupe bathing and washing their clothes in a river, and the next gives us Li himself, sitting in one of the sets—the Japanese-style house that his family lives in during this period—that has not even been introduced in the not-quite-parallel dramatization component of the film. Moving beyond a notion that these different perspectives provide simply a "*Rashomon* effect," in which what is knowable differs with the perspective, these scenes engage with the question of what *is* knowable or representable. Hou invites Li into his film set—a re-creation of a piece of Li's life—to tell *his* version of the story.

In some cases, Li's appearance in a set precedes the use of that same setting in a dramatic context. In one scene (Figure 2.10) Li sits in the Japanese-style house that his family is shown occupying later (Figure 2.11), demonstrating the way Hou mixes several of his methods in different combinations throughout the film. Beyond the extraordinary notion of placing the film's real-life subject in the middle of the film of his own life, placing him before a set that has previously been seen in the dramatized context is also unusual. In addition, the set in this case is used in three different subsequent scenes, which, combined with the scene featuring Li himself, make up another quartet of scenes using Hou's delimitation of the frame and his movement along an unseen axis in the set. This particular set is very difficult to recognize on the first viewing as the movement along the axis is much more disparate and the lighting is quite different in each of the subsequent three scenes.

Taken together Hou's cinematic techniques involving layering of narratives and framing, plus disjunctions of time and film space, question why choices are made in any narrative and by whom, as well as what is "narratable" using whose language. These competing perspectives combine to show Hou, through the film, demonstrating the limits of history "by experimenting to see how films and history might intersect...[by] studying memory rather than just history."²⁵ Hou demonstrates visually how memory and history can simultaneously conflict and overlap. They may not make as much narrative "sense" as other cinematic narratives, but they may be the very aspects that make them stand out as "knots," as in Chakrabarty's configuration. These sometimes-irrational features of subaltern pasts are "signposts" of "the limits of the discourse of history."²⁶ Hou's method also speaks to Trouillot's

inquiries into history and power and his critiques of theories of history, such as the notion of the “storage” model of history that assumes each individual has unlimited, uninhibited access to their own memories. Troillot points out that even if this were true, such recall would hardly form a narrative. “Consider a monologue describing in sequence all of an individual’s recollections. It would sound as a meaningless cacophony even to the narrator.”²⁷ Though Hou and Li’s film is hardly a cacophony, the disorientation produced and seeming randomness of the scenes is certainly somewhere in between that extreme and an ordered “official” history. As such, Hou and Li demonstrate the interplay between history, memory and each individual’s role in the writing of history. Or as Trouillot puts it, “Historical actors are also narrators, and vice versa.”²⁸

A particular aspect of Li’s narratives echoes another of Chakrabarty’s points about subaltern pasts and their use of “supernatural” beliefs. Many of Li’s stories contain references to what could be called a system of folk beliefs and customs. Many times, this system is represented merely by a reference to fate or fortune: Li begins several monologues with the phrase “To speak of man’s fortunes . . .” before launching into the particular story he’s going to tell. One describes his mother setting up a special altar to pray to, asking “the Gods to take her life in exchange for her mother’s,” and then her subsequent death. Another tells of a time when his grandmother was living with him and became ill. No one can determine what is wrong with her, but a friend instructs him not leave her side. “Lucky for you, you were born under the Kwia star,” the friend observes. “If you weren’t, your grandmother would have caused your death.” When Li does leave to go to a puppet

show performance, she dies. In the most unusual story, Li treats his lover, Lietzu, who is sick with a sore on her lip and a fever, with a remedy he remembers from his childhood. "The only cure is to go into the fields and catch some frogs, slit one open at the belly and place the opening on the sore. A minute later, the frog should dry up." After applying several "bucketfuls" of frogs to Lietzu's lip through a long night, the condition clears up. None of these tales is represented visually in any way; we see only Li himself occupying one of the sets that his story takes place in, which was featured in a previous scene.

Hou's decision to allow these stories to stand on their own without an attempt at representing them once again underscores the ongoing dialogism in the film regarding *what* events are representable and *how* they are represented. Key to this distinction is Hou's decision to use Li's speaking voice and dialect for the film. In fact, Li's personality, stories, and voice in Hou's three previous fictional films (in scenes like the one from *Dust in the Wind*, for example) inspired this film, but Hou acknowledges in *The Puppetmaster* that his visual tools cannot express what Li expresses with his linguistic ones. Hou's significant contributions to Taiwanese cinema include not only the introduction of synch-sound recording but also the introduction of some of the many Taiwanese dialects to the screen. According to Jonathan Rosenbaum, nearly all Taiwanese productions before the mid-1980s were synchronized to recordings in Mandarin made after the shooting. It was Hou's engagement with Li that led him to these innovations because he wanted to preserve Li's "idiosyncratic delivery and Taiwanese dialect."²⁹

June Yip's uses the Bakhtinian notion of "heteroglossia" to describe Hou's technique in *City of Sadness*. Recalling Chakrabarty's "major and minor," Yip writes that in his earlier film Hou mobilizes "those discourses, normally considered to be outside the generic boundaries of 'historical narrative'—nonpolitical 'voices' like the economic and sociological discourses, personal letters and diaries, and so on—that Hou incorporates to interrupt, complicate, and ultimately explode the monolithic view of Taiwanese history disseminated by the Kuomintang."³⁰ Considering that *The Puppetmaster* is temporally framed by the beginning and end of a period of colonial rule and that Hou's film is also generally about defining Taiwanese identity—historically but also, most importantly, in the present of the early 1990s—what do these techniques say to us about what Aníbal Quijano calls "the coloniality of power," neocolonialism, and the possibilities for decolonization?³¹

To answer this question, I turn to Emma Pérez's concept of the "decolonial imaginary." The decolonial imaginary, according to Pérez, is both a theory of resistance and a tool for the historical recovery of Chicana resistance, but it is also a theoretical tool applicable to many different colonial and postcolonial contexts. "The decolonial imaginary," she writes, "embodies the buried desires of the unconscious, living and breathing in between that which is colonialist and that which is colonized."³² Pérez analyzes the interstitial movement of Yucatan feminists between colonizer and colonized, describing how these women led "doubled" lives and spoke with two voices. One voice spoke in sync with a mainstream nationalism that professed a moderate vision of the equal treatment of women, but the other voice spoke of a feminism that moved beyond the emerging hegemonic nationalist

discourse. Teresa de Lauretis calls these multiple voices “a movement back and forth between the representation of gender and what that representation leaves out or more pointedly, makes unrepresentable.”³³

The unrepresentable is also what Hou’s film dances around: what is shown may not be spoken, and what is spoken may not be easily shown. Between what is shown and what is spoken are moments and spaces completely absent from the picture (literally and figuratively). What Hou gives us is a heteroglossic representation of many phases of a man’s life spent in and around a particular configuration of disparate nationalisms and colonial powers. In *The Puppetmaster*, the “movement back and forth” covers the distance between the vocal and visual representations, carving out a third space of agency fueled by Li’s decolonial imaginary. As Pérez notes, “If the colonial imaginary hides something, then the decolonial imaginary . . . recognizes what is left out.”³⁴ Within this space we come to understand how Li negotiated those forces, struggled for a certain definition of liberty and survived.

This shifting of perspective within the film, calling attention to the film as a film, brings to mind debates in film theory of the 70s where psychoanalysis and notions of subjectivity in film were seen as bound with ideological practice. Of course, these are some of the very theories that Bordwell and Carroll reacted against, charging that films were used to justify “Grand Theories” and did not take into account how films were made or constructed. However, in a film where the “fourth wall” is broken down in such an unusual way and it is interesting to consider how this film might speak to these theories.

Hou's delimitation of the frame and narrative techniques that seem to elide representation bring to mind what Lapsley and Westlake name the "questions that threaten to expose film as a signifying practice, as a constructed and enunciated operation."³⁵ These questions threaten the "doubled absence" that upholds the viewer's suspension of disbelief. This is the notion that the film appears "real" to us, despite our semi-conscious knowledge that it is a fiction that simply appears real. "Spectators double up their belief by acknowledging that they know very well this is a film made with cameras and microphones, but all the same the pleasure derived from this film depends on the magical transformation those cameras and microphones make possible. Indeed, for the majority of spectators, therein lies the glory and lure of the cinema."³⁶

Of course, a "realist" style would typically be aimed at upholding this suspension of disbelief, trying to convey to viewers that what they are shown is a true reflection of reality. Hou's methods reveal that he is not concerned with upholding this doubled absence, but rather is foregrounding the gaps inherent in any narrative, visual or not. His very framings can, if one is aware of it, call attention to this gap. Hou calls attention to them in the same way Trouillot identifies the rift between "history" as knowledge and a process. That is, the notion of history as a true representation of the past versus the process of determining the past gets smoothed over all too easily, and soon the latter narrative becomes the understood true version of history. Any narrative—written, national, cinematic—carries some version of the doubled absence. At some level we know it is a construction, but (consciously or not) we choose to forget that understanding and temporarily believe

the artifice. But the cinematic version appeals to us the most directly because it is the closest version of our experience of reality.

Following Metz, *Screen* theorists Colin MacCabe and Stephen Heath hoped for breaks in this suspension of disbelief. While their standards for a truly revolutionary film ultimately revealed the weakness of their theory,³⁷ one can detect in *The Puppetmaster* an attempt to place the viewer within the realm of film production itself, by way of Li's unusual direct addresses to the audience. While perhaps not sparking a revolution that was hoped for by these theorists, this technique contributes to the understanding and interpretation of history, and therefore has its own mode of influence. Recall Nowell-Smith's notion that the kind of cinema that Hou creates, which calls attention to itself as a film and emphasizes the cinematic apparatus, becomes part of its meaning by reminding us "how reality makes us."³⁸ The lesson that Hou and Li impart has as much to do with the contentious history of Taiwan as it does about our relationship to film and culture making. Rather than simply a reflective mechanism, a film calling attention to itself can spark reflection on the workings of history and the present; that is, revealing reality to us. And insofar as this also lays bare what Trouillot called the roots of power, films expose the writing of history and its limits, and also lay bare the workings of power as it is deployed through and used by history.

If one substitutes "the nature of our desire" in Nowell-Smith's thought here with "the tracing of power" or "the construction of history" or other building blocks of the multicultural product, we see how the thread runs through these traditions of thought. Notions of absence, incompleteness, and the unrepresentable are already a

component of some critiques of colonial power, especially how that power works within institutionalized forms like the writing of history. Chakrabarty notes that by locating the “limits of history” in the “‘minority’ of subaltern pasts, we stay with the heterogeneities without seeking to reduce them to any overarching principle that speaks for an already given whole.”³⁹ In this case, the “whole” in question begins with the rest of Hou’s frame and settings within his film but extends to the history of cinema and questions about what a Taiwanese nation-state, notion of citizenship, and identity might look like. The repetition of Hou’s delimited frames tells us that those configurations will never be complete and are always being remade in the intersections among family, business, and conversation across the dinner table. It also reminds us simultaneously that the writers of history are not exclusive to the academy, but that no matter where they are, “any historical narrative is a particular bundle of silences, the result of a unique process, and the operation to deconstruct these silences will vary accordingly.”⁴⁰ Thus, as much as Hou and Li present their own unique process, they are also deconstructing the silences of other narratives.

Li’s references to folk beliefs also relate to an important aspect of Chakrabarty’s “subaltern pasts.” In Chakrabarty’s explication, subaltern pasts can disturb the “major” of conventional history because they dislodge the notion of agency itself. His example, in which the Santals attribute their agency to the god Thakur and thus locate it both outside themselves and outside a conventional model of social agency, is one that questions the legitimacy of the underlying philosophical position of historical method itself. Conventional histories—even those undertaken by the Subaltern Studies group, which ostensibly challenge conventional histories—

look for basic cause and effect within all events and social actors' motivations. Thus, the historian ends up ascribing an agency to an actor that the actor does not attribute to herself. "Historians will grant the supernatural a place in somebody's belief system or ritual practices, but to ascribe to it any real agency in historical events will be [to] go against the rules of evidence that gives historical discourse procedures for settling disputes about the past."⁴¹

This point is part of Chakrabarty's overall argument about exposing the limits of the discipline of history and ultimately showing that the discipline "is only one among ways of remembering the past."⁴² Chakrabarty includes several ideas of what some other ways might look like. He writes that one might "write history from within what we regard as [the Santals'] beliefs"⁴³ or "refrain from assimilating these different voices to any one voice and deliberately leave loose ends in one's narrative."⁴⁴ Hou employs these techniques in *The Puppetmaster* by allowing Li to speak directly to the audience and by yielding the authority of his visual representative mode to Li's oral one. What results is a history of Taiwan filtered not only through Hou's camera but also through Li's beliefs.

Hou incorporates subaltern histories into "official history" by weaving them into his film, interrupting and expanding not only the normative histories of the nation but also of film. And this inclusion, as Chakrabarty notes, "has turned out to be a much more complex problem than a simple operation of applying some already settled methods to a new set of archives and adding the results to the existing collective wisdom of historiography."⁴⁵ To resolve this problem he proposes dissolving "the subject-object relationship that normally defines the historian's

relationship to his or her archives” and putting us in touch with “the plural ways of being that make up our own present,” making visible “the disjuncture of the present with itself.”⁴⁶ Hou’s film dissolves the relationship between filmmaker and subject; he blurs the line of narrative authority and disrupts the border between past and present by placing Li into re-creations of past events and by re-creating set pieces from Li’s life, literally building the past back into the present. Taken together, these elements of the film are demonstrations of Chakrabarty’s “time-knots,” meaning that an articulation of the past is necessarily shaped by an understanding of the present and that subaltern pasts are necessarily articulated in relation to the “historian’s past”—understood as official history.⁴⁷ Hou’s techniques interrupt Bordwell’s story about the international spread of classical narrative style and contribute to the project of provincializing Hollywood by representing particularities, not universals.

Hou’s visual dramatization of moments from Li’s life and Li’s oral narratives converge and then diverge again at the end of the film in an interesting way. This convergence involves the role of “gods and spirits” in everyday life, as well as in major historical turning points, and the perhaps unsung roles of social actors not always considered contributors to these, as Chakrabarty would call them, “major events.” When discussing the Santals, Chakrabarty refers to a story about the poet Yeats’s interest in the supernatural world. An informant claims not to believe in the “fairies” she has just told him about, yet reminds him, “They’re there, Mr. Yeats, they’re there.”⁴⁸ Li puts it this way: “If you call it superstition, it’s superstition. But if you believe, it will prove itself very swiftly.” “Gods and spirits,” writes Chakrabarty,

“are not dependent on human beliefs for their own existence; what brings them to presence are our practices.”⁴⁹

As WWII winds down, Li is released from his job as puppeteer for the Japanese. Upon returning to Taipei, he becomes sick with malaria. Nevertheless, his apprentices and audience implore him to perform for them. An apprentice arranges a bed behind the stage so that if Li becomes fatigued with fever, he can turn the performance over to one of them and rest. For once, Li's story is accompanied by a visual dramatization as reconstructed by Hou: we see the actor playing Li performing, then his assistants leading him to a bed some distance behind the stage, the loud voices and gong crashing of the show continuing as he attempts to rest. Shortly after this scene, we see the real Li once again, and he tells a series of stories having to do with the departure of the Japanese.

In his last monologue, Li tells of following some Taiwanese people out to a field, where he finds them dismantling a Japanese war plane that has been abandoned. When he asks what they are doing they ask him, “How do you think we've been paying you for that long performance?” They tell him that they have been funding his magnum opus in praise of the gods who have given them independence. The final words of the film are, appropriately, Li's, who then states, “And that was the reason why Taiwan was finally liberated from Japan.” After these words, the shot quickly cuts to black, and then begins a very slow fade-in of a crowd of people surrounding the wreckage of a plane and the musical theme that has played sparsely throughout the film, as the scene that Li was describing a moment earlier is dramatized by Hou.

The scene provokes a delayed reaction—neither Li’s final words nor the final images are fully meaningful in and of themselves, and both interact in the viewer’s memory to become invested with emotional significance and narrative impact. We hear what Li says, but our realization of the elation and enthusiasm surrounding this otherwise opaque dismantling of the planes only gradually seeps into consciousness. Li’s statement about the connection between his performance and the “liberation” of Taiwan alone speaks volumes, but the connection between his performance, the people’s belief in the influence of the gods, and the political reality of people’s lives also elucidates Chakrabarty’s argument that, acknowledged or not, gods and spirits make changes in material realities through people’s practices. The film acknowledges the people’s belief in gods and spirits without resorting to an anthropological or empirical perspective. Rather, the entire film up to this point has been inviting us to see the past from a flexible perspective, outside of the teleological narrative of cause and effect to which we have become accustomed.

Also interesting is Li’s use of the words *Taiwan* and *liberate*. Although the Japanese surrendered Taiwan to China in October of 1945, Darrell Davis points out that the decolonization process actually dragged on for some time. He describes an eyewitness who reported in November that the Japanese “were still masters of the island.”⁵⁰ Though his statement could be seen as a boast, Li says Taiwan was not free of these “masters” until the gods his performances praised made it so, thus making his use of “liberated” ambiguous and not necessarily referring to the formal hand over. What could Li mean by “Taiwan”?

As I have pointed out, Taiwan was turned over to the mainland Chinese government and given not independence but rather “a second colonial yoke at almost precisely the time its Japanese colonial burden was lifted.”⁵¹ However, the end of *The Puppetmaster* evokes the feelings of hope and exhilaration that came before the realization that the KMT’s rule would become brutal in a way that Japan’s never was. This history might explain the film’s ambivalence about the (at times) civil, and even friendly, relationship between the Japanese authorities and common people like Li and his family. Li’s reference to “Taiwan” *may* be to the independent nation-state of Taiwan that was never able to truly flourish. But given the many different peoples, cultures, and languages that made up Taiwan at that period, I theorize that Li refers to a concept of nation outside the parameters defined by a nation-state. It may be going too far to suggest that he alludes to what Chakrabarty calls “nonstatist forms of democracy that we cannot . . . yet either understand or envisage completely,” but I would posit that this “Taiwan” is implicit in all of Li’s narratives and that it arises from his “decolonial imaginary”: the nation of peoples to whom he is speaking with his tales of folk remedies and beliefs, a “nation-people” represented and insisted upon by his very voice and regional dialect. As such it contributes to the transnational imaginary as well, and aligns with Appadurai’s notion of the imaginary as social practice: this nation-people defines itself through practices that bring about their definition, liberation, and survival.

This self-definition becomes the theme of the film and is pertinent to the time of the film’s production in 1990–91. What did Li’s taking ownership of the liberation of Taiwan mean in that context? *City of Sadness* lamented a belief in active

resistance in the shadow of Tiananmen Square (the film was released a few months after that incident), and Taiwan watched the mainland Chinese people's struggle with more than passing interest. A year later, *The Puppetmaster* suggested that political change need not be radical or even intentional. More importantly, the film communicates that after hundreds of years, the Taiwanese can once again build their own nation and identity, that they can make their own Taiwan, and that no one version is necessarily the right one.⁵²

Conclusion

My final point brings me back full circle to the question of "Western food," which connects Li and Hou as artists. If we are looking for direct resistance to colonialism, Li can be a frustrating figure. He agrees without much hesitation to be employed by the Japanese to do propaganda plays honoring Japanese military heroism and even befriends Japanese officials who call Taiwan their second home. However, Li's actions ensure his family's survival through the difficult war period, and, importantly, they ensure the survival of his performance skills, which herald his homecoming and lead to the eventual "liberation of Taiwan." His interactions with the Japanese remind us that the classic model of colonizer/colonized rarely describes reality, and reminds us, in Ann Stoler's words, of the "tense and tender ties," the associations, alliances, and friendships, that belie that simple dichotomization. Li's actions and relationships demonstrate how colonial situations are not made up of "fixed identities, but [are] inhabited by a range of persons whose changing subjectivities respond to relations of power only partially of their making."⁵³ Stoler

further reminds us that even so-called colonizers may not be individually aware of the full political and social ramifications of their actions and may not embody the roles expected of them in their relationships with the “colonized.” Similarly, Pérez draws upon Homi Bhabha’s concept of “doubling” and the role it plays as a vehicle for the decolonial imaginary “to refer to the manner in which women ‘doubled’ with men’s agendas seeming to agree, yet in actuality articulating their own position.”⁵⁴ Li doubles in relation to both the Japanese and the rest of the film in which he carves out his own authorial position.

Consider that just as Li “sold out” to the Japanese, Hou has been accused of “selling out” to the Taiwanese government and to the international art film community. Shortly after the wave of praise for *City of Sadness*, Hou was denounced for not being critical enough of the KMT government and for not depicting the February 28 Incident more directly in the film. The fact that he directs commercials also became a rallying point for those announcing the “Death of the New Taiwanese Cinema.” Hou continues to direct commercials, in part to help finance his production company and in some cases to work on formal ideas. Hou’s films after *The Puppetmaster* have been criticized in the West for becoming less accessible and increasingly aloof and ambiguous.

Bordwell has also implied that Hou has modified elements of his films over time to fit the demands of the film-festival market. In reference to the increasing complexity of the narratives and time frames in Hou’s Taiwan Trilogy, Bordwell writes that Hou “was an intuitive, unpretentious filmmaker who stretched his ambitions in response to a market that demanded reflexivity, roundabout storytelling, and other

modernist conventions.”⁵⁵ Bordwell does not quite accuse Hou of selling out, but, like many others, he centers the modernist conventions with which Hou is accused of complying in the West, adapting his own “exotic” twist. After relating that Hou must have lengthened his shots over the course of the trilogy because he knew he was expected to “exhibit a distinctive style,” Bordwell becomes much more accusatory: “Now he began to claim that his long take and other stylistic features were indebted to Chinese art. These remarks lent the films a more exotic air on the festival circuit, and Hou’s declarations of his attachment to classical Chinese culture were approvingly echoed by critics.”⁵⁶

Bordwell describes Hou in a very familiar way: as part of a group of people who are not modern, who have not participated in its development, and who can only add their own “spice” to the modern conventions to which they have assimilated. Hou may very well have made these stylistic decisions purely in relation to the market and not for any political or cultural reasons or even—and here Bordwell seems to argue against his own point—for the purpose of solving a narrative problem within his films.

If he did, we can see that Hou's dilemma is the same as Li's, that is, the *two* Lis: the one in *The Puppetmaster* who worked for the colonizing government, enabled his family to survive, and eventually played a role in “liberating” Taiwan, and the one playing the grandfather in *Dust in the Wind* who tricks his grandson into eating his creative culinary solution to a relatively minor sustenance problem. Either way, I would imagine that Hou was familiar with the politics of exoticism and tradition,

with survival, sacrifice, and compromise, well before his engagement with the world cinema market.

Rather than seeing Hou and Li as either “selling out” or fully rebellious, I prefer to see them both as prime purveyors of border gnosis, both working toward revealing colonial difference and provincializing Hollywood. They occupy—in different ways—that space where “global designs have to be adapted, adopted, rejected, integrated, or ignored.”⁵⁷ They show that ordinary people can be simultaneously subversive and complicit as they negotiate between their everyday ways of life and the global networks in which they are embedded. Ultimately, and most importantly, Hou and Li know that most people live their lives outside of “global designs” and academic theories, what Chu Tien-wen calls “life as an ocean, an immovable ocean.” “The lives of everyday people are like an ocean, they move with the tide but never really change, unlike the lives of intellectuals, who are often caught up or even swept away in the waves. Everyday people have a way of changing with the times and adapting with the tide.”⁵⁸

In the end, it is not likely that Hou’s vision will single-handedly affect the material realities of persons in the postcolonial world or bring to international attention an understanding of the workings of colonial power. Nor is it likely that Bordwell’s writing will keep us from seeing Hou’s films. My goal has been to acknowledge the complexities in one of Hou’s films and consider how they might relate to the decolonial process and to postcolonial studies while remembering that sometimes even the positive evaluation of an artist like Hou can be complicit in the discursive field of neocolonialism.

Bordwell and other critics continue to place Western values (or, in this case, Hollywood) at the center of history, leaving figures like Hou on the perimeter. Their call for a return to formalism leads too quickly to a dismissal of the political and cultural contexts—in all their local specificity—in which films are both produced and placed. Rather than seeking a “global di-verse,” we remain in Bordwell’s “transcultural” “uni-verse,” knowing only how similar or dissimilar a film is to our own and how well it might play within Hollywood categories. The experience that such films may offer, that of seeing or knowing the world from someone else’s perspective, is minimized at best, eliminated at worst. Viewers in the West continue to regard a given way of life *in relation* to their own, not *from within*, and possibilities for understanding are lost. In a world where acts of violence are perpetrated based solely on world views and beliefs, our being able to understand—or even glimpse—ways of life outside our own is imperative. We desperately need artistic and cultural sites like *The Puppetmaster*, where Chakrabarty’s dreams of alternative human connections can grow and be realized.

¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 101.

² Davis, “Borrowing Postcolonial: Wu Nianzhen’s *Dou-San* and the Memory Mine,” 239.

³ Ellickson, “Preparing to Live in the Present,” 16.

⁴ Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 313.

⁵ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, ix.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Yeh, “Poetics and Politics of Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s Films,” 173.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ “The Players.”

¹⁰ Yeh, “Poetics and Politics of Hou Hsiao-Hsien’s Films,” 173.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 173–74.

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- ¹² Giroux is quoted in Dirlik, "The Global in the Local," 42.
- ¹³ Lim, "Speaking in Tongues: Ang Lee, Accented Cinema, Hollywood," 142.
- ¹⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 109.
- ¹⁵ Browne, "Hou Hsiao-Hsien's The Puppetmaster: The Poetics of Landscape," 81.
- ¹⁶ Klinger, "Decoding Hou."
- ¹⁷ Ibid.
- ¹⁸ Bordwell, "Transcultural Spaces: Toward a Poetics of Chinese Film," 150.
- ¹⁹ Yeh and Nornes, "City of Sadness."
- ²⁰ Another example is the scene previously described where Li tells the story of his grandmother. When Li is in the shot [Figure 2.4], one can see the set from the scene just previous on a slightly different point on the axis [Figure 2.3]. This is also evident in *Dust in the Wind*, where the first time Li tries to feed his grandson is from a wider shot [Figure 2.5], and the second time is from closer in on the same axis [Figure 2.9].
- ²¹ Bordwell and Thompson, *Film Art*, 285.
- ²² Ibid.
- ²³ Yeh and Nornes, "City of Sadness."
- ²⁴ Ibid.
- ²⁵ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 106.
- ²⁶ Ibid., 110.
- ²⁷ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 15.
- ²⁸ Ibid., 22.
- ²⁹ Rosenbaum, *Movies as Politics*, 270.
- ³⁰ Yip, "Constructing a Nation: Taiwanese History and the Films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien," 148.
- ³¹ Quijano, "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America.," 533.
- ³² Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary Writing Chicanas into History*, 110.
- ³³ Quoted in *ibid.*, 54.
- ³⁴ Ibid., 55.
- ³⁵ Lapsley and Westlake, *Film Theory*, 87.
- ³⁶ Rushton, *What Is Film Theory?*, 49.
- ³⁷ Ibid., 68.
- ³⁸ Nowell-Smith, "From Realism to Neo-Realism," 157.
- ³⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 107.
- ⁴⁰ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, 27.
- ⁴¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 104.
- ⁴² Ibid., 106.
- ⁴³ Ibid.
- ⁴⁴ Ibid., 105.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 107.
- ⁴⁶ Ibid., 108–9.
- ⁴⁷ I use "articulated" because Chakrabarty's writing on page 112 sounds very like the definition of the word that means "to unite" or "joint" as in the joints of fingers or limbs. David Kazanjian exploits the term quite usefully in *The Colonizing Trick* to understand how discourses of race, colonization, and economy were joined together. In addition, Chakrabarty's notion of the past's connection to the present also seems similar to several of Walter Benjamin's ideas on the writing of history.
- ⁴⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 111.
- ⁴⁹ Ibid.
- ⁵⁰ Davis, "Borrowing Postcolonial: Wu Nianzhen's Dou-San and the Memory Mine," 239.
- ⁵¹ Ibid., 240.
- ⁵² The notion of more than one definition of Taiwan is something that more recently some have questioned whether Hou himself has forgotten. Brian Hioe suggests that Hou's recent film *The Assassin* reveals his affiliation with what is known as the "Pro-Unification Left," and that he favors reunification with China. His family history associates him with Chinese who immigrated to Taiwan in the 1940s rather than the majority

native Taiwanese population. These factions were once united in opposition to the KMT, but in the years since the 1987 ending of KMT martial law, these political affiliations have drifted further apart. See Hioe, "Hou Hsiao-Hsien's 'The Assassin' and The Pro-Unification Left."

⁵³ Stoler, "Tense and Tender Ties," 895.

⁵⁴ Pérez, *The Decolonial Imaginary Writing Chicanas into History*, 141 n.5.

⁵⁵ Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, 216.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 217.

⁵⁷ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, ix.

⁵⁸ Berry, *Speaking in Images*, 256.

Chapter 3 – Revealing Reality in a Changing Nation: Jia Zhangke

I think surrealism is a crucial part of China's reality. In the past 10 or so years, China has experienced the kinds of changes that might happen across a span of 50 or even 100 years in any normal country, and the speed of these changes has had an unsettling, surreal effect.

—Jia Zhangke

At one point in Jia Zhangke's 2006 film *Still Life*, a building in the landscape suddenly comes to life and takes off into the sky like a rocket. It is a jarring and unusual moment in a stream of realistic, documentary-style imagery. And yet, as I noted in chapter 1, Jia has also asserted that "revealing reality is urgent for Chinese filmmakers."¹ These things might seem contradictory, but in fact they illustrate the key irony in Jia's work and characterize the continuum of styles and modes he works within. On the one hand, Jia feels that only a realist aesthetic can accurately depict the conditions in his rapidly changing nation, but on the other, he is attempting to convey a truth about these radical transformations that requires him to use unconventional methods within the realist aesthetic. In other words, the truth of what has been happening in China is stranger than anything an unambiguously realistic document could depict. In what follows, I explore how Jia brings forth this irony or tension in his narratives and cinematic technique and how his combination of realism and surrealism is significant as a form of "border gnosis." This irony between real and unreal, nation and individual constitute Jia's method of revealing reality and underscore his contribution to the transnational imaginary.

Unlike Tsai Ming-liang or Apichatpong Weerasethakul, whom I will discuss in subsequent chapters, Jia does not often create surreal moments within a realist context, like the one in *Still Life*, but the theme of friction between narratives has long distinguished his films. Berry calls attention to this theme by identifying Jia's "absurdist rift between the ideal and the real."² Jia's films often juxtapose the "ideal" of the nation with the "real" of characters' lives: the narrative of the nation—larger in terms of scope and power—forms the backdrop for individual lives, which comprise the primary narrative of his films. Just as Hou Hsiao-hsien uses different techniques to depict the past and the present in the same shot, Jia reveals that the ideal and the real always coexist, even when a rift has opened between them. Jia uses cinematic language to show how these narratives occupy the same space, thereby tracing cinematic, subaltern pasts that reveal the limits of a colonizing, hegemonic history of the nation, even as that history is unfolding in the present.

In his earlier career, Jia would use one long shot to depict this connection between the ideal and the real, but as his work has evolved he has developed other methods, including experimentation with documentary narrative techniques, as well as with moments of what could be called surrealism (such as the spaceship launch in *Still Life* or the animated sequences in *The World*). These experiments, along with the narratives themselves and his composition of the *mise-en-scène*, allow Jia to open up a dialogue between nation and individual, and they represent his contribution to the tracking of national power. As such, Jia joins the conversation about representation and realism that I began with Hou and that will continue to evolve with my analysis of Tsai and Weerasethakul in subsequent chapters. By

tracing the “ambivalences, contradictions...and ironies that attend” the history of modernity through China’s economic transformation, Jia contributes to Chakrabarty’s project of “provincializing Europe” by creating subaltern pasts and alternative versions of the present.³ His narratives place personal stories alongside national narratives and at times uses unconventional methods to reveal the gaps between those narratives. He captures the limits of official history in those spaces, within which is an example of border-thinking or border gnosis.

Jia has spent his career exploring depictions of the different forces at work in his home nation, and his filmography has evolved through various stages. His first three features are defined by a realist style without any overtly surreal elements, yet the cities in these films (two of which take place in his hometown of Fenyang and one in nearby Datong) undergo changes so radical that they could be considered surreal. Jia was inspired both by European masters of realism, such as Vittorio de Sica and Robert Bresson, and by the naturalism of Chen Kaige’s film *Yellow Earth* (1984) and the early films of Hou, particularly *The Boys from Fengkui* (1983). He was particularly impressed that these so-called fifth- and sixth-generation Chinese films focused on everyday people, a viewpoint that was not usually depicted in the state-funded Chinese films. What struck him about *The Boys from Fengkui* was how similar the young men’s stories were to his own. “This has remained the most important aspect of filmmaking for me: that films relate to my own life, that I can recognize myself in them.”⁴ This familiarity contrasted with the films he knew. “Up to that point, the life that I knew had never been depicted in film: it was unthinkable at the time that the everyday struggles of the people would be showcased in a movie.

All we usually saw were Communist propaganda films that painted history according to the Party line.”⁵ Films depicting the concerns of individuals were not common either. “Talking about oneself simply wasn’t part of Chinese culture. . . . The concept of the individual was something the Chinese had to discover and, in some ways, cinema facilitated this.”⁶

During the Cultural Revolution (1966–1976), filmmaking ground almost to a halt, and even films from previous decades were no longer shown publicly.⁷ We can infer that the fifth-generation films Jia references would not have been much different stylistically from films made prior to 1949, which Udden describes as “a mostly conventional commercial cinema conducted according to the norms of the time, including Hollywood’s.”⁸ And a closer analysis of films made after that period reveals fairly conventional continuity editing.⁹ Thus, the state-funded films narrated the ideals of the nation through conventional dramatic (or classical) cinematic techniques. *The Boys from Fengkui*—shot in a style not dissimilar to, if less complex than, *The Puppetmaster*—is a prime early example of the style that Jia would later emulate: long takes with little camera movement, naturalistic or nonprofessional acting, and a minimum of editing. Jia was clearly influenced not only by the subject but the form of Hou’s film.

Jia has continued to depict this negotiation between individual and nation in new and innovative ways. In each of his films, Jia combines visual and narrative styles to show how narratives of the nation and the individuals living in it are intertwined. Whereas the “main” narrative is invariably about ordinary characters living under extraordinary conditions, they interact against a backdrop of pop culture,

including public announcements, graffiti, or flyers representing the “official” narrative of the Chinese government. In later films such as *The World* and *Still Life*, the setting conveys this national narrative.

Following Anderson’s description of “official nationalism” as those policies intended to impose a national identity on people from above, we can see these background elements as part of a strategy deployed by a dominant group against emerging “imagined communities” that define themselves along different lines. Jia’s central characters are thus part of “minor” narratives in relation to the “major” narratives portrayed by these elements. This Communist Party propaganda or other implied national narrative appears very much like the other “policy levers of official nationalism: compulsory state-controlled primary education, state-organized propaganda, official rewriting of history, militarism . . . and endless affirmations of the identity of dynasty and nation.”¹⁰ And the national narrative put forth by these cultural artifacts becomes, itself, a larger-than-life player in the film. This is certainly true in Jia’s later works, particularly *The World* and *Still Life*, where the national narrative takes the form of the World Park and the Three Gorges Dam project as the literal setting of the film. For example, the difficult conditions of the performers and other employees at the World Park contrast sharply with the glamorous and cosmopolitan image of the park itself. The minor “functions to cast doubt on the ‘major,’” writes Chakrabarty—an observation that is not only true of but also essential to Jia’s films.¹¹

Jia’s first feature-length film, *Xiao Wu* (1997), was shot on film and tells the story of its title character, a pickpocket and small-time grifter, as he navigates the

changing landscape—and relationships—of Fenyang. The idiosyncratic Xiao Wu, played by Wang Hongwei, is the most provocative element of the film and is able to close the distance the camera establishes between him and the audience, while the city of Fenyang forms the backdrop, exuding a sense of rapid change through Jia's frequent shots of demolition and rebuilding. Jia has described how his use of a handheld camera resulted from his shooting style, which often necessitated working quickly within the city before its citizens became interested in what he was doing and spoiled a shot.¹² Jia's second feature, *Platform*, takes as its subject several friends from Fenyang who are performers in a state-supported traveling musical troupe. Wang Hongwei again plays a young man who, though not a petty criminal, has a similarly brash or rebellious attitude toward the rapid changes occurring around him. While aspects of Jia's visual style are the same, such as shot length and use of found settings or actors, the camera is decidedly static and makes very few pans or tracking shots. The breadth of *Platform's* time frame is also unique in his filmography as it covers roughly ten to twelve years from the late 1970s to the early 1990s.¹³

In 2002 Jia made a technological shift with *Unknown Pleasures*, the last film in what Berry calls his "hometown trilogy." The resulting aura (possibly due to his use of standard definition digital video rather than high definition, which is more difficult to distinguish from film) is quite different from those of his previous films and transmits a sense of presence or immediacy. The camera is more fluid and moves more frequently using this technology, even though long takes still dominate the style. Whereas *Platform's* visual style conveys a sense of the present despite its traditional medium and setting in the past, *Unknown Pleasures* is located

unavoidably in the now. Underscoring this quality, its young characters seem to live impulsive, aimless lives and are heavily influenced by popular culture, though (unlike *Platform's* performers) strictly as consumers—that is, until they decide to rob a bank, a scheme that goes humorously and pathetically awry.

Having completed his unofficial trilogy of changing times in his hometown with *Unknown Pleasures*, Jia turned his digital camera to an even wider frame. The resulting film, *The World*, is a departure in several ways. While still focusing on the daily lives of a group of young people, *The World* is set within a theme park in Beijing rather than in Jia's hometown of Fenyang. It is also the first film he made with the support of the Chinese government; his previous films were part of an “underground” movement that earned its reputation through the distribution of pirated DVDs within China. In *The World*, Jia continues to use his camera in the more mobile style, and during the film's 135 minutes, he rarely deviates from his tendency to record an entire scene or unit of narrative in only one shot. When he does, he makes a radical break with his realist style in the form of seven short animated sequences interspersed throughout the film.

Jia followed *The World* with three more films that continue in the same general style but have different twists on his established form of realism. *Still Life* examines the changes occurring in a community that will be consumed by the Three Gorges Dam project and includes several moments of surrealism. The film *24 City* focuses on the closing of a factory but delivers its material in a structurally subversive way: the oral accounts of real factory workers are delivered by actors playing the actual workers—a dramatization of real accounts that harkens back to

Hou's merging of different points of view in *The Puppetmaster*.¹⁴ Similarly, Jia's 2013 film *Touch of Sin* narrates actual incidents of violence as reported through the Chinese version of Twitter (called Weibo). This film is his most stylistically dramatized, the action and emotional drama meant as an homage to the Chinese *wuxia* (martial arts) films of the 1960s and 1970s.¹⁵

Although Jia's visual style has changed to fit each of his films, or has been at least somewhat determined by circumstances of production, a baseline or default visual palette has emerged. Long takes and naturalistic acting form the bedrock. Most scenes contain no more than two or three shots at most, and these scenes can be several minutes long, resulting in an average shot length of around forty to sixty seconds. According to one measurement, the average shot length in *Unknown Pleasures*, *Platform*, and *The World* is approximately sixty-eight seconds.¹⁶ (As a point of reference, Hollywood films made since the 1980s have increasingly diminished their average shot length over the course of the film, often to between three and six seconds.)¹⁷ After he began working with digital media, Jia used these long takes even more frequently. Often whole scenes are a single continuous shot, and only on rare occasions are adjacent scenes directly related in the narrative. As with Hou's films, and particularly in *Platform*, cuts between scenes (which are often cuts between single shots) may indicate that an hour, a day, or even years have passed. Jia rarely, if ever, uses close-ups. When he does he usually focuses not on people but on items, such as a postcard (*Platform*) or a photograph (*The World*), that provide key narrative or emotional information.

Jia uses this mix of techniques to reveal the stories of individuals living within China's extraordinary recent history, but the significance of these stories is not necessarily restricted to China. His attention to both personal narratives and their context answers Chakrabarty's call to "write into the history of modernity the ambivalences, contradictions, the use of force, and the tragedies and ironies that attend it."¹⁸ And as Berry observes, Jia's visual depiction of what occurs amid "official" historical events is an unearthing within the nation of "border gnosis": the knowledge maintained by those repressed within the modern, colonial world system. In a transnational landscape, we can see Jia's focus on everyday lives as producing translatable stories of people living within "progress" or "development," tropes of modernity that are not unusual in any film from a formerly colonized nation and which mark China's entrance into the global marketplace, aligning it along the colonial-modern continuum of neocolonialism. His narratives contribute to the visualization of the transnational imaginary, creating new spaces for alliances and connections beyond the national.

If, as Mignolo states, "there is no modernity without coloniality" and "the coloniality of power underlines nation building," then China's entrance onto the stage of global capitalism also places its nation-building exercises within the neocolonial continuum whether China intends it or not.¹⁹ While this matrix of power has long existed in the Americas and was later expanded by colonized areas like India, the inclusion of China and Japan creates "new possibilities for *thinking from* and about the exterior borders of the system,"²⁰ which is exactly what Jia's films do.

Mignolo argues that “the major economies of Western Europe, the US and China share the assumption that there are no historical future horizons other than ‘growth and development,’” and asks: “Why should ‘growth and development’ be the only game in town when it has continued to create increased economic inequality, wars to secure natural resources and has incited people to believe that happiness consists of acquiring commodities?”²¹ Jia echoes this query by depicting the construction underway in Beijing in the backdrop of *The World* with its workers living in near poverty in the foreground, or by showing the effect of the rising river on people and their families in *Still Life*. And yet, as Chakrabarty points out, a history of the present cannot simply reject capitalism or modernity outright, but rather should make “visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in collusion with the narratives of citizenships in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity.”²² Though Jia’s films document China’s “development,” they also critique it with a sense of urgency. His films “*perform* the limits of history in various ways: by fictionalizing the past, experimenting to see how films and history might intersect.”²³ Jia places his characters cinematically within their own narrative and the nation’s, as when two courting characters in *Platform* cross in front of an oncoming parade of people touting the new one-child policy. They are shown in one shot quite literally narrowly escaping the oncoming march of the nation’s history and progress. Jia’s narratives and techniques “put us in touch with the plural ways of being that make up our own present” and fulfill Chakrabarty’s directive that “the writing of history must implicitly assume a plurality of times existing together.”²⁴

Platform

Jia's second feature-length film, *Platform* (1999), takes place over roughly twelve years, from the late 1970s through the early 1990s, the period of Deng Xiaoping's economic reforms after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. Though the changes under way during this period in China were significant, they are only apparent in the film as small details, and the foreground narrative focuses on the lives of the main characters, most prominently Cui Mingliang, played by Wang Hongwei. Popular music and other forms of popular culture play prominent roles in the film, providing not only temporal but also emotional signposts that map the characters' and the nation's intersecting narratives.

Jia's focus on the individual within his particular cinematic language creates a tension between narratives, a contrast with the larger forces at work throughout the period, and thus records the kind of history called for by Chakrabarty. For example, according to Michael Berry, the film ends after the Tiananmen Square demonstrations in 1989, though no direct mention is made of it. It is not that these seemingly disconnected events are unimportant, they are simply part of the backdrop and structure of lived lives. In another example, Berry notes a reference to Hua Guofeng in *Platform* that appears incidental but upon reflection must be strategically placed. Hua was Mao's chosen successor and a more dedicated communist who was eventually overtaken by Deng Xiaoping, initiator of the economic reforms that moves China towards a market system in the late 70s and 80s. Hua "appears" in *Platform* only through references over a loudspeaker and from graffiti-like slogans written on walls that characters pass by. With its allusions to key

figures and moments in Chinese history, “*Platform* seems to be most keenly interested not in the event but in the transitory moment between historical events—the kinds of everyday occurrences that are usually overlooked not only by ‘history’ but even by ‘cinema.’”²⁵ This connection between cinema and history is something I will return to, as Jia’s films continually critique “history” as always emanating from a Eurocentric center.

This backdrop is part of the overall visual strategy that Jia deploys in the film. With *Platform*, Jia consolidated his penchant for long takes, location settings, and nontraditional actors. In addition, he dramatically limited his camera movement. *Xiao Wu* contains many handheld camera shots that have a documentary feel to them, but in *Platform* the camera plays the role of the distanced observer. Typically, an entire scene plays out in front of the camera with no cuts and no camera movement—that is, pans or tracking shots. Like Hou, Jia began to see the value and function of prolonged ellipses in the narrative. The next cut after a long scene could take place the next day or years later. According to Berry, early cuts of the film ran 210 minutes and included more narrative information about certain characters and plot points than the final cut, which runs 150 minutes. Describing the trajectory of one of the characters who is depicted in only a few scenes, Jia explained, “It struck me that anyone would understand the life journey of a girl . . . living in a provincial city like that. There was no need to explain all those details, they simply weren’t important.”²⁶ His description of this realization is remarkably similar to Hou’s comments about why he left out narrative information between two particular scenes: “I could extract a section, and omit everything else. Things would still be

clear.”²⁷ This streamlining gives what Berry calls “an economy and elegance to the narrative and overall structure of the film.”²⁸ Both the economy and distant yet firm gaze help to create the critique of the major narrative that Jia develops in the film.

The sequence of *Platform* in which Mingliang encounters his cousin in a neighboring town is an excellent example of how Jia reveals the disparities that the new economy is creating between rural and urban people, as well as the issues raised by the privatization that took place in 1980s China. Sanming Han has played a character of the same name in four of Jia’s films. In each, he is a quiet presence, often representing the working class people who go unseen and unheard, “a figure of the people.”²⁹ Fact and fiction intersect when we realize that Sanming is Jia’s actual cousin and that his story is not dissimilar to the one in *Platform*. In the film, Mingliang is particularly affected by an encounter with Sanming while visiting a neighboring town for a performance with the troupe. Sanming is asked to pour water out for the performers, and as Mingliang washes his hands, Sanming exclaims, “Cousin!” as if he has just recognized Mingliang. But an earlier scene has indicated that Sanming knows exactly who Mingliang is, thus underscoring his potentially humiliating role as a servant to the performers.

When the troupe first arrives in the town and the troupe boss Song orders them to unload, Mingliang jumps onto the outdoor stage and begins interacting with the crowd of children who have followed them into town (Figure 3.1). As he does, another adult enters the frame to the left, watching silently and smoking: it is Sanming. A man, probably a coal miner, crosses in front of him carrying a ladder. We will soon see Sanming applying to become a coal miner because his prospects

in the new economy are so bleak. The dynamics of this scene and the emotional impact of Sanming's silence are difficult to understand on first view, but when seen again, the scene becomes a poignant moment.

The framing and *mise-en-scène* evoke the ironies that Jia brings forth so often, and the arrangement of characters illustrates Chakrabarty's concepts of major and minor. Mingliang is certainly the focus of the scene—literally at center stage. At first, we might not even notice Sanming, to the side with his back to us, or the coal miner as more than simply background. We could see the coal miner as a representative of the major, national narrative, walking by without noticing the others on his way to work. The nation is focused on capturing resources to fuel its economy, and yet Jia presents this narrative as background information, almost completely separate from the rest of the scene. We could see Sanming as “casting doubt” on his cousin, who crows like a rooster to entertain the children, but over time it will be the stories of Sanming's, Mingliang's, and his friends' lives that become a critique of China's major narrative, even as they enable it.

Chakrabarty characterizes subaltern pasts as the histories that “act as the supplement to the historian's pasts,”³⁰ the “official” history or narrative that I equate with the nation's. The stories of Mingliang and his friends, and especially that of Sanming, are “supplementary in a Derridean sense—they enable history, the discipline, to be what it is and yet at the same time help to show what its limits are.”³¹ Mingliang and Sanming's roles enable the nation, yet their personal stories show where its limits are. If we understand Jia's films as subaltern histories, as history

resulting from thinking otherwise or from different perspectives, Sanming and Mingliang are the tools of Jia's critique.

This interaction between Mingliang and Sanming depicts the uncomfortable and heretofore lesser-known workings of class just then beginning to emerge in the new China. While Mingliang has been part of a movement in which things seem to be getting better for him and his friends, this encounter is his first indication that while his life has been improving, others' lives might be getting worse. In the next several scenes Mingliang learns more about his family. His aunt tells him about efforts to keep a sibling of Sanming, Wenying, in school in Fenyang, and he later helps Sanming read the contract he is offered by the local coal mine (literacy being another notable class difference between the two). The contract states that if you are injured on the job, as the mine representative explains to Sanming, "We're not responsible for anything. It's clearly stated." Sanming looks uncertain, and Mingliang seems unable to voice any concern over Sanming signing such a contract, which serves to remind us of the necessity of sometimes accepting dangerous work to support the family. Meisner argues that the new Chinese market economy "requires the elimination of many of the social welfare and job guarantees of the Mao period."³² While the government had provided some support to coal miners, in the new privatized world owners see no advantage in offering their workers these protections and are no longer required to by the government.

Jia's framing and timing of their final interaction emphasizes the distance between them. Sanming charges down a hill to intercept a surprised Mingliang before he leaves town to give him five dollars for Wenying to go to school. As the

scene begins, Sanming seems to come from behind a bluff that the troupe's bus passes, and he runs down the road after the bus (Figure 3.2). As he does so, the camera pans slightly to the right to center him in the frame during his conversation with Mingliang (Figure 3.3). Mingliang accepts the money, astounded that his struggling cousin is giving money to him. Not knowing what to say, with a noncommittal "I'm going," he moves along. Mingliang seems stunned that the forces that have given him new freedom to travel and money to buy fashionable clothes have turned his cousin's working conditions into dire ones. Lin describes Mingliang's encounter with Sanming as having "shaken Mingliang's new faith in capitalist privatization and political liberty," which he had previously extolled to his father, a farmer who could not see the utility of Mingliang's bell-bottom jeans.³³ "What he has seen on this journey is what I would term as the 'ruins' of post-Mao China," writes Lin, where the privatization of the troupe that has given Mingliang newfound economic freedom has also left his cousin no choice but to work in a "'private-owned' coal mine where human life has so little value."³⁴ Sanming lingers for some ten seconds to watch Mingliang go before returning to his uncertain fate as a coal miner, receding into the frame as the camera pans back to its starting position (Figure 3.4). The camera movement, so common in other styles, is limited here and so emphasizes the emotion and pain of the moment.

Another scene that contains one of the film's few pans also juxtaposes the opportunity of the new economy and its accompanying dangers rather explicitly. Mingliang and other members of the troupe are strolling around an outdoor marketplace. They seem to enjoy the novelty of walking by many different shops

displaying women's clothes. As the camera completes its turn, the characters are exiting the frame at the end of a line of shops and the foreground is taken up by a large sign reading "Private market for clothes and small goods." The camera lingers on the sign as the friends' voices trail off and they turn the corner and walk out of the frame. Two younger boys run after them, and the camera lingers for fifteen more seconds. The boys run back as we hear shouts, and Mingliang emerges with one of the girls. "Stop fighting," she yells. "You think you can beat them?" As the members of the troupe approach and the camera pans back, we can see that Mingliang has been hit on the head and is bleeding—he has been mugged by the two boys. In one shot, Jia conveys both the pleasures and the dangers of the new marketplace economy, with the marketplace sign looming over the scene of violence (Figure 3.5). His juxtaposition of these dangers within the same space makes visible some of the contradictions and ironies of the nation-state and the modern project. Furthermore, he demonstrates that film is uniquely suited to do this work: the marketplace sign clearly represents the national vision, while the human drama in counterpoint simultaneously enables and comments on that vision.

One of the recurring themes in the film, which weaves together the major and minor narratives, is the privatization of the performance troupe that Mingliang and his friends are associated with. Deng's economic policy took many institutions that had been run by the state and turned them over to private owners and managers. This process was seen by some as a "great reversal" of the principles of the Great Leap Forward and the Cultural Revolution, and yet the new policies had problems as well. Hinton interprets later events at Tiananmen Square as the foregone conclusion

of the privatization process, with its “underlying currents of economic dislocation, infrastructural decay, environmental degradation, social disintegration, cultural malaise, and rising class antagonisms that threatened to unravel the fabric of Chinese society.”³⁵ Indeed, Hinton even paid a visit to Jia’s home city of Fenyang in 1983, roughly the time period depicted in *Platform*, and saw these issues developing: “There I saw the best the reform had to offer in rural development, but I also saw a host of problems arising from the privatization and atomization of the land, the most serious being the polarization of society, the emergence of affluent entrepreneurs and shareholders on the one hand and of wage laborers on the other.”³⁶

One of the most eloquent examples in the film of the national and personal narratives coming into conflict involves the privatization of the troupe and the friction Hinton refers to as a narrative undercurrent. As this scene in a hospital unfolds, we learn that Zhang Yun, one of Mingliang’s friends and a fellow performer, has taken his girlfriend, Zhong Pin, also a performer in the troupe, for an abortion, accompanied by Cui Mingliang and brokered by the troupe leader, Mr. Xu. The scene begins with Mr. Xu talking about his earlier life in this town as Yun and Pin sit sullenly by his side. The doctor comes out to greet Xu and take the couple back to an examination room, and Xu and Mingliang resume a conversation about offers to privatize the performance troupe. Xu encourages Mingliang to make the investment himself as Yun returns to the bench in the modest waiting room (Figure 3.6). “Don’t miss the chance,” Xu tells him. “Many have longed for this chance.” At this moment the doctor returns to tell Xu, “Your friend’s girl says she doesn’t want it.” As Yun gets

up, the camera pans over to watch him walk down the long dark hallway where Pin waits.

Up to this point in the film (about one hour in, and occurring before the previous two examples), the camera has made few movements of any kind. After Yun reaches Pin, the two argue until she gets up, slaps Yun and yells at him, then angrily crosses the hallway. Mingliang claps a hand on Yun's back in support as a voice from an unseen television reports, "In celebration of the thirty-fifth anniversary of the PRC, the armed forces will salute Deng Xiaopeng in a procession"³⁷ (Figure 3.7). All of this action occurs in one unbroken shot lasting just over three minutes, with only one short pivot of the camera from right to left, the latter part of which shows the characters from a long distance and backlit so that they appear as silhouettes. Once again, the subtle movement is connected to emotional pain, this time explicitly in relation to the national narrative.

The visual dynamics of this nearly static shot communicate much about the political and economic context: the privatization conversation occurs in the foreground, while the private conversation is far away, in the dark and off to the side. This contrast is made literal by the silhouetted figures in the hallway in relation to the dull but sunlit figures in the hallway near the waiting room. The shot also reveals the paradox of Jia's technique: real-life problems are seen from a distance or minimized in relation to the national narrative, yet this device has the effect of bringing them to the fore emotionally. This particularly difficult moment in the clinic is seen from so far away but is emotionally more relatable than the dull conversation about privatization that occurs before it but in the foreground. The transition from this scene also

emphasizes contrast. It is followed by a pivotal scene in which the troupe members are asked to consider the privatization offer, and Mr. Xu emphasizes the urgency to take advantage of the situation. The heretofore quiet Song volunteers to accept the offer, to Mr. Xu's surprise. Again, the national narrative takes center stage through the trajectories of these characters' personal lives, yet our uncertainty of Pin's fate is what lingers in our memories.

Consider also the visual similarities between this scene and the scenes described previously: Sanming and Mingliang's final encounter and the scene at the market. All contain rare—for *Platform*—camera movements in the form of slight pivots of about 35 to 45 degrees, emphasizing the characters' positions on the periphery, as well as distancing particular characters in the background. Jia places these characters on the “exterior borders”—places where the “modern/colonial world system” (as Mignolo would have it), China's participation in that system, and the ironies of modernity and participation collide.³⁸

The ways in which Jia makes explicit these national narratives through visual and verbal narratives and yet subtly uses them to form the context of his characters' lives reminds us that the constant flow of information through our lives is neither new nor exclusive to the West. He is very aware of the ways in which all of us experience the intersection of crucial moments in our lives with larger (national) narratives, often via the media: some experiences, though hidden in the dark hallways of memory, are foregrounded by their personal and emotional importance, while larger narratives seep through around the edges

The lives of Jia's characters are changing quickly in ways they do not fully understand, and the hospital scene's reference to politics may at first seem totally detached from where these characters are emotionally. Yet the privatization conversation is directly linked to Deng's economic policies, and the abortion narrative refers to the one-child policy adopted in 1978. The link between abortion and the one-child policy is made thirty minutes before this scene, when Yun and Pin cut in front of a procession rallying for birth control and the one-child policy, on their way to a salon where he convinces her to get a permanent. The irony in the visual is palpable: they barely cut ahead of the parade before reaching their destination (Figure 3.8). Again, Jia literalizes the intertwining of national and personal lives in one shot and thus insists on the impossibility of separating them. Through his short history of the economic transformation of China in the 1980s, he puts us in touch "with the plural ways of being that make up our own present" and "the disjointed nature of any particular 'now' one may inhabit."³⁹

Unknown Pleasures

Jia continued his history of a disjointed present in *Unknown Pleasures* (2001), even as the major or national narrative is much more diffuse and difficult to pinpoint. The film's emphasis on national events happening around the time it was made (2000–2001) seems to convey that the interests of the nation are focused elsewhere. That is, the economic structure of Datong (the city where the film is set, not far from Fenyang, in the province of Shanxi), which was based on long-standing industry supported by the socialist government, is now being abandoned. "Current

events” are happening not in the crumbling city of Datong, but in Beijing and other urban centers.

According to Jia, he was motivated to shoot *Unknown Pleasures* and another documentary short, *In Public*, based on a rumor that the coal-mining industry that had sustained the city for so long was being abandoned and that the citizenry was “living it up” before abandoning the city for greener pastures. Unlike *Xiao Wu* and *Platform*, in which redevelopment seems to explain the constant construction, *Unknown Pleasures* depicts landscapes in a state of demolition without any other evidence of change. Berry describes how Jia’s images of demolition and destruction “reach a disturbing climax in *Unknown Pleasures* as old buildings are torn down to make way for new architectural wonders that have yet to appear.”⁴⁰ Similarly, the young characters in the film seem to be waiting for some opportunity that has yet to appear, and by the end we understand that it is unlikely ever to materialize. Their journey through what Xiaoping Lin calls “the ruins of post-Mao China” is a bleak one.⁴¹

The two protagonists of the film, Binbin and Xiao Ji, are noticeably more directionless and idle than the characters in Jia’s previous films. Mingliang, Zhang Yun, and even Xiao Wu have at least some motivation, some spirit behind their actions, even if they are often frustrated or thwarted. The first unbroken, minute-long scene, which tracks Binbin’s motorcycle ride across town, sets the tone of the whole film through Binbin’s expression, which remains unchanged during the scene and in many ways throughout the entire film: it is almost blank, exuding apathy and disconnection from his surroundings (Figure 3.9). By the end of the film, his

expression has only become more intense and melancholy, even bitter and hopeless. One of his last lines in the film is a bitter retort to his girlfriend after she suggests that in the future he can call her while she is away: “There is no fucking future.”

This description fairly well sums up Binbin and Ji’s personal stories as the “minor” narrative of *Unknown Pleasures*, even as the nation seems to have simply forgotten them and their city and turned its attention to other more pressing activities: facing off with the United States over an airspace violation, curbing the activities of the Falun Gong, and awaiting the announcement of the location of the 2008 Olympics, all of which creep into the narrative via Jia’s familiar methods of reference in the background. Binbin and Ji do not have much more interest in these events than the state has in them, but are rather more focused on making a buck, inspired by local low-level gangsters and American pop culture, specifically the film *Pulp Fiction* (Tarantino, 1994), which is directly referenced several times in the film. They have inherited the legacy of the commercialization and privatization policies that began in the era of *Platform*, shortly after *Xiao Wu* leaves off, and theirs is the most dismal vision of contemporary China that Jia has yet depicted and possibly that any Chinese filmmaker had depicted up to that time. Appropriately enough, Xiao Wu himself appears (the role reprised by the great Wang Hongwei). The conman seems to have lost the humanity he had in his eponymous film and is simply surviving on the gullibility of others. We know things cannot get much worse for Binbin when he resorts to obtaining a loan from Xiao Wu.

Jia continues to juxtapose the national and personal narratives in *Unknown Pleasures*, but the film's historical landmarks are a bit more recognizable to the Western viewer. Made in 2001, the film takes a different perspective on the tumultuous events of that year. For example, in one two-and-a-half-minute shot featuring Binbin in his home apartment, he reluctantly discusses with his mother the prospect of joining the army as his last chance for a job. A television is on during the entire scene, narrating a story of China challenging the United States on its violation of Chinese airspace. Binbin and his mother hear a loud noise, and Binbin goes to the window to investigate, wondering aloud, "Shit! Are the Americans attacking?" The noise turns out to be from an explosion at a local textile mill, thought to be the work of saboteurs.

Another intersection like this one occurs at the end of a long sequence that involves Ji's pursuit of Qiaoqiao (Zhao Tao in her second role for Jia, also her husband since 2012), a performer and sometime prostitute who is involved with a local gangster. Binbin accompanies Ji on his travels across town to Qiaoqiao's performances that advertise a liquor called Mongolian King, and the two are shown to have a close friendship. In a nightclub, Ji finally gets too close to Qiaoqiao, and the gangster has a henchman give him a beating. Binbin realizes that his friend's pursuit could end in violence when he sees the gangster's gun, and he tries to warn Ji, who is marching back to the club to retaliate. As Binbin tries to pull Ji back, he gets slapped by his friend who yells, "Are you my friend or what?" A shocked Binbin backs off, saying simply, "He has a gun, stupid." He turns away and toward a television in the back of a kind of outdoor pool hall they are standing in.

Here, Jia emphasizes the scene with rare cuts and a close-up. He cuts to the television screen, which shows the chairman of the International Olympic Committee walking to his seat at a press conference. Then he cuts to just behind and to the right of the TV to show Binbin standing with a large crowd of people waiting to hear the announcement. Ji enters the frame to stand by his friend. As the announcement is made that Beijing will host the 2008 Olympics, the crowd around them erupts into cheers, but Binbin and Ji, preoccupied by their quarrel, remain motionless and expressionless (Figure 3.10). The camera pans away from this scene to focus on a few children setting off fireworks in celebration. Though they are left out of frame, we cannot help but be preoccupied with Binbin and Ji's problems. Again, Jia's pan away from the main characters serves, ironically, to emphasize them and to highlight their peripheral status in relation to the main events of the nation.

Binbin and Ji's problems are magnified as their wanderings continue and their prospects for jobs and romance dry up. The overriding tone of *Unknown Pleasures* shares with *Platform* and *Xiao Wu* a sense of idleness and waiting. At this point, however, it is clear that the characters are waiting for nothing. Long unbroken scenes of characters sitting, waiting, or idly chatting pervade Jia's films. Wang compares these scenes to Benjamin's analysis of Baudelaire's poetry:

Walter Benjamin bemoans that meaningful events disappear, like holidays dropped out of the calendar, like human beings dropping out of historical narrative. These dropouts are "like the poor souls who wander listlessly, but outside of history." In his melancholy musings, Baudelaire . . . "holds in his hands the scattered fragments of genuine historical experience." Jia Zhangke

makes a similar attempt to document the melancholy quest for authentic experience in a time when historical ground for experience is eroding.⁴²

Putting Jia into context with his contemporaries, sometimes called the sixth generation of Chinese filmmakers, Wang recognizes the mission of Jia and others to make minor narratives their major ones: “By recording and witnessing the twisted mindset, the drift of life experience, the loss of meaning, and the disintegration of the social fabric, these filmmakers seek truth against commercial technique, melodrama, and simulacra.”⁴³ In both *Platform* and *Unknown Pleasures*, Jia perfected his brand of “recording and witnessing” reality, using his own form of realism to bring the significance of minor narratives to the fore.

The World

With *The World* (2004), Jia brought his sense of irony directly into the title of his film, playing on both the changes within China, including its economic transitions, but also its relationship with and status on the larger global stage. The Beijing World Park (which opened in 1993), the “world” of the title and location of the film, is certainly not unique, but it might be the only place on the globe to have so many large replicas of landmarks in one place—the closest competitor being the Window of the World in Shenzhen. Like many amusement parks, it also stages performances with international themes.

Both the park and the film have everything to do with China’s appearance on the global stage. The park itself attempts to convey to its visitors an experience of

glamour and cosmopolitanism. As a narrative of nation it seems intended to spread the message that China, too, can participate in cultural spectacle and entertainment; in short, China is also “worldly.” Internally, the park is a microcosm of China’s national narrative: young people from rural areas relocate to urban centers in order to participate in the economic development under way and partake of its pleasures. While the central characters are unusual in their place of work, they mirror the situation of many who migrate to work in construction (as depicted in the film) or in factories (as Jia would depict later in *A Touch of Sin*). And as they discover, they may be able to take part in glamorous-looking productions and afford luxuries like cell phones, but their existence is otherwise less than enchanted.

The film emphasizes the pride the park takes in its reconstructions and localizations of famous landmarks. “Our Eiffel tower” is lauded by a voice in the structure’s elevator, and Taisheng, a security guard and one of the main characters, notes proudly, “The twin towers were bombed on 9/11. We still have them.” Many of the park’s slogans that are seen or heard throughout the film take pride in them and stress the importance of visitors being able to visit these landmarks locally without having to leave their home country. By the end of the film, however, the tag line that park performer Tao tells her ex-boyfriend—“See the world without ever leaving Beijing”—sounds more like a punishment than a marketing slogan.

Tourism and colonialism typically intersect in the form of the colonizer visiting the colonized or appropriating aspects of the latter’s culture in “parody of the colonial experience.”⁴⁴ In the particular case of the Beijing World Park, China, though not a colonized nation, attempts to flip the paradigm and exoticize monuments of the West

as a way of taking ownership of those monuments but also of those cultural and economic practices dominated by the places they represent. We can read the park as a reversal of the colonial situation, not only declaring that China can be “worldly,” but that China can “capture” and display the world as well. However, this neocolonial narrative is critiqued in Jia’s film by the minor narratives—the lives of the workers within the park—which subvert its uncompromising message.

The characters of *The World* tell the stories of the harder truths that underlie the facade of the park’s worldliness, resulting in a bleak vision of the transnational imaginary. In Beijing, many are far from their families in the country, and their need for a better situation drives them to search constantly for new jobs, even to engage in low-level theft or prostitution. In one subplot, a minor character killed in a construction accident leaves behind a note listing his outstanding debts. Another subplot both foregrounds and undermines the narrative of “worldliness.” Zhao Tao appears as a dancer at the park and befriends a Russian woman from a group of performers “imported” to boost the park’s authenticity. The two bond over everyday activities and through the challenges of learning to communicate with each other. As we learn more about the price that each has paid (the Russian woman has left behind family and she does not know whether she will ever reunite with them) and as the women continue to encounter each other in worse and worse situations, however, the other side of “worldliness” is revealed. They meet for the last time in a club that functions as a front for prostitution, where they confront each other’s desperation and wordlessly embrace, each sobbing for the other’s misfortune.

In many ways, *The World* can be seen as an extension of *Platform* and its juxtaposition of the world of performance and music with the personal lives of the performers, their relationships, and their work environment. Even the actress Zhao Tao as the dancer Tao in *The World* might have been another version of her *Platform* character, Ruijuan, if circumstances had been different.⁴⁵ But where *Platform*'s visual approach was akin to a nearly static portal into the past, *The World*'s camera moves with its protagonists in a much more fluid way. Jia's style could never be confused with the "shaky-cam" realism of, say, Paul Greengrass (director of *United 93* and *Captain Phillips*), but the fluidity and presentness that come with digital video bring forth its immediacy. And where *Platform* documented the transition from state-supported cultural mechanisms to private ones, *The World* shows the natural development of that trajectory: global cultural entertainment that lets you escape within your own home, nation, or city.

The paradoxes of *The World* are further elaborated by Jia's use of animated sequences throughout the film, which are usually associated with the use of cell phones and text messaging to illustrate the disconnection in the characters' lives between the real and ideal, the personal and the national. This technique is unprecedented—even shocking—in Jia's oeuvre, but in the film itself the sequences flow into the narrative whole. The first animated sequence prefaced with a "real" shot of Zhao Tao riding in a bus, the window open and a warm breeze entering. She has just come from her boyfriend's apartment (actually a hotel room), where he has been reassuring her of his dedication and hopes for their relationship after a surprise visit from her ex-boyfriend. Taishen tells her he will give her "a better life," and she

responds, “It doesn’t matter to me.” In the background, we can see Tiananmen Square pass outside the bus window as Tao continues to look forward (Figure 3.11). Just as the bus passes Mao’s portrait, Tao’s cell phone rings to signal a text message from her boyfriend. The most jarring cut in the film up to this point occurs as she opens her phone to read the message: we see an animated sequence depicting the bus and then the phone and message, which reads, “How far can you go?” (Figure 3.12). We could interpret this cut as a representation of the fantasy world that Tao either believes she lives in or feels she has been promised—a dream world that the real world cannot possibly live up to—that is, her idealized vision of *her* world, wrapped in the idealized vision of the world at the park. The animated sequence itself is relatively short and simple and shows only the events that are actually occurring in that same scene: the bus, the phone, the text message.

Subsequent animated sequences begin to extrapolate on the sometimes bizarre scenes based in the hyper-reality of the park. The second sequence follows a scene in which Tao and Taisheng are hiding in an airplane in the park, Tao in costume as a flight attendant from another age. Taisheng gets a text, and the animated sequence is the next shot. It shows the phone and then transitions into a fantasy sequence showing Taisheng taking off in the airplane and Tao also taking off and flying over various landscapes that stitch together the park’s Eiffel Tower, another national monument complete with Mao statue, a kind of shantytown, and finally, what appears to be a nuclear power plant (Figure 3.13). This sequence sutures together fantasy and reality in a way that seems incongruous, and yet Jia

seems to be using our sense of the animated as “false” to parody the nation’s self-identity, pasted together from various sources.

In some cases, it is difficult to say whether the more surreal moments are in the “real” film or in the animated sequences. Scenes of Taisheng patrolling the park in his role as a security guard are decidedly discordant, and one animated sequence picks up on this theme, portraying him as the romantic hero on a horse, galloping to meet another girlfriend. However, reality pierces fantasy when this sequence ends with an animated scene drawn to match the real one it dissolves into—a small workshop where his girlfriend churns out knockoff fashions (Figures 3.14 and 3.15). The contrast between these images emphasizes the distance between fantasy and reality and the multiple narratives the film represents.

Jia’s mission in *The World* is to discover new ways to reveal the disconnected, disjointed nature of reality in his transforming nation and to write a history of the present that emphasizes these discordances. The surreal environment that the characters live and work in and the film’s animated sequences literally and interpretively support his argument that “surrealism is a crucial part of China’s reality.” Despite the grim vision of the transnational imaginary that it depicts, in bringing these ironies forward the film hopes to raise transnational consciousness of the situations it depicts.

Still Life

Jia's emphasis on the friction that results from rapid change over a short period of time reaches a high point with *Still Life* (2006), in which he captures a decisive moment in China's development and its effect not only on people but on the landscape. Less extravagant than *The World* and shot more in the meditative style of *Platform* or *Unknown Pleasures*, *Still Life* follows two figures, played by Sanming Han and Zhao Tao, who search for their spouses after a period of separation in the region of Fengjie, upstream from the Three Gorges Dam. Some portion of the town has been consumed by the Yangtze River, and their spouses and families have been displaced.

Still Life falls somewhere between the stasis of *Platform* and the dynamism of *Xiao Wu* or *The World*. Long takes dominate, but in this film they are often in motion: slow tracking shots that may pan slightly to follow the action. This slow but steady motion reflects the flow of the river and the gradual rising of the waterline, which we are reminded of again and again by measurements of future water heights on the sides of buildings. The constant motion in the film contrasts with its title: the people in the film are anything but still due to the rising water, yet the title evokes a future in which everything that remains in the town will be held in place, underwater.

The film opens with a shot already in motion and out of focus that slowly sharpens into view and continues with several lap dissolves across a river of people on a boat—laughing, talking, smoking, and playing cards—until we glimpse our lead character, Sanming. As ever, Sanming's presence is a subdued, almost meek one, but this time, in contrast to his very similar characters in *Platform* and *The World*, he

has more of a determined character because he needs to find his family. The constant movement of the camera in this shot, suggesting the slow but steady progress of the water and the nation, along with many of its citizens, combines with the slow-focus effect to add a sense of uncertainty to the film.

The bizarre nature of its setting in a town about to be flooded is obvious, but the film also contains a few key surreal moments that depart from Jia's usual style. The first is a kind of transitional mechanism that bridges the stories of Sanming and Tao (who is also seeking a missing spouse): a sequence, like a free-associative pastiche, that flows with the themes of the film as they pertain both to the characters and to the national narrative. This scene begins with a song that Sanming's new friend, Brother Mark, uses as his phone's ring tone. "Fuck 'good-hearted people!'" he scoffs to Sanming. "None of those in Fengjie these days." Then he plays his ring tone, "Shanghai Beach," the theme song from an early 1980s Hong Kong TV series that first launched the actor Chow Yun-fat into popularity before he became a superstar in the films of John Woo. "Brother Mark," a professed fan of Chow, has named himself after Chow's character in the 1986 Woo film *A Better Tomorrow*. The film itself is referenced several times in *Still Life* (just as *Pulp Fiction* is in *Unknown Pleasures*). Mark weaves in dialogue from *A Better Tomorrow* in several scenes and mimics, with a scrap of newspaper, an iconic scene of Chow lighting a cigarette with a hundred-dollar bill.

In his conversation with Sanming, Mark accuses Sanming of being nostalgic and mimics Chow while delivering a line that he attributes to *A Better Tomorrow*: "Present-day society doesn't suit us because we're too nostalgic" (Figure 3.16).

Then, as we listen to “Shanghai Beach” transition from diegetic to nondiegetic, the music moving from Mark’s phone to the soundtrack, Jia cuts to a television, presumably in the room, that shows a number of images, including a boat bearing the banner “Yangtze River Tourism.” As the sound becomes nondiegetic, Jia cuts to a moving shot of a “Third Phase” waterline marker and then to Sanming on a boat that he had also seen on the television. The convergence and layering of themes in the scene and the film as a whole is obvious in these lyrics:

Rushing waves, ever-flowing waves,

Thousand miles of the torrential river flows ceaselessly,

Washing away all worldly affairs,

Bringing in a new world for you and me,

[Cut to depth marker]

Is it happiness or sorrow,

In the rushing waves, struggling,

Unable to differentiate between the two,

Success or failure,

[Cut to Sanming on boat]

In the rushing waves, unable to see our future.⁴⁶

At this point the song begins to fade, and the camera pans past Sanming as he looks into the distance. In the background—not in the direction that he is looking—a strange light emerges from the clouds and begins to fly to screen right (Figure 3.17). It flies out of frame, and when it does Jia cuts to Tao as Shen Hong, standing and looking at a similar landscape. Something catches her eye, the ship comes in to view, and she watches it until it disappears (Figure 3.18).

From the soundtrack comes a faint banging noise that grows louder. The scene of Shen Hong is followed by a sequence of seven exquisite three- to four-second shots showing various pieces of rusted machinery and the exterior of an old factory building—detritus from the demolition that we have seen Sanming participating in. The banging continues through this sequence and until the next shot, when we can see Shen Hong emerging onto a platform in a factory that is being dismantled. The banging is the noise of many men swinging hammers into its metal exterior.

The sequence is complex, but one of its most important themes has to do with the distance that the UFO travels. As Dalle notes, “The only relationship between the two couples of the film is the demolition/construction divide that inversely defines their lives. Therefore their travel from Shanxi to the dam occurs through different economic channels. The positionalities of the characters mirror the multilayered realities of locations, origins, and socio-economic backgrounds.”⁴⁷ He explains how Jia represents this relationship visually through a pair of shots that depict the two couples reuniting.

Sanming and his wife, Missy, are shown inside a nearly demolished building, the buildings beyond appearing small, while Shen Hong and her husband are shown against the dam itself, which appears larger than they are. These scenes of the couples emphasize the difference between them and point out the irony of their respective roles in this project that has shaped their lives so drastically. Shen Hong's husband works in construction and controls a labor force, while Sanming works in demolition only to support himself on his mission. The dam—a huge national undertaking—links these two couples across an economic divide that has only recently been created. Shen Hong and Sanming are not treated any differently, or more or less sympathetically, by Jia's film, but it becomes clear that they have different levels of control over decision making or the freedom to travel. That is, the characters are on similar missions, but they live worlds apart, as Jia's UFO suggests.

Another of *Still Life's* surreal moments is the aforementioned building-rocket scene, which takes place after Shen Hong has spent the evening looking for her husband with the help of a friend or coworker (played by Wong Hangwei). She waits out the hot night, washing a shirt and hanging it up to dry, with the strange, modernistic building we have seen in previous shots visible in the background (Figure 3.19). After she steps out of frame, the building begins to rumble and then blasts off into the sky (Figure 3.20). Perhaps, after Shen is frustrated in her search and somewhat bewildered by the changes in the town and landscape, the rocket-building represents her thoughts about those changes or her frustration with her estranged husband for not returning when she thought he would. The scene does,

however, echo Jia's thoughts on witnessing the dramatic changes that occurred in relation to the dam: "Seeing this place, with its 2,000 years of history and dense neighborhoods left in ruins, my first impression was that human beings could not have done this. The changes had occurred so fast and on such a large scale, it was as if a nuclear war or an extraterrestrial had done it."⁴⁸ When he found the building during filming, Jia was dismayed to realize that it had been planned to honor immigrants to the area but was left unfinished and abandoned on the shore of the river—the site where much more money was being invested than would have been required to finish the monument. It appeared to him so "alien" that he decided to send it "back where it belongs—flying to outer space."⁴⁹

Dalle, recalling Hou and looking forward to Tsai and Weerasethakul, interprets the launch and the UFO as supernatural elements that reveal the "boundaries of representation."⁵⁰ That is, these filmmakers, by not simply playing with the structures and expectations of documentary or cinematic realism but by including surreal, supernatural elements in their films, depict a crisis in representation that mirrors the crises they depict on screen: the unprecedented upheaval and inequality that the current state of the world engenders. Dalle writes:

The illogical and supernatural elements that Jia throws into the otherwise realistic representation of the demolition in *Fengjie* add another jarring element that complicates the boundaries of the diverse artistic projects occurring simultaneously. The appearances of supernatural moments shock the tranquility of the *documentary* effect, but the blow of this shock reminds

the viewer that the work *Still Life* is no more than a narrative—a fabricated story, though resonating heavily with true events of contemporary China.⁵¹

What Jia's filmography shows us is that while realism can document or narrate change, his unconventional methods help him to document truth.

Like the agential "gods and spirits" of *The Puppetmaster*, the supernatural, alien, or surreal elements in Jia's film serve to demonstrate the limits of history and the "disjuncture of the present with itself" that characterizes a subaltern past whose actors narrate their own political agency.⁵² By evoking these supernatural elements, "*Still Life* purposefully defies allegorical readings and instead points to cracks in the act of representing the massive destruction that accompanies the Three Gorges Dam project. Along with narrating topography, in *Still Life* Jia Zhangke exposes the limits of narrating change."⁵³ Using cinematic tools to articulate what cannot otherwise be narrated, Jia allows knowledge excluded by the national narrative to flow, and sometimes explode, into the film.

In this context, the final scene is appropriately ambiguous, both narratively and in terms of the "realism" of the scene. Having located his wife, but failing to reunite with her or his daughter, Sanming announces to his brother-in-law and his family, with whom Sanming has been staying, that he is leaving Fengjie to seek a higher paying job in the coal mines. After a lengthy good-bye, his brother-in-law suggests that the family go with him, if the pay is as good as Sanming says it is. In the next scene, everyone marches out the door and over a small hill overlooking the set of buildings they have been demolishing. The group reaches the top, and the

camera continues to glide to the left to capture Sanming stopping as the others keep walking over the hill. Sanming has turned to his right and is looking at something (Figure 3.21). Just as the last of the family is about to disappear out of the frame, a cut reveals what Sanming is watching: a person on a tightrope stretched between two of the buildings being demolished (Figure 3.22). Sanming watches for an additional twenty seconds, then turns and walks on. The shot continues for another ten seconds before a cut to black—the figure still some distance from the safety of the next building.

We do not know whether the figure on the tightrope depicted in this scene is “real” or not. It is indistinct enough that it could easily be a special effect like the UFO or rocket-building, yet it is just plausible enough to be real. Perhaps we are to think of it as a vision of Sanming’s, as the rocket-building may have been for Shen. One would think that if he had stopped to watch such an unusual event, the others in the group would have as well. The symbolism is, of course, manifold: the nation, the landscape, the town, and each individual all seem to be on the verge of losing their balance, caught between a known past and an uncertain future. Will the tightrope walker make it to the other side? Will Sanming make it to his next destination? Will any of the figures we have seen “make it” anywhere? Do they *need* to? Will the waves of progress pull them under, or will it push them to create their own trajectories? The film’s narrative seems to suggest not, yet the fact of Jia’s film’s existence provides a glimmer of hope.

Conclusion

Early on in *Still Life*, a character voices Jia's concerns about the weight of history and the speed of change. He seems to be a government official, besieged by people complaining about the implementation of a policy. Finally, the man says, "Of course there are problems! A city with 2,000 years of history was demolished in just two years! We need to slow down a bit to solve problems." Slow down is exactly what Jia's films attempt to do: document and contemplate the reality of people's experiences in a slow and methodical way that allows for contemplation. This idea is one that I will return to in subsequent chapters, that of the connection between these filmmakers and "slow" movies. Ostensibly, though not officially, connected to other "slow" movements (like the "slow food" movement), these films make the same case as the official in *Still Life*: that participation in democracy sometimes requires slowing down to leave time for adequate contemplation and judgment.

Chakrabarty uses an apt analogy to talk about what a truly democratic modernization process would look like:

What would it mean, for instance, for the modernization process, assuming it was unavoidable in the modern world, to be an open-ended dialogue between the subaltern and the elite classes? Can people displaced by a dam—constructed in the so-called "national" or "public" interest—actually stop the dam, resist the obsession with "growth," and still be part of a dialogue about modernization? Or does modernization invariably entail strategies of "management of populations" by those who choose to govern?"⁵⁴

Internally, Jia's films often answer no, even while he makes them in search of a yes.

Jia's films are a kind of "patient, creative engagement in democracy" that slowly reveal, and allow us to consider, what is hidden in order to expose the limits of "knowledge" and of "history."⁵⁵ In relation to Quijano's ideas about the coloniality of power, Mignolo describes an early conception of border thinking that includes moments of conflict "between two local histories and knowledges, one responding to the movement forward of a global design that intended to impose itself and those local histories and knowledges that are forced to accommodate themselves to such new realities."⁵⁶ Jia works to show us these moments of conflict, these fissures between the real and the ideal, between the narratives of the nation and those of its people. Remarkably, he often does this within one continuous scene: the yawning gap that opens up when Binbin and Ji show no reaction whatsoever to the announcement of Beijing as the site for the Olympics, preoccupied as they are with their own conflict, which is rooted in a friendship that outlasts what they have suffered as a result of their town's "development"; the shock of hearing an announcement about the anniversary of the People's Republic of China as Pin screams at Yun about getting an abortion. For Mignolo, border thinking requires an understanding of meaning on both sides of the divide "because while the first problem was to look into the spaces in between, the second was how to produce knowledge from such in-between spaces."⁵⁷ Jia's films are taking a long hard look at these in-between spaces, challenging us to begin work on the second problem.

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- ¹ *Filmmaker Jia Zhangke on the Realist Imperative (at Asia Society).*
- ² Berry, *Jia Zhangke's "Hometown Trilogy,"* 60.
- ³ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 43.
- ⁴ "Life in Film: Jia Zhangke."
- ⁵ *Ibid.*
- ⁶ *Ibid.*
- ⁷ See Zhang, *Encyclopedia of Chinese Film,* 26–27 and; Udden, "In Search of Chinese Film Style(s) and Technique(s)," 277.
- ⁸ Udden, "In Search of Chinese Film Style(s) and Technique(s)," 265.
- ⁹ See, for example, though it is not the main point of the essay, Berry and Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation,* 116–18.
- ¹⁰ See Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* Chapter 6, "Official Nationalism and Imperialism," pp 83–112. Though Anderson describes these forces as often involving language and as a part of an empire or monarchy transitioning to a nation-state, the concepts are still applicable, especially when he explains the "the policy levers of official nationalism: compulsory state-controlled primary education, state-organized propaganda, official rewriting of history, militarism...and endless affirmations of the identity of dynasty and nation." (p. 101)
- ¹¹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 101.
- ¹² Berry, *Jia Zhangke's "Hometown Trilogy."* 26.
- ¹³ Until 2015's *Mountains May Depart,* which tells the story of three different periods in several characters' lives from 1999 through 2014 and 2025. Hou Hsiao-hsien attempted something similar in 2005's *Three Times.*
- ¹⁴ A similar technique was pioneered by Trinh T. Minh-ha in her classic *Surname Viet Given Name Nam* (1989).
- ¹⁵ Such as King Hu's *Come Drink with Me* (1966), *Dragon Inn* (1967) or the Shaw Brothers' *One-Armed Swordsman* (1967) and *Have Sword Will Travel* (1969). Jia's film's title is a direct homage to Hu's *A Touch of Zen* (1971).
- ¹⁶ Harry, "Unspoken Cinema."
- ¹⁷ Bordwell, "Intensified Continuity Visual Style in Contemporary American Film," 17.
- ¹⁸ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 43.
- ¹⁹ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs,* 43.
- ²⁰ *Ibid.*, 44, emphasis added.
- ²¹ Mattison, "Neither Capitalism nor Communism, but Decolonization: Interview with Walter Mignolo (Part I)."
- ²² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 45.
- ²³ *Ibid.*, 106. Emphasis in original.
- ²⁴ *Ibid.*, 108–9.
- ²⁵ Berry, *Jia Zhangke's "Hometown Trilogy,"* 69.
- ²⁶ *Ibid.*, 56.
- ²⁷ Klinger, "Decoding Hou."
- ²⁸ Berry, *Jia Zhangke's "Hometown Trilogy,"* 56.
- ²⁹ Duhamel, "Cannes 2013. Consistency In a Filmmaker's World."
- ³⁰ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 112.
- ³¹ *Ibid.*
- ³² Quoted in Lin, "Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Trilogy: A Journey Across the Ruins of Post-Mao China," 208 note 31.
- ³³ *Ibid.*, 200.
- ³⁴ *Ibid.*
- ³⁵ Hinton, *The Great Reversal,* 7.
- ³⁶ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ³⁷ This fairly specific signpost indicates the actual date of this event: October 1, 1984.
- ³⁸ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs,* 11.
- ³⁹ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe,* 109.
- ⁴⁰ Berry, *Jia Zhangke's "Hometown Trilogy."* 94.

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- ⁴¹ Lin, "Jia Zhangke's Cinematic Trilogy: A Journey Across the Ruins of Post-Mao China."
- ⁴² Wang, "Epic Narrative, Authenticity, and the Memory of Realism: Reflections on Jia Zhangke's 'Platform,'" 212.
- ⁴³ Ibid., 211.
- ⁴⁴ d'Hautesserre, "Postcolonialism, Colonialism, and Tourism," 237.
- ⁴⁵ And *The World's Tao* is arguably in a better situation than Qiaoqiao, her character in *Unknown Pleasures*, in that the latter is performing in the service of a product—essentially a living commercial who reports to a gangster.
- ⁴⁶ WhiteLibraTexas & JFB, *Shanghai Beach (The Bund 上海灘)* by Andy Lau with English Translation. The subtitles of the DVD of the film stop translating after three lines before the switch to non-diegetic sound: "Waves flow, waves pound/The river runs for a thousand miles/It surges through our world of woes." The translation included here is from a YouTube-accessible version of the song, within which I have noted the scene changes.
- ⁴⁷ Dalle, "Narrating Topography."
- ⁴⁸ Chan, "Interview: Jia Zhangke."
- ⁴⁹ Quoted in Jaffe, *Slow Movies Countering the Cinema of Action*, 148.
- ⁵⁰ Dalle, "Narrating Topography."
- ⁵¹ Ibid.
- ⁵² Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 108.
- ⁵³ Dalle, "Narrating Topography."
- ⁵⁴ Browning, Prokhovnik, and Dimova-Cookson, *Dialogues with Contemporary Political Theorists*, 66–67.
- ⁵⁵ Jaffe, *Slow Movies*, 8.
- ⁵⁶ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 17.
- ⁵⁷ Ibid., 17–18.

Chapter 4 – Drifting as Knowing: The Cinema of Tsai Ming-liang

[I]n Taiwan and India, filmmaking is like dreammaking. The dreams are escapist. I also enjoy watching those films. But when I make my films, I like to be closer to reality. Slowly, I realized how hard it is to capture reality. What is real? What is a realistic performance by an actor? When I film actors, I usually give them instructions, but then I regret doing so. So I wait till they have finished all my instructions, and then keep the camera rolling. I wait to see what else they'll do, until a point of ambiguity. At that point, things become real.

Slowly, I realized realism in cinema is not the same as realism in life. Cinema has its own realism. The world in cinema is not the real world. It has been crafted. That makes cinema interesting. It's not real. It's closer to dreams. If you treat life as a dream, you can understand this. My later films became freer because my realism doesn't have to be like real life. My realism can be treated as dreams.

—Tsai Ming-liang

In a small room, a woman sits for nearly two minutes without moving except to blink, the sounds of a film projector, dialogue, and clashing swords in the background. A cigarette burns down as she sits. Another woman remains motionless in a chair by a pond as we see a suitcase drift by in the water. We watch the exterior of the Fu-Ho Grand Theater as a light blinks slowly and randomly during a downpour. After twenty seconds, a cat sneaks into frame, then slips out to the right. Shortly thereafter, a man tiptoes through puddles to the entrance, heads out of frame to the ticket office, then returns into frame and wanders into the theater. These scenes from the films of Tsai Ming-liang exemplify an experience of drifting and wandering, as well as the other qualities he brings to his work: silence, slowness, and stillness.

Tsai works at the borders of conventional narrative film, crafting movies in more of an avant-garde or experimental style than the previous filmmakers in my work. His style is crucial to an understanding of his significance in relation to border gnosis, subaltern pasts, and other modes of revealing reality that I have followed so far. His method goes further than Hou's and Jia's experiments with the conventions of realism or documentary style. Rather than using personal memory or the narratives of individuals to expose, question, or disrupt the national narrative, Tsai depicts the skewed desires of his characters via an extreme realism that questions, disrupts, and pushes the boundaries of narrative. In so doing, Tsai pushes the boundaries of the transnational imaginary. In this chapter I focus primarily on Tsai's film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* with its exceedingly long takes, minimal camera movement, and focus on the corporeality of its actors to demonstrate what Jean Ma astutely identifies as this "queering" of the norms of cinematic realism.

Goodbye, Dragon Inn is the sixth feature-length film of Tsai's career, which began in television and branched out to film in 1992 with *Rebels of the Neon God*. All of Tsai's films have emphasized alienated characters in urban settings, but also deliberately slow pacing and long, static shots. In some ways, his style follows that of his national predecessors, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, and the filmmakers who came to be known as the Taiwanese New Wave. One might say that the most notable feature of Tsai's work is the sense that "nothing happens."¹ That is, he stretches the bounds of narrative cinema by means of a different mode of cinematic address and by focusing on people's everyday, corporeal existences. But by showing us the limits of narrative, stretching them just to their breaking point but

perhaps not exceeding them, his films become a critique of the things that they typically help to narrate: nation, family, identity, subjectivity. This avoidance of all but the barest minimum of rules of cinematic narrative allows him to also elide more direct references to the national narrative as well. That is, there are few if any historical “signposts” as in Jia’s films. His films critique, antagonize, but aren’t completely oppositional to, the supposed coherence of those categories. Put another way, Tsai does not so much critique the national narrative by juxtaposing it with personal narratives as Jia does, but rather he questions the very existence and coherence of the national narrative itself.

Goodbye, Dragon Inn is an unusual movie about movies: unlike many reflexive films that tell stories about filmmaking, such as Fellini’s *8 ½* or Truffaut’s *Day for Night*, it is about film-going and the theater as a place. The place is the Fu-Ho Grand Theater, an actual Taipei cinema that closed not long after filming. The film being screened is *Dragon Inn* (King Hu, 1967), a landmark martial-arts film that is one of the many antecedents to the globally popular wuxia revival of the early 2000s, which included *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (Ang Lee, 2001), *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002), *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou, 2003), and others. The “action” of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* takes place almost entirely within the theater and concerns its few patrons and employees as *Dragon Inn* plays out. In this film and others, Tsai minimizes three major aspects of conventional filmmaking (shot length and editing, *mise-en-scène*, and sound and dialogue), emphasizing instead slowness, stillness, and silence. This emphasis creates a sense of drift and allows Tsai’s film to re-imagine how it addresses its viewers. For all of these reasons, but

especially its reflexivity, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* bends the rules of narrative cinema. Tsai's refusal to follow these conventions, or his allowing the film to fail to conform to them, creates a space in which other forms of knowledge and history—analogue to border-gnosis, gnoseology and subaltern pasts—can be accessed.

Goodbye, Dragon Inn begins with a “memory” of its subject theater's heyday—the era of *Dragon Inn*'s initial release, when its seats were probably filled nightly. As the opening credits of Tsai's film fade in and out, we hear the opening fanfare and prologue from *Dragon Inn*. The first narrative shot of *Goodbye* is actually one of the first shots of *Dragon Inn*, projected on the screen of the Fu-Ho Grand Theater. Then *Goodbye* cuts to a view of the audience, from a side hallway and through a curtain, and we can see that the seats are full. As the original film's credits begin to sweep by, we see a montage of shots of the screen from within the crowded theater, including one right behind Tsai himself, his and his neighbor's silhouettes in focus while the screen is not (Figure 4.1).

As *Goodbye* progresses, we realize that these scenes of the crowded theater depict a memory or a haunting and that the actual reality of 2003 is quite different: during a soaking rainfall, the Fu-Ho Grand Theater plays host to an almost forgotten oldie for an almost nonexistent audience, whose members attend for reasons other than to view the sword stylings of *Dragon Inn*'s once-famous actors. For Chan, this sequence establishes the film's theme of nostalgia, as well as the structural layers through which the film and its nostalgia operate. “This overlapping of the two gazes into a single gaze exemplifies . . . nostalgia's ‘rhetorical practice’ of ‘positing’ not just ‘continuity’ with a specific past, in this case *Dragon Gate Inn* as the classic *wu xia*

pian, but also ‘discontinuity’ with that past.”² This tension between pasts reminds us how subaltern pasts highlight disjunctures between the past and the present and points to Martin’s concept of “temporal dysphoria.”³

The disjuncture or confusion between the film we are watching and the film the characters are watching—as well as the relationship between us as viewers of both films and the viewers who are the subject of the film—creates another layer of complexity. Initially, the Japanese tourist seeking shelter from the rain is the butt of several jokes about film spectatorship that we can all identify with: he sits too near people who are eating and loudly smacking, feet rudely appear over the seat next to him, and men keep sitting down next to him when there are empty seats all around (probably related to the use of the theater as cruising space), but these potential connections fail, just as his later attempts to connect with other characters will fail. Typically, Tsai shoots the scenes of the tourist in the theater space at an angle from which we can see other parts of the audience around him, and almost always *away* from the theater’s screen. In these scenes, Tsai insists that we focus on this everyday activity of spectatorship. The sounds of squeaky seats become as important as the ambient sounds of *Dragon Inn*, including dialogue and music, which sometimes seem to comment on events occurring in the theater.⁴ Though this sound design would seem to contrast the attribute of silence that I have argued is important in Tsai’s work, I also believe that these kinds of sounds are emphasized to contrast with and foreground the overall silence of the scene.

Drifting as Knowing

Tsai is one of the prime makers of what has been called “slow cinema,” a trend that began in the 1980s. Because this label often refers to the extensive use of long takes and minimal “action” throughout those takes, the films of both Hou and Jia have also been placed in this category, in which they join other international luminaries such as Abbas Kiarostami (Iran), Bela Tarr (Hungary), and Nuri Bilge Ceylan (Turkey). Like these other films, Tsai’s work within the broad definition of slow cinema is distinctive and conveys slowness in its own way. The action in Tsai’s films sometimes appears to come to a full stop, and any normative sense of narrative development disappears. His films tend to reach only nominal conclusions, more often seeming to evaporate in front of us. His camera is nearly always static, and his shots are typically lengthy. Lim brilliantly uses the word *drift* to characterize both Tsai’s films and the people and objects that inhabit them. Persons and things literally drift in and out of frame, and the drift of the narrative motivates the viewer to engage with the film differently. But Lim also connects drifting to a more philosophical notion:

Tsai’s cinema, I would contend, structures drift both as epistemology and ontology, form and content. I mentioned above that the audience is left to drift in Tsai’s empty moments of stillness. Rather than the audience’s making a conscious attempt to make sense of them, a mental state of drifting may, in fact, be most suited to the experience of the inexplicable enigma and ambiguity in these moments. Drifting, here, becomes a way of knowing.⁵

We would not usually expect “drifting” to fulfill our well-trained expectations of

narrative cinema, but Lim suggests that by accepting Tsai's invitation to follow his films where they wander, we might find ourselves in the midst of a new kind of experience.

In Tsai's work, *drifting* describes both technique and narrative, both theory and practice. Recalling Jia's *Unknown Pleasures* and Hou's *Goodbye South Goodbye*, Tsai's films contain very little or even no camera movement or dialogue, or even interactions of any kind between characters. This is not unusual, as evidenced by the words I cited in the epigraph: he films actors following some instructions and then keeps the camera rolling "after they have finished." It is only when the actors are no longer "acting" that he gets to the heart of a scene. While the films of Jia and Hou typically include a dramatic context in which the characters "hang out," the drama of Tsai's films is of the thinnest nature. Narrative materializes only faintly over time, develops in familiar but strange environments, and often builds (quietly and slowly) to an odd climax. Chan describes how this style accentuates "lingering" or staying in one place. He sees Tsai's "aesthetics of lingering" as the primary component of "a localized politics of place to disrupt the seamless co-optation of nostalgia into the transnational capitalist structures and networks of cultural consumption."⁶ Like Lim, Chan sees drift and lingering as a challenge both in the political and aesthetic realms: in other words, as a form of border gnosis.

Tsai's 2001 film *What Time Is It There?* serves as an example of his visual and narrative sense of drift and lingering. In it, Tsai's primary muse, actor Lee Kang-sheng, playing a street peddler in Taipei, tries to sell a watch to a young woman (Chen Shiang-chyi) who insists on buying the watch he is wearing, rather than one

on his table, just before she leaves for Paris. After this moment of “drama,” Lee spends the rest of the film hanging out in his house, at one of his vending spots, or elsewhere around Taipei, appearing depressed and setting all clocks within his reach (and many nearly out of his reach) to Paris time. Many scenes are simply one long take of Lee lying in his room or eating a meal with his mother—both of them discussing the possibility of his recently deceased father’s ghost haunting the apartment. Alternating with these scenes are sequences of Chen’s life in Paris in which she appears to be no more happy than Lee. The film reaches a climax of sorts, resulting in the relief of some of the sexual tension that has built up within each of these characters (Lee, Chen, and Lee’s character’s mother), but hardly brings any expected narrative closure.⁷ However, the film achieves a kind of poetic closure, showing Lee’s and Chen’s suitcases (his full of watches) in some paired sequences. In one, Lee’s case is stolen by a prostitute he has sex with, then Chen’s suitcase is rescued from a Parisian pond by a man who appears to be Lee’s dead father.

This drifting narrative logic is shared by the vast majority of Tsai’s films, particularly those made before *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. *Vive l’amour*, which follows the relationships of two young men (Lee Kang-sheng is one) and a young woman through wandering scenes very similar to those in *What Time*, ends with an over five-minute-long static shot of the young woman sobbing by herself on a park bench. *The River* ends with an incestuous encounter between Lee and his on-screen father, played by Tien Miao, a scene that is only partially lit and completely static. The more recent *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* ends with the main characters arranged on a

mattress floating aimlessly in what appears to be an underground cavernous lake. As with *What Time Is It There?*, this film's climax is not based on narrative, and rarely do these extended sequences bring any logical sense to the events that have preceded them. Nevertheless, their intensity and focus pack an emotional punch that is the culmination of the film. But even these emotionally climactic scenes are suffused with a sense of chance and happenstance: we drift toward them and then, just as unintentionally, away. Often, the same actors play similar characters in multiple films; scenes seem interchangeable among these works, as if the films form a world that Tsai simply visits from time to time. In this way Tsai's ability to create "imagined worlds" is even more pronounced than Jia or Hou, and his films feel like time spent in an alternate universe.⁸

Slowness, Stillness, and Silence

Besides the overarching sense of drift, Lim identifies three fundamental and distinguishing aspects of Tsai's style: slowness, stillness, and silence. On many occasions, these attributes are in play simultaneously, as in the final sequence of *What Time Is It There?*, which shows Chen resting and perhaps faintly hearing children dragging what appears to be her suitcase. Then Tsai cuts to a shot from behind Chen with the water beyond her. Her suitcase floats into view from the left and drifts across the frame, exiting at the right. The shot lasts one minute and twenty seconds, the journey of the suitcase taking up around fifty-five seconds of that time. Chen is completely motionless through the entire scene, and at the cut even the sounds of the children have faded. The water reflects a large Ferris wheel that is

directly visible in the final shot of the film, when Lee's father (Tien Miao) reappears (Figure 4.2).

The effect of this scene on the viewer is described by Lim as inducing a state of mind that both parallels the (feeling of) drift on screen but that also allows or encourages the viewer to let go of any attempt to make sense of the narrative.⁹ This interpretation is echoed by Luca, for whom the long shot bypasses normative narrative logic, comprising another key component of Tsai's originality and significance. Luca emphasizes the way that Tsai's methods appeal directly to the senses. While Tsai's and others' work might seem to conform to Bazin's conception of realism, formed in relation to Italian Neorealism of the late 1940s, Bazin's rules still recommend that a film employing long takes or deep focus be applied to further the film's narrative goals.¹⁰ However, as I have described, Tsai is not as interested in or dedicated to narrative coherence. Instead, he invites the viewer "to adopt the point of view of the camera and protractedly study images as they appear on the screen in their unexplained literalness . . . surpass[ing] by far the demands of the story, leaving the spectator unguided as to how to read that particular scene hermeneutically."¹¹ By allowing the viewer to drift along with the characters through a film, Tsai largely ignores the typical narrative goals of film and addresses the viewer's senses directly using stillness, silence, and slowness.

Tsai's mode of address also speaks to the senses by emphasizing the body. Typically focused on his muse, Lee Kang-Sheng, Tsai uses his films to study Lee's various bodily experiences: eating, sleeping, urinating, having sex. Other characters, like a disabled ticket woman whom we meet early in the film, emphasize the difficulty

of living inside our bodies. The way Tsai lingers on aspects of corporeal life allows us to identify with his characters or even feel what they feel physically. “As Jared Rapfogel puts it, Tsai’s characters behave ‘the way people generally behave (but are rarely portrayed behaving) when they’re alone—that is to say, very oddly.’”¹²

It is not quite accurate to say that Tsai’s films have no narrative at all, simply that narrative is not his primary interest. In fact, his achievement is that he allows his films to *fail* to meet conventional narrative goals, thereby frustrating our expectations of fulfillment and offering a critique of narrative reason. This is not to say his films are failures, as Bergen-Arnaud, Mazzilli, and Hee remind us, but rather to point out that failure can be full of “potential, possibility, or even promise.”¹³ Tsai’s films take the viewer past a typical, rational interpretation of “what happens,” past “getting it,” and invite us along for the ride—even if the ride is often not going anywhere in particular. His films are akin to wandering in a city or driving through a countryside without a definite destination in mind. Rather than arriving at the destination that a narrative film would usually deposit us, instead we experience the slowness, stillness, and silence that the characters occupy, which has the power to evoke a contemplative, rather than interpretive, mental state.

Tsai’s meditations on corporeality and drift are exemplified by an early sequence in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* that involves one of the main characters, the theater’s ticket taker, a woman with a disability who walks very slowly and makes a clanking sound with each step. This is one of two extremely long treks she makes in the film, as she travels to the projection booth and makes several side trips along the way. The first sequence depicting her trip to the projection booth takes five full

minutes of screen time and focuses almost entirely on her walking through five shots. As she travels around the theater, Tsai's static camera usually anticipates her entry into a frame and lingers after she leaves it—perhaps following her sound more than her image. This method establishes a certain kind of continuity, even cause and effect, as classical narrative would require, but stretches it so far as to be absurd. The ambiguity of the ticket woman's purpose, which is emphasized by the frame's great depth and width of field, combined with her slow progress and hypnotizing noise allow any narrative momentum to evaporate. The viewer has time to forget what her motivation or goal is, even if these have only existed in the viewer's imagination.

The ticket woman's ostensible goal is to deliver a rice cake (resembling a peach, traditionally given in birthday celebrations)¹⁴ to the projectionist, which she accomplishes in the first of two lengthy journey sequences. After the second, which leads her to the projection room by a different route, she discovers that the projectionist is missing from the projection room and that he has not even touched her gift. She sits dejectedly and extremely still, and we sit with her. This scene goes on with almost no perceptible movement for nearly two and a half minutes. Neither the camera nor the editing directs our thoughts or feelings—or reveals hers. We must deal with her as she is, the sound of the projector dominating the soundtrack with faint dialogue from *Dragon Inn* in the background (Figure 4.3). We must deduce or decide on our own what she is doing, thinking, or feeling. Slowly, clues from the framing fall into place as we realize what her goal was and ponder her feelings: this is the projection room, entered from a different angle; that is the peach rice cake she

delivered earlier. Her disappointment and frustration perhaps begin to mirror ours. But our desire for the scene to change is stubbornly resisted by Tsai's refusal to cut, thus leaving emotions on both sides of the screen uninterrupted.

Tsai's protraction of continuity editing in these sequences, combined with Luca's focus on the viewer drifting through the film without interpretation begs comparison with some studies of early cinema. In 1909 a member of the new discipline of cinema journalism wrote, "To secure art in a motion picture, there must be an end to be attained, a thought to be given, a truth to be set forth, a story to be told, and the story must be told by a skillful and systematic arrangement."¹⁵ Thompson elaborates, "A narrative is not something to be placed in front of an audience, but something to be 'given' or 'told.' A coherent narration must hold the film together."¹⁶ Tsai's arrangement is both systematic and skillful and yet his films toy with an audience's expectations. Rather than handing over the narrative, as Thompson suggests, Tsai, his approach like that described by Gunning as a "cinema of attractions," simply shows.¹⁷

When Gunning writes that "the term *attraction* refers backwards to a popular tradition and forwards to an avant-garde subversion,"¹⁸ he opens the possibility for political interpretations of the cinema of attraction, as well as of Tsai. Gunning refers to the carnivals and amusement parks of the past and present, but also to Eisenstein and the development of the editing technique that he calls the "montage of attractions." He describes Eisenstein's aesthetic and political goals of using "the power of attractions to undermine the conventions of bourgeoisie realism."¹⁹ Though Eisenstein famously attempted "a dialectic approach to film form" in which he used

editing to represent a clash of ideas that resulted in a thesis was very different from the type of realism under discussion here, his stated intention to make an impact in the ideological and political realm is worth noting. In addition, Gunning connects the cinema of attractions and its legacy to its potential for producing different types of images: “It provides an underground current flowing beneath narrative logic and diegetic realism, producing those moments of cinematic *dépaysement* beloved by the surrealists.”²⁰ This uncanny disorientation or displacement was the state of mind sought by the surrealists, who believed that through it they could open new spaces and find freedom of thought.

Gunning’s work reveals that this undercurrent from cinema’s earliest days continues to flow through film history and has manifested itself in the contemporary cinema of slowness. It is exactly this current that bubbles up into Tsai’s worlds, producing not just isolated moments, but extended—and surreal—experiences of disorientation in some viewers. This undercurrent disrupts not only the bourgeois norm, but the norms of cinematic convention. Tsai’s films hearken back to the cinema of attractions—which in its second and third decades sought to “tailor every detail to the spectator’s attention” and to “control the vision of the spectator”—but he presents a different sort of spectacle.²¹ He makes no pretense of directing our vision beyond his use of framing and *mise-en-scène*, and rather than showing us grand vistas or unknown wonders of the world, as early cinema did, he shows us scenes of mundane, everyday life—often moments that seem so private and uncinematic we are surprised they have even been filmed, like Lee alone in his room, still and silently watching TV, or eating dinner with his mother. Gunning’s reference to the

avant-garde also recalls the cinematic experiments of Andy Warhol, whose protractedly long scenes of “nothing happening” and intentional distancing seem particularly similar to Tsai’s. His films’ extended gazes are punctuated by scenes of unexpected or odd behavior that often focus on the body, scenes that appear to project an awareness that they are failing to provide what we expect from narrative cinema. At the end of one of the scenes I have described, after several minutes of watching Lee motionless in his room, during which we question or forget the existence of any narrative thrust, he suddenly gets up and urinates into a plastic bag. These moments of odd behavior abound in Tsai’s films: they intensify the sense of disorientation established by his long, still takes, subvert any normative sense of narrative action that we expect, and re-train our conventional ways of seeing.

Scenes like these, with their address to the senses and their palpable surrealism, show Tsai’s methods to exceed the boundaries of Lim’s epistemology/ontology framework and to engage with Mignolo’s ideas about gnoseology and border gnosis, pushing us to begin to see drift as a way, Mignolo might say, of “think[ing] otherwise.”²² Tsai’s border gnosis is stylistically rooted in the borders of cinematic convention, but the films themselves also proceed from an intersection of Western and local Asian perspectives. Tsai does not directly engage with questions of Taiwanese nationality in the way that Hou does, or in the way Jia does with China, nor is Taiwan traditionally thought of as postcolonial (as outlined in chapter 2). However, he produces knowledge from the borders of “normative” human relationships and configurations of desire and shows how relationships and desires blend or clash with contemporary global life. More specifically, his drifting narrative

and cinematic technique and attention to the senses “invite a sensuous engagement that resonates with specific socioculturally and historically situated knowledges and experiences that traditional (Western) forms of representation, and ways of accounting for those representations, might not be able to ‘grasp.’”²³ His address to the senses combined with pushing at the limits of narrative cinema are his methods of gnoseology.

Tsai’s engagement with these representations threatens to undermine some of the fundamental underpinnings of Western ideology. In one of his own films, *The Pervert’s Guide to Ideology*, Žižek articulates his notion of ideology as “an (unconscious) structuring our social reality itself,” playing out in our dreams and in films.²⁴ These are the narratives that root us to the principles of capitalism (and therefore of globalization, as well as the colonial legacy or “colonial difference” that has driven global colonialism over the last five centuries).²⁵ He notes that the failure of the major political revolutions of the twentieth century (Russia, China, Cuba) was a failure to change not the political structure, but a culture’s dreams. Žižek has often used films to demonstrate philosophical principles; that is, these films structure those principles in us subconsciously. As McAlister and Bourdieu remind us, “we have to “explain the coincidence” that brings specific cultural products into conversation with specific political discourses.”²⁶ We must explain the coincidence of the similarity of a scene in a film to a social relationship or concept. Žižek argues, for example, that Kate Winslet and Leonardo DiCaprio’s relationship in *Titanic* does not just uncannily or conveniently demonstrate the master/slave dialectic of class dynamics under capitalism; it also reinforces them in our collective unconscious. It becomes the

ideology that we internalize, even if it is superficially critical of those dynamics.

Therefore, Tsai's failure or refusal to confirm normative Western configurations of desire, his refusal to reconnect characters in the traditional sense, reveals the suture between the "dream" of film and our internalization of it. Like the realism of Hou and Jia, Tsai's is a development of his own border gnoseology, a queering of the norms of desire and narrative that makes "drifting" a pathway to "knowing."

Tsai's Films as Gnosis and Critique of Modernity

Knowing and being intersect in Tsai's representation of time through his use of slowness, stillness, and silence and become part of his political aesthetic. While "slow cinema" is not an official label or means of self-identification on the part of the filmmakers, this trend in filmmaking shares some of the same goals as other movements that offer critiques of or resistance to the dominant global culture of "speed."²⁷ In the realm of food, gardening, or medicine, for example, many of these coordinated movements, are critics of the pace of globalization and commodification and the slow filmmakers could be seen as contributing to this larger critique. Quoting Rancière and his notion that aesthetics and politics intersect because they both relate to "the properties of spaces and the possibilities of time" and to "modes of being and forms of visibility," Lim posits that "as a new way of visualizing temporality, a cinema of slowness is making an intervention in a wider filmmaking milieu that does things with time very differently."²⁸ Some of Tsai's fellow practitioners have referred to the possibilities of contemplation that their style of cinema opens up, which has implications for the political realm of democratic participation and its

necessary contemplation and creative thought. Abbas Kiarostami has said, “I believe in a cinema which gives more possibilities and more time to its viewer [and which is] completed by the creative spirit of the viewer.”²⁹ Citing Agacinski, Jaffe notes that the “slow” movements, as well as slow movies, appeal to the belief that true political engagement requires time for reflection and contemplation and that these filmmakers’ style stimulates a “patient, creative engagement in democracy.”³⁰ Lim, like Jaffe and Agacinski, connects Tsai’s penchant for unpredictability and contingency to the notion of democracy in the context of film. Jia has also articulated this idea:

In my long shots and long takes, my goal is to respect the viewer’s agency, and even to give my films a sense of democracy. I want audiences to be able to freely choose how they want to interact with what’s on screen. But everyone’s reasons for using long shots and long takes are different; personally, I just don’t want my position as a director to become dictatorial, because I want my films to be governed by a sense of equality and democracy.³¹

“Maybe we need to slow down to solve some problems,” says one of Jia’s characters, implying, along with Tsai and Kiarostami, that an openness of mind can stimulate the creative process. These filmmakers allow the time and space for thought that conventional narrative cinema does not.

Tsai’s focus on giving the viewer “more time” and his representation of time can be seen as part of his critique of modernity. Lim associates Tsai’s representation of time with Doane’s analysis of cinematic representations of time and modernity:

“For Mary Ann Doane, insofar as the invention of cinema coincided with other technological changes (such as electric lighting and elevated trains) within modernity, the emergence of cinematic time and the stories told through the new medium ‘reinscribe the recognizable tropes of orientalism, racism, and imperialism essential to the nineteenth-century colonialist imperative to conquer other times, other spaces.’”³² Doane continues, “In fact the emerging cinema participated in a more general cultural imperative, the structuring of time and contingency in capitalist modernity.”³³ In these passages, Doane acknowledges not only the link between colonialism and capitalism, as Mignolo does, but she also characterizes cinema and specifically its representation of time as a structuring force in the new phase of global capitalism (i.e., globalization). What Doane identifies is a moment of intensification that has only come into fruition in the last hundred years: cinema and visual culture as new tools for structuring time and modernity in service of the global, colonial capitalist project.

Doane explains that for capitalism to evolve into its modern form, an understanding of time as quantifiable had to be established and socialized as an underpinning concept of the larger system. Cinema, along with theories of work management like Taylorism, was one of the cultural tools that assisted in this conceptualization and socialization by regulating time with its narrative rules and internal coherence, but also by keeping the opportunity for chance occurrence and the unexpected.³⁴ Thus, cinema in its “classical” mode walks a fine line of assuring the spectator of rational, ordered time even as the unexpected or chance happening is always possible. As Gunning and Hansen know, earlier cinema held more

potential for this kind of unexpected surprise, but “classical conventions structure time and contingency in ways consonant with the broader rationalization and abstraction of time in an industrialized modernity. Efficiency becomes a crucial value, and time is filled with meaning.”³⁵ And just as Gunning assures us that cinema never fully outgrew the cinema of attractions, Doane states that “contingency is by no means banished” because in order to regulate time, cinema still has to pay homage to the possibility of uncertainty—even if it has no intention of letting things become truly uncertain. Classical cinema provides the illusion that stories are open and fluid—that something new and different could happen at any moment. It structures time and narrative in such a way that they appear undetermined while ultimately assuring us of their determinacy. Put another way, we may not know exactly what will happen at the end of a horror or action movie, but we know it will be shocking or frightening or exciting, and we know it will bring the narrative to a conclusion. This is exactly the vulnerability or unacknowledged truth that Tsai exploits, but in reverse. His films ask, “What if time is *not* filled with meaning?” Rather than focusing on unexpected action, he focuses on unexpected inaction: lingering on shots of people and their behavior long past the moment when classical cinema would have cut away to advance the narrative. If classical cinema helped to organize time, Tsai’s insistence on disrupting that organization subverts film’s underpinning of capitalist temporality and modernity.

Goodbye, Dragon Inn contains several examples of this unexpected unpredictability and its possibilities for the audience. In one, the tourist stands at a urinal in the men’s room, and another man stands with him in the immediate

foreground, methodically smoking a cigarette (Figure 4.4). We can see stalls behind the two men and the entrance to the restroom beyond. We expect this simple scene to turn into an interaction of some sort between the two men, but actually, neither of them even seems to finish the task after a total of three minutes. The scene is punctuated instead by its relentless repetition, which allows the absurdity of what we are seeing to sink in. Some of the characters' unusual behavior can be explained by an understanding of the theater as a queer space used for cruising, but even these sequences are tinged with a sense of the uncanny. It is as if the scene and its characters forget that the scene must go on and change into something else, the only movement seeming to stall in mid-action (a man comes out of a stall and begins washing his hands, but he continues doing so for a cinematically endless one minute and forty-five seconds) or continue in a choreographed loop (the man in the foreground smokes nearly an entire cigarette, taking a puff at regular intervals). At the same time, the scene seems to be teasing or joking with us—"waking us up" from our expectations with odd moments in this ridiculous cycle. At one point, for example, a man comes in to the bathroom and heads right for the tourist with a purposeful momentum. Precisely at the moment when we flinch along with the tourist, wondering what he is going to do, he reaches right between the tourist and the smoking man to retrieve a pack of cigarettes, which we would have presumed to belong to the man in the foreground.

Another even more extreme and hypnotizing example of Tsai leaving the audience adrift occurs a bit later, when the tourist is first bothered and then frightened away by a woman eating watermelon seeds, a once common theater

snack in Taiwan.³⁶ This scene contains two examples of the way Tsai's method of drift is actually a strategically constructed experience. The scene is the tourist's last appearance. Scurrying out the door, he leaves us with a view over the woman's shoulder of almost the entire theater space, but still without a crucial element: the screen (Figure 4.5). This scene continues—with the sound of her cracking and discarding the seeds—for almost two more minutes. Here, as with the sound of the ticket woman's slow gait, the audio combines with the image to produce a strange and somewhat mesmerizing effect. As in much of the film, the sound becomes the focus of a scene, but in a slightly more manipulative way. In this case, Tsai gradually mixes down the sound from *Dragon Inn*, leaving the sound of the cracking seeds to come to the foreground. He forces us to notice it and process it differently than we would normal ambient sound. Over the course of the scene, the rhythm of the noise changes from fascinating to meditative. Again, paradoxically this technique emphasizes the "silence" in the theater without the noise of the film being projected. This constructed silence, created by a kind of focusing in the sound mix is created purposefully as an "active" silence and functions as a tool to interpellate the viewer.³⁷ That is, this method is another way to draw Tsai's audience into his film, identifying with the experience of being there rather than with any narrative thread.

At the same time, due to its length, during this scene we are given time to wonder about the scene's meaning or the feeling it is meant to evoke. We anticipate a cut, and it inevitably comes, but long after we expect. By not directing our attention or instructing us where to look via the typical grammar of narrative cinema, the film confounds our expectations and frees our minds to wander with the characters.

Recalling Agacinski and Kiarostami, Lim recognizes the possibility in this failure: “Seen in this light, the long take is an incredibly democratic non-technique that, unlike slow motion, does not attempt to dictate how we see. As such, its effect is also highly subjective, as it is left to the individual to decide how he or she would engage with its extended temporality.”³⁸ Again, Lim encourages us to meet Tsai’s films with an approach beyond interpretation. There is a dynamic between conventional methods, which direct our vision and attention, telling viewers who to identify with and who not to—basically what to think—and Tsai’s methods, which don’t direct us or our identification much at all. But in letting us drift with the characters, he lets us understand something else. Drifting is a way of “being” in the film, and there is knowing in this purposelessness, drift, or “just being.” Here is an underlying extension of his films: in capitalism or modernity one must have a purpose or utility to have meaning, and his films challenge that need by supposing that drifting is being/knowing, and a different kind of knowledge than that valued by Western modernity.

Tsai’s Queering of Cinematic Norms

My focus on the contingency of Tsai’s films underscores how they contrast with Doane’s view of classical cinema. Rather than only acknowledging or minimizing contingency, Tsai revels in it in a particular way. Ma describes how Tsai’s films “dwell in the unanchored time of melancholic desire,” and this drifting sensibility becomes a critique of modernity by dislodging the sense of order created by classical cinema.³⁹ That is, Tsai welcomes contingency into his films, places where

anything can happen, *including nothing*, which ends up being the bigger surprise. In this way, posits Ma, Tsai's films are connected to the recent "chronopolitical turn in queer theoretical discourse" that "looks to untimeliness as a resource for resistance and pleasure."⁴⁰ Thus, Tsai joins Judith Halberstam and other queer theorists in critiquing the articulations between time, desire, queerness, capitalism, nation, narrative, and progress.

In his discussion of the long take, Lim describes a particular negative aspect of Tsai's work that I also want to call attention to: the notion of failure.

More important, the long take is about the unknown. While the object in a slow-motion shot is usually fixed, we cannot predict what a long-take shot is going to show us (or not show us) next in its extended duration: anything can happen (or disappear). The unpredictability of the long take's object, the unguaranteed experience of its slowness, and the uncertain extent of its duration combine to create an aesthetic that embraces the unknown, the lost, and the default.⁴¹

While the liberating and democratic aspect of Tsai's style affects the audience, actors, and filmmakers, it is also paradoxically associated with disconnection (between scenes, characters, or relationships) and other negative qualities, as evidenced by all of the "un" words Lim employs: *unpredictability*, *unguaranteed*, *uncertain*, *unknown*. Tsai's work reflects the "frequent repression and indeterminacy of feeling" that Jaffe describes in slow movies, their portrayal of "feelings contrary to optimism" and "cheerless aspects of existence that are likely to worsen if ignored," which Tsai drapes in "stillness, blankness, emptiness and silence."⁴² Lim's language

reveals the emphasis on contingency in Tsai's work that subverts not only the cinematic certainty guaranteed by "normal" or classical film style, but also the certainties of identity, nation, modernity, and capitalism that cinema helps to secure.

What Time Is It There? can be seen as the extended failure of two people, one in Taipei and one in Paris, to connect. *Vive l'amour* is the tale of Lee Kangsheng's failure to make a connection with the two people he hides from in an apartment—at one point lying under their bed while they have sex above him. In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, multiple people fail to connect: the Japanese tourist cannot make contact with any of the other patrons in the cruising realm; the woman at the ticket counter cannot get through to the projectionist. In this disconnection and failure, we can see Tsai's films as disruptions not only of narrative conventions, but of norms of identity, desire, family, and nation.

Tsai's challenge to the norms of classical Hollywood narrative cinema are more than simply an extension of "art cinema," often understood by classicists like Bordwell as a deviation from convention. In addition to a reaction to "Western modernism," Tsai's repetition of themes, characters, and situations, as well as his overall style of long takes and slow action, is "an alternative line of investigation, one that takes as its starting point a rethinking of the concatenated categories of modernism, art cinema, and national cinema in view of the transformations these categories have undergone between the postwar period and the present moment."⁴³ Ma sees Tsai's films as "post-classical art films" that both incorporate and react against norms. They are aware of their own reception and address themselves to audience members already familiar with Tsai's cast of characters and themes. His

depiction of time and of the bodily experience of time are major factors in this address, and the themes of absence, loss, and missed connections—along with his disconnected scenes and long takes that defy interpretation—combine to articulate “a politics of time, directed toward an ongoing interrogation of normative sexual, familial, and social identities.”⁴⁴ In other words, insofar as Tsai investigates the undefined ground between identity binaries and even critiques the structures that uphold those norms, Ma contends that his films constitute a cinematic contribution to recent turns in queer theory.⁴⁵ As he disarticulates cinematic style, his films also contribute to the work of recent queer studies that has undertaken to identify the ways in which sexual identity is bound up in national ones and with “colonial structures of knowledge and power.”⁴⁶

Ma attends to loss, disconnection, and absence in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* as evidence of Tsai deliberately failing to provide closure or even continuity between scenes, but she extends her analysis to the quality of time and also to queerness. Tsai’s curious depiction of people and his actors’ odd actions (or lack thereof) cause an uncanny decoupling of the character from his or her expected identity similar to the way that his use of long takes disconnects his films from the classical style, which is itself an articulation of the political stance of the film. In Tsai’s “world that is at once familiar and uncanny, fashioned around a realistic iconography of actual, recognizable, and everyday locales that are submitted to an operation of defamiliarization . . . bodies shift in and out of phase with the character types they signify and the identities they inhabit, acquiring an untimely aspect as deterministic frameworks of the self, family, and nation are submitted to the disarticulating force of

contingency.”⁴⁷ Again, the contingency and possibility of the work are notable but ironic because they emphasize the possibility of failure. Failure is an important component of what Ma calls Tsai’s queering of cinematic style or “a queer politics of time, a summoning forth of temporalities that disrupt, in the words of Judith Halberstam, ‘the normative narratives of time that form the base of nearly every definition of the human in almost all of our modes of understanding.’”⁴⁸

Many other examples of untimeliness, disconnection, and failure feature the Japanese tourist who entered the theater to escape the rain but whose journey within reminds us that the theater has become a public space with uses beyond those of its creators. His scenes connect to the notion of corporeality as well as emphasize Tsai’s protracted cinematic style. The tourist participates in the film’s first piece of dialogue outside of *Dragon Inn*, which occurs forty-four minutes into the film and one and a half minutes into a four-and-a-half-minute scene. After yet another near encounter with a fellow filmgoer in the back rooms of the theater, the tourist’s would-be partner asks him suddenly, “Do you know that this theater is haunted?” (Figure 4.6) “This theater is haunted,” he continues. “Ghosts.” Another important moment in this scene occurs when the Japanese man states his nation of origin and leaves his would-be companion with a “Sayonara!” The presence of a Japanese person in Taiwan is conspicuous given the history of Japanese occupation in the early twentieth century. This occupation “continues to haunt [Taiwan’s] history, just as Japanese culture haunts Taiwanese culture.”⁴⁹

As the tourist and this odd figure encounter each other, they move with a strange slowness that seems to be part of their nonverbal conversation that leads to

their failure to connect. We do not know why they suddenly break off their interaction, but something interrupts the moment. Something similar happens when the tourist attempts to solicit a reaction from Shih Chun in the theater: he stares at Shih Chun and slowly moves his body closer, and then suddenly the moment is gone and their connection broken. This short-circuiting of desire also functions to emphasize the body and its movement. “Slowness” here connects directly to corporeality.

The use of the theater as a cruising area for Taiwanese queers makes an important connection to the possibilities inherent in failure. However, Ma emphasizes, we must understand Tsai not simply as a queer filmmaker or one who commonly features gay characters or themes in his films. Her incisive point is that Tsai’s depiction of queer characters does not conform to an “‘Anglo-Americancentric, identity-politics-based framework’ that privileges the coming-out narrative as the *urform* of gay filmmaking.”⁵⁰ Most of Tsai’s films depict queer desire in one form or another, but none contain a coming-out narrative. Tsai’s avoidance of this narrative—his failure to make his films conform to it—positions his style in contrast to narrative cinema and its depictions of “normative” relationships.

Hee concurs with Ma’s observation and brilliantly connects it to Tsai’s relationship with Lee Kang-sheng. He argues that the actor functions as a sort of alter ego for Tsai, allowing Tsai to “come out” vicariously on screen while he refuses to do so in public. Hee posits that Tsai sympathizes with what is known as the “hidden faction” within the Chinese queer community. Since homosexuals in China have not been as heavily persecuted as those in the West, this group argues that “to

'forcibly import' Anglo-American 'coming out politics' into Chinese societies would be a 'rank colonization of desire'" and would do those individuals more harm than good.⁵¹ Hee points out the implications for Chinese culture, in which coming out would disrupt family structures that might be more valuable to individuals than openly exhibiting their sexual preferences. Moreover, the "hidden faction" also argue against the notion that queer representations always be "positive." "It is impossible to insist that every queer have a positive image: heterosexuals also have their dissolute and pessimistic side."⁵² The seemingly odd behaviors on display in Tsai's films demonstrate his willingness to depict images across the spectrum of positive and negative. In addition, Hee notes Tsai's use of narrative "parallelism," the nonstandard, nonlinear form, which reflects the "corporeality of the 'gendered subaltern' rather than a narrative logic grounded in heteronormative, bourgeois aesthetics."⁵³

The linkages between Tsai's narrative style, his emphasis on the body and "gendered subalterns," and their relation to normative identities and narratives show us how Tsai's films engage with a "chronopolitical turn in queer theoretical discourse" that has questioned the "biopolitics of time . . . [and] collective narratives of history and nation," challenging the teleological narratives and assumptions about sexualities, identities, nations, and modernity. Tsai's disruption of normal cinematic time propels these waves of queer theory that attempt to "envision alternative habitations of time that might enable different modes of identification and affiliation."⁵⁴ In her essay on *What Time Is It There?*, Martin shows how the theme of time contributes to the film's critique of the postcolonial binaries of "West" and "non-

West.” Citing Bhabha’s use of Fanon’s concept of “postcolonial time-lag,” which refers to the developmental assumptions placed upon former colonies with regard to their place “behind” Europe or the West in terms of a modernist focus on “progress,” she writes,

The modernist teleology of development and “progress” that both Fabian and Bhabha critique, in their different ways, produces a (post)colonial temporality according to which the present “there,” in the non-west, is the pre-history of “here,” in the west, and the future “there” is projected as approximating the past or the present “here.” Bhabha’s notion of the postcolonial time-lag, and the subjective dysphoria that it can produce in subjects interpellated as belated finds an interesting, refracted echo in the thematics of *What Time*.⁵⁵

Though Taiwan has its own contentious relationship with the concepts of colonialism and postcolonialism, Martin identifies the ways in which Tsai depicts a “temporal dysphoria” or “time-sickness” that his characters experience that constitutes the focus of *What Time Is It There?* and the critique of that framework. “More than simply time in general, the film compellingly thematizes temporal dysphoria, most obviously in the structuring preoccupation of both Hsiao Kang [the character played by Lee Kang-sheng] and the film itself with the time difference between Taipei and Paris.”⁵⁶ I would argue that in *What Time, Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, and other films, Tsai depicts a time-lag that is analogous to the one Bhabha describes in the realm of queer identity and in cinematic style in general, and therefore it similarly functions as a critique of dominant Western discourses. That is, his avoidance of the coming-out narrative is an alternative way of constructing queer

identities just as his deconstruction of the experience of time is a way of critiquing its appropriation by modernity. His failure to come out, both in his films and personally, resists the imposition of an “epistemology of the closet rooted in the West as the single standard against which gay liberationist enterprises in other parts of the world are to be measured as inevitably *retardataire* and inadequate to the present.”⁵⁷

Tsai’s films explain what *queer* could mean in a cinematic sense that extends also to sexual, racial, and geographical or national frameworks. “The filmic articulation of a kind of twisted embodiment, an obliquely orientated subjectivity, is therefore one way of ‘making strange’ the Western (white, male, heterosexual) orientation of mainstream cinema that is based on a very particular relation to, and perception of, space and other bodies and objects within it, while passing itself off as universal.”⁵⁸

Tsai’s presentation of the experience of time—with its emphasis on drift, slowness, stillness, and silence—and his resistance to the coming-out narrative also contribute to this critique by causing a temporal disorientation or dysphoria in the viewer. As Ma puts it, “Tsai’s resistance to progressive models of temporality acquires a deeper significance in light of the colonial and developmentalist assumptions that weigh down the ideal of progress and attach it to a belated ‘other.’”⁵⁹

This disorientation is deepened in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* by the contrast not only between *Goodbye* and the film being watched in the theater but with other films that enjoyed international popularity around that time. While the homages to classic wuxia in the early 2000s could be celebrated as broadening the horizons of international (read: Western European) cinema generally, they could also be seen as regressive or Orientalist due to the time period they depict. This kind of nostalgic

view of Chinese culture contributes to the discourse of the “belated” culture. Chan explains how *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*’s contemporaries, like *Hero* or *House of Flying Daggers*, are rooted in “the new global or transnational imaginaries, with their fetishism of a dehistoricized developmentalism and placeless spaces.”⁶⁰ While Tsai’s view of *Dragon Inn* and the theater is firmly nostalgic in its own way, it is also just as firmly rooted in its present and in a specific place, where, as one of the actors says to the another (Tien Miao and Shih Chun, stars of the original *Dragon Inn*, but playing themselves in Tsai’s film), “No one goes to the movies anymore...No one remembers us.” By depicting this nostalgic distance as specifically and as rooted in a particular place, with its sometimes less than glamorous details, Tsai fails to conform to the imaginary that much of the rest of film culture constructs. His film challenges “the hegemony of the global imaginary that utopianizes transnationalism.”⁶¹

Thus, Tsai’s failure on all of these levels evokes possibility in what Halberstam calls “the queer art of failure.” Recall the “un” words used by Lim when Halberstam states that “under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”⁶² Indeed, the editors of *Transnational Chinese Cinema: Corporeality, Desire, and Ethics of Failure* found that “that desire and corporeality in transnational Chinese cinema always circulate through an economy of failure,” but they make sure to point out that they see “failure as potential, possibility, or even promise.”⁶³ To “succeed,” in their view, is to be completed and therefore to be limited, finite. Where there is failure there is “the

possibility to continue to practice or practice differently.”⁶⁴ Or as Mignolo might say, to “think otherwise: To engage in border thinking is to move beyond the categories created and imposed by Western epistemology.”⁶⁵ This is precisely what Tsai’s films do in the realms of cinematic style, queer identity, and temporality. And we can understand how a scene in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*—like the one in the men’s room, or the one between the Japanese tourist and the mysterious man behind the screen, or the one with the ticket woman in the projection booth—becomes a constructive failure on multiple levels in relation to normative cinematic narrative, Western queer identity, and postcolonial relationships—all while “nothing” happens.

Conclusion: The Theater Looks Back

By way of conclusion, I want to look closely at one of the most remarkable shots in the film, one that excavates the film’s minimalist technique to the limits and brings many of these themes to the fore. Just as *Dragon Inn* is concluding, Tsai cuts to a shot matching one of the opening credit “memory” scenes: we see *Dragon Inn*’s concluding moments through the curtain. Then, just before the lights come flickering on, Tsai cuts to an extremely long shot of the entire theater seating area, from the vantage point of the screen itself. The only action in the scene consists of the ticket woman walking through the seats to pick up trash, up the stairs on one side, across a row of seating, and then down the other side. She exits the frame three minutes into the five-minute, twenty-second shot (the longest in the film), and the sound of her walking away is audible for nearly forty seconds after her visible exit. Again, the prominence of a minor sound emphasizes the silence that remains after she moves

off-screen, and camera movement and *mise-en-scène* match with according stillness: we see the theater, as is, for another minute and forty seconds (Figure 4.7).

While this may not sound like a long time, more than two minutes of screen time without any human subjects or movement is uncharacteristically long in cinematic terms. My own first experience of this scene was one of confusion, anxiety, and then exhilaration, almost to the point that I had to turn away from it.⁶⁶ I recall looking at the seat in front of me and then to my side at another audience member. It went on so long that I began to question, along with how long it was going to go on, whether the audience would tolerate it, or even whether they were seeing what I was seeing. It reminded me of similar situations when a small technical problem occurs during a screening (less frequent in these days of digital projection) and the members of the audience look around and wonder who is going to inform the projectionist. At the time, a feeling of pleasurable vertigo began to dawn on me as I turned back to allow the Tsai's film to unspool, ready to give it as much time as it needed. It was only in retrospect that I realized the audacity of Tsai's accomplishment. The scene's silence and stillness brought me to self-awareness, and its content made the world seem to be turning inside out by representing the place where I actually was. This surreal feeling made me question which side of the screen I was on, collapsing distance, time, and bodily experience. The scene both absorbs and reflects our expectant gaze—rather than letting us absorb it, as we would a classical narrative film—and offers up our own self-awareness, staunchly reflecting: “Here you are,” both as an offering and a statement. “What do you expect?” it asks. “The movie is over.”

Recall Hansen describing classical Hollywood cinema as one that: offered its viewer an ideal vantage point from which to witness a scene, unseen by anyone belonging to the fictional world of the film—the diegesis. With the elaboration of a type of narration that seems to anticipate—or strategically frustrate—the viewer's desire with every shot, the spectator became part of the film as product, rather than a particular exhibition or show. As reception was thus increasingly standardized, the moviegoer was effectively invited to assume the position of this ideal spectator created by the film, leaving behind . . . an awareness of his or her physical self in the theater space, of an everyday existence troubled by social, sexual, and economic discrepancies.⁶⁷

Hansen also notes how the phenomenon of the actor addressing or looking directly into the camera, seeming to acknowledge the audience, problematized this ideal position. Could the theater's stare be a new manifestation of that "look," coming back to haunt the cinema? Is the scene shattering the space between subject and camera, screen and audience? Spoiling the absorption of the spectator so necessary to, yet produced by, the classical narrative style and ruining that spectatorship's commodification as the ultimate "product" of the film? Ma finds that "the shock of finding one's actual physical surroundings mirrored in the screen image amounts to an act of recognition that ruptures the invisible fourth wall dividing the world of the fiction from that of the viewer."⁶⁸ Combined with this sense of shock, Tsai's address to the senses creates a different kind of realism that encourages self-reflection and interaction with it rather than (viewing as) consumption. When asked

about the theater scene, he said, “I feel that image is like a mirror. I wanted to give the audience the opportunity to think not just about how things are vanishing—for instance, this movie theater is going to shut down and eventually it will vanish—but also about change in life. Why and how life changes, and whether there is a possibility of life changing for the better.”⁶⁹

Chan provocatively interprets this scene as conveying another kind of failure and thus, possibility. Recalling his emphasis on odd behavior and the bodies his actors, he compares Tsai’s style with pornography, suggesting that Tsai borrows “the very structuring of porn visuality”: “to register ‘all’ and offer it to our view.”⁷⁰ As such, the theater scene becomes pornographic and reveals the “failure of the nostalgic gaze”—not the nostalgia of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* itself, but that of the modern wuxia such as *Hero*, *Crouching Tiger*, and the like. And again, failure opens up possibility.

The scene

forces into emotional view the contradictions, complexities, and ultimate failure of the nostalgic gaze. It encourages a quiet, contemplative reflection on human suffering, alienation, and pain, so as to prompt change and foster the possibilities of connection. Hopefully, its ghostly traces will linger long after the frenzied visual spectacle of the contemporary *wu xia pian*’s global nostalgia subsides and vanishes.⁷¹

Against the nostalgic view of Chinese culture over-glamorized and popularized in the early 2000s, Tsai invites us to reflect on the failures and inconveniences of life in order to prompt thoughts of possibilities in an increasingly disconnected world.

In making films that combine realism with a challenge to the audience to reflect on both public and private matters, Tsai shows us cinema and lived lives as echoes of one another. The epigraph reflects this idea as well, with Tsai paradoxically equating dreams with his form of realism. He conveys that at the point where his films reach a particular point of ambiguity they “become real.” I read his statement that his “realism can be treated as dreams” as meaning that his films have the logic and atmosphere of a dream, and paradoxically this is the point where it becomes most real for him. In making his films follow a kind of dreamlike anti-logic, they become more real, i.e., they express his experience of life. When Tsai says “the world in cinema is not the real world...It has been crafted,” I believe he refers to classical Hollywood style and those of Taiwan and Indian popular cinema. He seems to be saying that he wants his films to be closer to reality, yet that requires them to be more dreamlike. The discussion of film, “real” life, and dreams recalls one of the first Chinese film reviewers, who wrote, “After seeing these shadow plays, I thereupon sighed with the feeling that every change in the world is just like a mirage. There is no difference between life and shadow play . . . suddenly hidden from view, suddenly reappearing. Life is really like dreams and bubbles, and all lives can be seen this way.”⁷²

This person’s revelation that life and films are the same seems to contradict Tsai’s, but I find it compatible. It relates to the paradox that Nowell-Smith identified in the inherent “unreality” of film and realist film styles “which [use] the cinema apparatus to remind us in a material way how reality makes us, rather than us commanding reality through our ability to make fictions about it.”⁷³ Tsai’s brand of

realism is a kind of reversal of what is expected: film is not realistic because *life* is not realistic—at least not in the way that we often believe it is, or have been led to believe it is by the coherent narratives of dominant film practice. Life is often random, odd, or uneventful, and our emphasis on those dramatic, coherent moments underpins the ideologies that mobilize our subjectivity. Tsai's triumph is in undermining that subjectivity, using, like poetry, a subversion of cinematic language, revealing that reality and dreams truly are not as different as we might think and giving us a glimpse of what “practicing differently,” or border gnosis, might look like.

In another sequence of Žižek's *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*, we are shown abandoned, obsolete jetliners in the Mojave Desert as Žižek ruminates on the “invisible side” of capitalism and its “tremendous amount of waste.”⁷⁴ But he warns against our initial reaction to this waste, which is to hide it or get rid of it. In his film he also refers to apocalyptic visions of the world such as those in *I Am Legend* and many others. Several of Tsai's films take place in a decaying or decomposing world like those Žižek refers to. The ruined buildings that provide shelter for the characters in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*; the makeshift hovels of the homeless protagonists in *Stray Dogs*; the incessant rain in *The River*, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, and *The Hole*; the gradual evacuation of the other citizens in *The Hole*; and especially the rundown theater in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* collectively seem to suggest a crumbling universe.

Perhaps acknowledging this detritus of the market is exactly what we need to do in order to imagine something new. Maybe gazing at the empty theater is a kind of “chance for an authentic passive experience. Maybe without this properly artistic moment of authentic passivity nothing new can emerge. Maybe something new only

emerges through the failure, the suspension of proper functioning of the existing network of our life: where we are. Maybe this is what we need more than ever today.”⁷⁵ Žižek also notes that the failure of many revolutionary movements of the twentieth century was that they failed to change the dreams of the social body. “The first step to freedom isn’t just to change reality to fit your dreams it’s to change the way you dream.”⁷⁶ Tsai’s films are a queering of capitalist dreams that show us our failure to change our dreams and then revel in this failure, giving us the space to imagine a way otherwise.

¹ Margulies used this phrase as the title of her book on Chantal Akerman, whose work is certainly a critical, if unintentional, precursor to that of Tsai. (Margulies, *Nothing Happens*.)

² Chan, “Goodbye, Dragon Inn,” 94.

³ Martin, “The European Undead.”

⁴ We hear “Get lost, errand boy” from the theater’s screen right after a man gets up from a seat next to the tourist, his relief palpable. When he does the same thing to Shih Chuh, we hear, “Well, thanks. See you around.” On screen, Shih Chun and another character say, “We’ll see each other another day” just as the Japanese man leaves Shih Chun in the theater.

⁵ Lim, *Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness*, 2014, 110.

⁶ Chan, “Goodbye, Dragon Inn,” 90.

⁷ One can imagine the Hollywood version: Lee and Chen pining for one another and then making a last minute connection.

⁸ My thanks to Luisela Alvaray for the suggestion that this element of Tsai’s world seems similar to the “world building” we see so prevalently in popular Hollywood cinema (Star Wars or Marvel films), where characters recur (and even narratives repeat) and narrative elements from one film are picked up in another. While there is not much of the latter in Tsai, this is something that Apichatpong Weerasethakul plays with extensively.

⁹ Lim, *Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness*, 2014, 110.

¹⁰ De Luca, “Realism of the Senses: A Tendency in Contemporary World Cinema,” 193.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² De Luca, “Sensory Everyday,” 173.

¹³ Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 15.

¹⁴ This piece of information was related by several fans, who posted messages on the film’s IMDB message board (“What was she eating?” <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0377556/board/nest/12304215>).

¹⁵ Thompson, “Part Three: The Formulation of the Classical Style, 1909-1928,” 174.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Gunning, “The Cinema of Attraction[s]: Early Film, Its Spectator, and the Avante-Garde” and ; Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the [In]Credulous Spectator,” 121.

¹⁸ Note 13 in Gunning, “An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the [In]Credulous Spectator,” 131.

¹⁹ Note 13 in *ibid*.

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- ²⁰ Ibid., 123.
- ²¹ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, 79.
- ²² Delgado and Romero, "Local Histories and Global Designs," 11.
- ²³ Lindner, "Situated Bodies, Cinematic Orientations: Film and (Queer) Phenomenology," 154.
- ²⁴ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, 33.
- ²⁵ Used throughout, Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs* but defined on 14. .
- ²⁶ McAlister, *Epic Encounters*, 7.
- ²⁷ See Jaffe, *Slow Movies Countering the Cinema of Action*, 7; and Lim, *Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness*, 2014, 2–3.
- ²⁸ Lim, *Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness*, 2014, 33.
- ²⁹ Quoted in Jaffe, *Slow Movies Countering the Cinema of Action*, 8.
- ³⁰ Ibid.
- ³¹ Chan, "Interview: Jia Zhangke."
- ³² Ibid, 22. Quote is from Doane.
- ³³ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 3-4.
- ³⁴ Ibid, 31.
- ³⁵ Ibid.
- ³⁶ Again, this was revealed on the *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* IMDB message board ("Peanut Eating Woman?" <http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0377556/board/nest/14922055>).
- ³⁷ Thanks to Luisela Alvaray for this observation.
- ³⁸ Lim, *Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness*, 2014, 151.
- ³⁹ Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 122.
- ⁴⁰ Ibid.
- ⁴¹ Lim, *Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness*, 2014, 151.
- ⁴² Jaffe, *Slow Movies Countering the Cinema of Action*, 9.
- ⁴³ Doane, *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, 79.
- ⁴⁴ Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 92.
- ⁴⁵ Ibid., 122.
- ⁴⁶ Somerville, "Queer," 191.
- ⁴⁷ Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 98.
- ⁴⁸ Ibid., 99.
- ⁴⁹ Chan, "Goodbye, Dragon Inn," 97.
- ⁵⁰ Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 119. Emphasis in original. Quote is from Song Hee Lim.
- ⁵¹ Hee Wai-Siam, "Coming Out in the Mirror: Rethinking Corporeality and Auteur Theory with Regard to the Films of Tsai Ming-liang," 124.
- ⁵² Ibid., 125.
- ⁵³ Ibid., 119.
- ⁵⁴ Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 122.
- ⁵⁵ Martin, "The European Undead."
- ⁵⁶ Ibid.
- ⁵⁷ Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 119. Emphasis in original. It is worth noting that the coming-out narrative-- both socially and cinematically--has diminished substantially since the release of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* in 2003.
- ⁵⁸ Lindner, "Situated Bodies, Cinematic Orientations: Film and (Queer) Phenomenology," 156.
- ⁵⁹ Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 120.
- ⁶⁰ Chan, "Goodbye, Dragon Inn," 93.
- ⁶¹ Ibid.
- ⁶² Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2–3.
- ⁶³ Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 15.
- ⁶⁴ Ibid.
- ⁶⁵ Delgado and Romero, "Local Histories and Global Designs," 11.
- ⁶⁶ I was fortunate enough to see *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* for the first time on the big screen, at Albuquerque's

longest running independent theater, The Guild.

⁶⁷ Hansen, *Babel and Babylon: Spectatorship in American Silent Film*, 23.

⁶⁸ Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 100.

⁶⁹ Rapfogel, "Taiwan's Poet of Solitude," 28–29.

⁷⁰ Chan, "Goodbye, Dragon Inn," 99–100.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁷² Quoted in Yang, *Once upon a Time in China*, 1.

⁷³ Nowell-Smith, "From Realism to Neo-Realism," 157.

⁷⁴ Fiennes, *The Pervert's Guide to Ideology*.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*

Chapter 5 – Blissfully Real: The Strategic Ambivalence of Apichatpong

Weerasethakul

James Quandt [after describing several “documentary”-style sections in the films]: But this realism becomes surreal, almost dreamlike in its matter-of-factness.

Apichatpong Weerasethakul: In Thailand, reality is that way. There is no sense of its being strange or surreal.

The films of Apichatpong Weerasethakul reveal reality in an altogether unique blend of local history, folklore, magical realism and an address to the senses that constructs a kind of “strategic ambivalence,” contributing to the transnational imaginary and functioning as border gnosis and subaltern pasts in the context of his native Thailand. That is, his cinematic practice combined with his own sense of “Thai-ness” produce knowledge that is otherwise suppressed in the course of nation building: a history told from the perspective of those excluded from that process. David Teh identifies the “strategic ambivalence” in both his narratives and his realist style that serves to be purposefully ambiguous in the face of the unifying narratives of Thai nationalism.¹ This ambivalence is found in Weerasethakul’s narrative and realist style, as well as his encouragement of multiple interpretations of his films. In this chapter I analyze several of Weerasethakul’s feature films to investigate his unique vision, his address to the senses, and how his films participate in the transnational imaginary and in what Bergen-Arnaud and colleagues call the embodiment model. I discuss how this style becomes a political aesthetic, combining

personal and national memories in an exploration of language, landscapes, and people—in short, of alternative “Thai-ness.”

Weerasethakul, known as “Joe” to English speakers, is a filmmaker from Thailand whose rise to recognition within the international film festival circuit has occurred during one of the most tumultuous periods of his country’s history, from the early 2000s to the mid-2010s. Born in the northeastern region of Thailand and educated as an architect in his hometown of Khon Kaen, he earned a master’s degree in film at the Art Institute of Chicago after becoming interested in US experimental filmmakers such as Maya Deren, Stan Brakhage, and Bruce Baillie. Though these artists sparked Weerasethakul’s creativity with their unorthodox methods, it was not until he returned to his home ground that he became the prolific, multi-platform artist that he has been throughout the 2000s. Today, Weerasethakul’s work straddles several different venues: short works for art gallery spaces and longer feature films that are often hailed on the festival circuit. He won the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 2010 for *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, which was itself an extension of a multi-piece art installation that explored his home region in northeast Thailand.

In visual, thematic, and narrative terms, Weerasethakul’s cinematic style has much in common with Hou’s, Jia’s, and Tsai’s cinema. He shares with all three several characteristics: long takes, minimal camera movement, location shooting, nonprofessional actors, slow pace, and oblique narratives. His formal interests—innovation and playful experimentation with the notions of “documentary” and “realism”—are also similar to theirs. While the experience of watching his films is

most similar to that of Tsai, with their shared address to the senses and sense of the surreal, Weerasethakul's narratives often fold in elements of history, folklore, and personal narrative that recall the films of Jia and Hou. Like theirs, his films also obliquely reveal an ambivalent or antagonistic relationship with national narratives, rapid change, and "modernization." His continuing desire to perform a deep ethnography in his home region of Isan in northeast Thailand, with its particular history of communist purges and immigration issues, creates a dialogue about what constitutes "Thai-ness" and parallels Hou's and Jia's investigations into their own homelands. Weerasethakul has mentioned that part of his interest in documenting different aspects of life in the northeast is his belief "that many things in my region Khon Kaen will disappear soon, the folktales and the customs and many of the precious things I grew up with."² He has explained that this interest in the past in some ways contradicts his Buddhist beliefs, which teach the acceptance of change, but he maintains that "in Thailand people forget too easily, especially in politics," acknowledging that his films have become more political due to the recent political climate of Thailand.³

However, as much as Weerasethakul shares stylistically or thematically with Hou, Jia, and Tsai, his emphasis on experimental techniques and the experiential aspect of cinema creates a different kind of film. Each of these artists shows how any one person's lived or living version of their respective nationalism at different times undermines or aligns with the official version of history. Resisting the urge to make the connections between these artists progressive or teleological, I would suggest that they have plural relationships with one another and with the ideas that

they critique: narrative, history, realism. Weerasethakul's unique vision transforms these similar interests into something new and distinct, both revealing another reality and exemplifying border gnosis and subaltern pasts.

Weerasethakul's films both resemble and contrast Tsai's in three major ways that lead to a broader discussion of his style and how he has been understood. First, despite their documentary style, Weerasethakul's films contain moments during which we question the "reality" of the world he depicts and whether it is our own. This disjuncture between the unexpected things he represents and the style in which he depicts them produces an unusual experience. Whereas Jia's playful animation sequences representing the text-message conversations in *The World* or a spaceship lifting off in the middle of *Still Life* are jarring and unusual and Tsai's insistent and intentional attention to odd behavior evokes a sense of bizarreness, Weerasethakul's breaks with realism seem even more otherworldly, if only due to their "matter-of-factness" or unassumingness, as if he has stumbled upon a world and is simply documenting it or as if the film itself has been hypnotized or drawn away from its original narrative, which begins in the "real" world.⁴ As Quandt puts it, "He can't seem to cast his eye on any object without making it strange, not so much defamiliarized as ineffable."⁵ In Weerasethakul's films we find strange moments that are not particularly flashy, nor do they rely on special effects to accomplish their effect. As a result, we are left unsure whether we, or the characters, are meant to accept them as reality. This is part of Weerasethakul's strategic ambivalence, his of building ambiguity and uncertainty in a purposeful way, just as other filmmakers seek to build tension or suspense.

Weerasethakul's incorporation of myths and legends into his realistic style brings him closer than Hou, Jia, or Tsai to magical realism or fabulism, which has been described as "what happens when a highly detailed, realistic setting is invaded by something too strange to believe."⁶ While I and other writers have used the word surreal to describe his work, I do not intend it in reference to surrealism specifically, but rather to describe the feeling or experience of his films as dreamlike or even uncanny. Rather than an uprising of the unconscious that surrealism more often describes, his films have much more in common with magical realism. More often associated with postcolonial literature (e.g., Gabriel García Márquez, Isabel Allende, Salman Rushdie), magical realism has often been understood as not only challenging colonial legacies but working through them to envision the future. Magical realist texts, Slemon states, can "be seen to provide a positive and liberating response to the codes of imperial history and its legacy of fragmentation and discontinuity."⁷ Though Weerasethakul is not working in a postcolonial context, his continued focus on northeast Thailand recasts the region's and nation's history and presents it in ways that harmonize with a magical realist approach. Slemon continues, "By conveying the binary, and often dominating, oppositions of real social conditions through the 'speaking mirror' of their literary language, magic realist texts implicitly suggest that enabling strategies for the future require revisioning the seemingly tyrannical units of the past in a complex and imaginative double-think of 'remembering the future.'"⁸ These "enabling strategies" recall the decolonial imaginary: a way of imagining the future in the postcolonial present that does not rely on the colonial past but does not forget it either. Weerasethakul is attempting to

“revision” his nation’s present, and as with the films of Hou, Jia, and Tsai, this vision at times requires a blurring of the boundaries between fantasy and reality. As we will see, this blurring of boundaries and the notion of seeing it as “magical realism” can also be seen as a mechanism for the Western viewer to understand, and such differentiation of dimensions or realities are not always understood as separate in different cultural contexts. Indeed, it is Weerasethakul who underscores that in Thailand the mode he presents is not always thought of as “surreal.”

Outside of the second half of *Tropical Malady*, which features a telepathic baboon, the spirit of a deceased water buffalo, and the climactic encounter with the tiger-spirit, one of the most striking examples of this blurring occurs midway through Weerasethakul’s film *Uncle Boonmee*. *Boonmee* was inspired by a book about a man who claimed to remember his past lives and is one component of a multimedia art project centered around Nabua, a village in northeast Thailand. Overall, *Boonmee* is a kind of document of its title character’s final days, when he is visited not only by family but also by spirits and memories from his past lives. Some of these take the form of lengthy digressions from the main narrative that do not appear to involve Boonmee at all. One evening Boonmee, his nephew, and his sister-in-law are having dinner, sitting at a table lit by a single lamp, the sound of the night prominent on the soundtrack. After an expository shot that lasts twenty seconds, the diners talk for a minute and a half before another woman slowly begins to materialize in an empty seat at the table. After identifying her as Boonmee’s long-deceased wife, they have a short conversation with her. During a lull in the conversation, they hear a sound like a twig snapping. Two glowing red eyes emerge

out of the darkness, and a creature starts up the stairs toward the table. The family is perturbed, and the dark, hairy creature makes for a truly disturbing sight, but more so for the viewer trained to see strange creatures as signifiers in the horror genre. Here, the creature is identified as Boonmee's son, Boonsong, who disappeared as a young man, so he is invited to join them (Figure 5.1). This scene nonchalantly continues to delve into Boonmee's story—his interest in photography and his capture of another strange creature in a photo. The progression of the scene may sound unusual, but it is shot relatively conventionally, with cuts to reverse shots that might be found in any conventional film, if at a much slower pace. The slow pace of both the cutting and the acting combine with the increasingly fantastic elements to create an unusual atmosphere.

Weerasethakul's films also contain moments that are not as obviously fantastic but still seem odd or otherworldly. At the end of *Syndromes and a Century* (2006), after the second retelling of Weerasethakul's parents' memories of meeting comes to an end, we are shown a series of scenes in a hospital, mostly disconnected and accompanied by an ambient, hypnotic, soundtrack that grows gradually louder toward the climax. We see several empty hallways in the hospital and catch a final glimpse of some of the characters we have seen previously. Then the film dives further into the hospital's depths, ending with several shots of what appears to be a basement machine room. A long, twisting pan shows the ceiling of this hazy room with its fluorescent lights and insulated vents before cutting to a level shot of a lathe. The camera pans and tracks further left over more hospital equipment in the haze and finally finds a focal point: an odd vent with a funnel on the

end stretched out to the middle of the room. The camera begins closing in on it slowly, the black hole of the vent seeming to draw the viewer in. We stop just before entering and watch mist flowing and swirling into the vent while the intensity of the music grows (Figure 5.2). Then just as suddenly, we are out in the world again, viewing a pleasant long shot of a couple on a bench by a river, the music quickly fading out of hearing. This scene is followed by ten more that focus on people exercising or preparing to do so, but also on some couples dancing without music and kids playing. The tenth scene depicts a few young men showing two monks how to control a small drone, and the penultimate shot of the film is a closer view of the small device hovering. Then we see a large outdoor aerobic session of a type that is common in Thailand and that fascinates Weerasethakul (a similar one is shown in the middle of *Tropical Malady* (2004)). The crowd and instructors dance to the whimsical music, and the film cuts to black. It ends on this strangely positive, even exuberant note (Figure 5.3).

A more subtle example can be found in Weerasethakul's 2016 film *Cemetery of Splendor*. The film follows a caregiver (Jenjira Pongpas, known as Jen in the film, a woman who has appeared in his last several films as more or less the same character) who comes to Khon Kaen to help care for a group of soldiers who have been struck by a kind of sleeping sickness. Their strange malady is not further explained, but later, as the soldiers remain in their coma-like state, new technology is introduced to help them: tall luminescent tubes that stand alongside their IV rigs and curve over them like upside-down candy canes. At night, these tubes gently glow in different colors, giving the room an eerie, meditative atmosphere (Figure

5.4). The film presents this strange technique with such matter-of-factness that we wonder if it is “real” or not.

A second similarity between the films of Tsai and Weerasethakul is the queer sensibility that runs through their work, referring both to the queer subjectivity that they represent as well as that subjectivity’s critique of heteronormativity. Tsai’s queer sensibility is melancholic and represents the “hidden factor” of queer culture in Taiwan, which resists coming “out.” Neither do Weerasethakul’s films present an explicit coming-out narrative, but in some ways his characters are radically open in their sexuality. As he puts it, “the word *queer* means anything’s possible.”⁹ In the middle of *Blissfully Yours* (2002), for example, one man makes a casual pass at another in the waiting area of an office building, even though each is later revealed to be the lover of another female character in the film. Rich comments on a scene in *Tropical Malady* in which a singer addresses the love song she is singing to the male main characters, publicly acknowledging their relationship. Rich calls it “simultaneously sexy as hell and mind-bogglingly astounding.”¹⁰ This is only one of several scenes where the two men’s relationship is casually acknowledged and normalized—in contrast to mainstream Western cinema. In addition, the radical break in the narrative of *Tropical Malady* and the alternative depiction of the men’s relationship diverge from the Western coming-out narrative and emphasize—though subtly in the first half—a sensuality between the men that is still uncommon in mainstream Western narratives. As such, *Tropical Malady* in particular shows how Weerasethakul’s work engages in an analysis of not only national but sexual subjectivity, and how the nation takes part in their construction. His films urge “a

revolution against all forms of state boundaries,” a role that Stevens identifies as one that queer theory also takes in relation to state and “colonial structures of knowledge and power.”¹¹ Since these subjectivities of sexual and national identities are inextricably bound, these are additional borders Weerasethakul’s films traverse.

Finally, like Tsai, Weerasethakul emphasizes corporeality: the body and physical experience. His long takes often foreground aspects of bodily experience that are not usually depicted in film. *Blissfully Yours* includes graphic scenes of sexual encounters, as well as showing us the body of a character who has a skin condition. Recalling *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*’s ticket woman, *Cemetery of Splendor*’s main character has a condition that causes her pain and keeps her from walking properly. While the first half of *Tropical Malady* allows us to indulge in Keng’s and Tong’s first tentative explorations of each other’s body, the second half immerses us in the physical experience of Keng as he navigates the jungle. Here the sensuous relationship is between him and his surroundings. Again, his cinematic style favors uninterrupted takes combined with unobtrusive camera movement and editing, making the everyday activities of a body seem strange due to the duration of the gaze. Similar to Rapfogel’s description of Tsai, it is not that Weerasethakul’s characters behave unusually; in film we are not accustomed to watching people doing “normal” things like lounge by a stream or trudge through the jungle for that amount of time.

Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Wai-Siam’s embodiment model is “especially interested in how our cinematic and post-cinematic experiences alter our experiences of our own and others’ bodies.”¹² These films’ emphasis on small

moments of casual awareness of the characters' bodies creates a point of identification on a level different from that of other cinema that depends more on an intellectual understanding of who a character is and then that person's similarity to ourselves. Here, we identify because we, too, have bodies that appear and function in the same way as those on screen. Their model is proposed for the study of transnational Chinese cinema, and although being Thai, his films are not typically thought of as Chinese, their model fits the study of Weerasethakul's films especially.¹³ They propose a model that combines many of the aspects of the strategies usually used: the national and transnational models, focused on the physical and political borders that surround filmmaking, and the Chinese-Language and Sinophone models, which take language as the organizing feature and analyze texts themselves, often taking into account colonial and postcolonial dimensions. "The embodiment model highlights national, local, and translocal contexts; it draws on international, transnational, and regional relationships; it emphasizes language, culture, history, geopolitical contact zones, and sites of contest—all as they are depicted in relation to the deployment of bodies on screen and at the cinema."¹⁴ Weerasethakul's evocation of the body and of the everyday experiences of being in the world evoke Luca's notion of a direct address to the senses and blend with glimpses of the political in precisely the way Bergen-Aurand describes.

Finally, while these similarities are notable, Tsai and Weerasethakul's differences are also revealing. Whereas Tsai breaks down the image/audience relationship almost by sheer force of will, Weerasethakul beckons us into his spaces from the beginning. Where Tsai, through long takes and set pieces in which

characters “do nothing,” compels us to experience time passing, Weerasethakul invites us not only to watch his actors, but to experience with them. Although at first their films might seem very similar, Weerasethakul creates an entirely different and strange experience and reveals “reality” in an entirely different way. We do not simply watch Weerasethakul’s films, but rather become enveloped by the strange world he envisions: “One surrenders, blissfully, to that strangeness.”¹⁵ As Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Wai-Siam note, his films follow a different physical and mental rhythm that produces a singular experience for the audience: “The films follow the rhythms of bodies—not the rhythms of narratives, shots or cuts—so we do not so much watch or listen to them as experience their effects.”¹⁶ As Luca and my analysis of Tsai posited, his direct address to the senses has political consequences; Weerasethakul deepens those consequences by folding in his own memories and sensibilities. His method reminds us of Chakrabarty’s call not to distance ourselves from the subjects of history but to frame their lives as a “possibility for the present.”¹⁷

Weerasethakul’s Unique Mode of Address

Before entering into a political analysis, I want to more fully explore Weerasethakul’s cinematic and narrative style and relate it to what Luca and others describe because it relates directly to how his films create an imagined world where a critique and negotiation of nation, narrative can take place. Many have written eloquently about the experience of his films. Weerasethakul’s narrative and cinematic techniques produce what Quandt calls an “abandonment of rationalism, an

apprehension simultaneous with amazement.”¹⁸ Referring to a “poetics of Apichatpong” on the occasion of his Cannes win, Martin writes,

His cinema sits firmly at the juncture of the modernist and postmodernist currents in contemporary culture. His films, at first glance, are firmly modern. Everything is in pieces, torn asunder, disarticulated: the plots, the bodies, the images and their sounds, the structures of time and space. . . . Yet Apichatpong also reaches beyond these fragments to a higher unity, a kind of resonance or vibration between the scattered pieces. His films are not a lament for what is lost or broken, but devote themselves to the restitution of unknown, never-before-heard messages.¹⁹

In his review of *Primitive* (2009), the multimedia installation that led to the feature-length film *Uncle Boonmee*, Lim writes, “Everything seems to belong to a larger whole, yet the overall effect is not of a puzzle to be solved but a space to be inhabited and freely explored.”²⁰ This description applies to Weerasethakul’s films as well, and Lim argues that for Weerasethakul the difference between a gallery exhibition and a film is slight because “he is particularly attuned to the contexts of creation and exhibition, to the fundamentals of sensory perception, and to the potential of the moving image to suggest different experiences of time.”²¹

Weerasethakul’s films and their “affective duration, their dilation of time, their spatial dynamics that maintain our awareness of screen time” undermine classical cinema’s regulation of time.²²

As these authors grasp at their experiences of Weerasethakul’s films, many of them end up describing the films as something to join with rather than view from

afar. This emphasis on the blurring of film and audience recurs in writing about Weerasethakul's work because, more than any of the other filmmakers in my work, Weerasethakul addresses the senses directly, evoking an empathetic response in his audience and making it possible for us not only to identify with the characters on the screen but to imagine ourselves in the spaces they occupy. Here, Weerasethakul's strategic ambivalence extends to the audience's identification and experience as well as what happens in the narrative. As such, the film could be seen as a precursor to contemporary virtual reality, the first steps toward which seem to be more experiential and immersive, along the lines of the cinema of attractions, rather than narrative based. What Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Wai-Siam suggest is that this blurring of lines has everything to do with a different type of audience identification that opens the doors to a different kind of understanding. They emphasize that Weerasethakul's films are not "about embodiment and the cinema," but rather "the very contact zone where we touch the cinema and the cinema touches us."²³

Weerasethakul's observational or meditative style, which invites the viewer in, could easily be mistaken for a technique. However, Weerasethakul's comments on this subject tell us otherwise. When asked about documentary, he has said, "I don't believe in documentary as it is viewed formally. I don't believe in reality in film. . . . I think the films are just my expression of my life . . . or a kind of assimilation of appreciation of being alive."²⁴ He conveys this appreciation in moments like the one in *Blissfully Yours* in which we vicariously enjoy simply lying by a stream (Figure 5.5), Keng and Tong's lounging in a rest area, or their meandering visit to an

underground Buddhist shrine. Weerasethakul favors an approach that captures moments of memory, and a different kind of truth: "I am interested in creating certain environments that are real, but may not represent actual reality. It is mostly from a memory of something past. So I guess it hovers between imagined reality and reality."²⁵ His transformation of memory into something that resembles documentary is the key to his meditative style. Quandt has said that Weerasethakul's films become "almost dreamlike in [their] matter-of-factness,"²⁶ a working description of what makes a cinematic sequence "surreal" and recalls scenes such as the one in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* which take place in the men's restroom. Weerasethakul responds, "In Thailand, reality is that way. There is no sense of its being strange or surreal."²⁷ It is this space located "between imagined reality and reality," that provides us entry to the political in Weerasethakul's work.²⁸

Weerasethakul's films feel more optimistic in tone than those of Jia or Tsai, partly because of the way they incorporate renewal into their structures. Three of Weerasethakul's five feature-length films "reboot," drastically changing course in the middle. *Blissfully Yours* and *Tropical Malady* so broke with tradition in transitioning between their parts that viewers at the Cannes film festivals where they were first seen complained to the projection booth.²⁹ Weerasethakul and some critics have linked this type of break to his interest in Buddhism and the notion of past lives, and it is difficult to avoid this thought when the two halves of his films can often be seen as two different versions of the same general narrative. Weerasethakul has said that this bifurcation was something he began to pursue after trying it in a short film because "it feels like life's journey. We always change course. We may live one day

and die the next. Films can change the same way.”³⁰ This belief allows his sense of freedom of narrative and willingness to try different approaches even within the same film to flourish.

The narrative of *Blissfully Yours* as a whole is slight, and it contains more action in its first half than its second. In the first half, Weerasethakul introduces major characters and establishes their relationships to each other: a young man named Min; his girlfriend, Roong; and another, older, woman, Ong, whose relationship to them is only revealed over time. In the second half of the film, we simply follow two of the characters on what turns out to be a rather aimless afternoon. Early on, we see the three characters at a doctor’s office seeking help for Min’s skin condition, which is followed by several scenes at Roong’s workplace, at Orn’s husband’s office, and of driving. The daily business of personal errands and work (and skipping work) is in the foreground. In the second half, when Min and Roong escape this daily routine for an outing in the jungle, the film slows down considerably, and the threads of narrative become thinner and even more removed from one another. Min and Roong have a picnic, and we see Orn and her lover having sex nearby. Then, after her lover mysteriously disappears, she discovers Min and Roong near a stream. As they lounge in the water and nap streamside, the film slows to match the pace of the action until it comes to rest at the end with Roong lying next to Min, nearly falling asleep.

In terms of narrative focus and pacing, the difference between the two halves of *Blissfully Yours* is notable. In the first part we follow the minor activities and listen to the dialogue of the characters. The rhythm and the pacing are similar to those of a

typical narrative film, even as *Blissfully Yours* and Weerasethakul's next several films comprise a kind of dialogue of contrasts to this method. The first section is followed by a credit sequence that, occurring forty-five minutes into the film, bifurcates its two "parts." We expect something narratively significant to happen during the outing, and then nothing does. In the second part, dialogue slows and drifting takes over, ultimately submitting us to a sense of lingering so hypnotizing that we feel we are whiling away the afternoon with the characters. The shot lengths become longer and dialogue is nearly nonexistent, leaving us with an impression of slowness, stillness, and silence.

As with some of Tsai's films, *Blissfully Yours* refuses to stop when it appears the narrative action has, which has the effect of focusing our attention on the sensory experiences of the characters. Though where Tsai's prolonged takes can seem rigid in a sense, Weerasethakul's shots are profoundly relaxed in tone. Several scenes in this section simply focus on the experience of being in the water: long shots show Min's and Roong's feet or Orn's hands in the water (Figure 5.6). The bubbling of the water and the chirping of the birds in the background combine to produce a meditative effect that also allows us to connect directly with the characters by identifying with their sensory experiences. This slowing down of time in *Blissfully Yours* established a pattern that Weerasethakul continues to follow: an aesthetic that appeals more to the senses than to narrative logic; an invitation to reverie, idleness, and, increasingly, meditation. Weerasethakul combines this unusual momentum, which upends our expectation of a climax with a denial of return to the "real world" of the first half and to resolution of the tensions begun there. The difficult

circumstances of life are not forgotten but sidelined. For Weerasethakul, border gnosis occurs in the form of reflection on and transcendence from everyday troubles through idleness.

The notion of “drifting” as being and knowing in Tsai’s work also applies very directly to Weerasethakul, perhaps even more so, given the invitational quality of his style. Thus, his films also work against the need for purpose within capitalism, modernity and even within film-going. This invitation into this relaxing space blurs the boundaries between audience, “actor,” and participant, opening “a shared space of reverie...for the characters, the actors, and the audience.”³¹ The film’s conclusion, which describes its non-professional actors’ actual futures, “reasserts the film’s direct interrelation with the world outside itself. It affords a unity, however brief, between the experience of the characters in the film and the spectators sitting watching them.”³² In this way, the film seems to embrace the embodiment model, breaking down the barrier between film and audience. Following “the rhythms of bodies—not the rhythms of narratives, shots, or cuts,” *Blissfully Yours* invites us to slow down with it, to live vicariously through its characters for a short time as they escape their day-to-day responsibilities and their ties to the material.³³ Before the credits we are shown a series of titles that tells us what happens to the characters after they return to their “real lives.” Because the last thing we see is Roong gazing up at the sky, these various futures, while concrete, seem remote.

Tropical Malady (2004) was Weerasethakul’s third feature film and the second to feature a bifurcated structure like that of *Blissfully Yours*, though *Tropical Malady* contains a much more radical break between the film’s two halves. Unlike

Blissfully Yours, in which the second part is an extension of the first and the characters and time line are continuous, the two parts of *Tropical Malady* feature the same two actors but in different configurations and settings. Weerasethakul's own introduction on his website says that the film "has two distinct stories that represent two very different worlds. However, these two territories are linked by characters that the audience can interpret as the same or not. What's essential are the memories. Memories from the first part validate the second part. Just as the second part validates the first. Neither exists wholly without the other."³⁴ The first half follows a soldier, Keng, and a young villager, Tong, as they meet and develop a relationship. This part is a series of vignettes taken from the lives of Keng and Tong, similar in tone and rhythm to the first part of *Blissfully Yours* but less narratively continuous. One scene leisurely transitions into another without any major drama and without clear indicators of time passing. As the film goes on, we get a sense of the men's familiarity increasing, but whether over the course of a few days, weeks, or months, we do not know. In the second part of *Tropical Malady* the narrative shifts dramatically. The actor who previously played Keng is reintroduced as a nameless forest ranger who goes into the jungle in search of a possibly mythical beast, a "tiger-witch," a sort of shapeshifter responsible for destroying local livestock. We follow this version of Keng as he tracks the beast, who eventually appears, portrayed by the actor who played Tong. This section is full of unusual moments and includes a baboon who seems to communicate telepathically with Keng; a water buffalo's spirit rising from its inert body; and the tiger-witch itself, with whom Keng has a close encounter in the film's climax.

The second part also differs in tone substantially. Relative to the first half, the second half's theme of pursuit establishes a more intense tone. The immersive visuals and particularly the soundtrack, which is almost exclusively composed of noises of the jungle, has the power to captivate the viewer to an extent beyond that of most cinematic experiences. *New York Times* critic Scott concurs: "It is the kind of movie that reveals a great deal about the taste of its viewers. For every person you meet who fell into deep slumber before the end of the first hour, you find another who was utterly hypnotized by its languid rhythms and its haunting lyricism."³⁵ Lim calls Weerasethakul's style "hallucinated documentary" and describes how his films "compel the viewer to look anew at the ordinary, to modulate their passive gaze into a patient, quizzical scrutiny."³⁶ And yet, this scrutiny should not be preoccupied with determining or fixing a meaning. This issue of authorship, understanding, and the intentional fallacy comes into play with each of my study's filmmakers, but it is particularly pertinent to discussions of Weerasethakul because his films are some of the most unusual. And as we will see, difficulty in understanding Weerasethakul's films is key to seeing their political implications.

Immigrants and Monkey-ghosts: Weerasethakul and the Political/National

Now I turn to the issue of interpreting and understanding Weerasethakul's films, which seems to be a preoccupation of critics and viewers, and ties into Weerasethakul's direct address to the senses. Speaking with Weerasethakul at the Asia Society in New York City in 2011, an interviewer asks, "Audiences . . . can have any interpretation of your films . . . but would you like them to understand you a little

more?" Weerasethakul thinks for a moment and answers, laughing, "Mmmmm, no."³⁷ When asked in a different interview if viewers and critics should "respect the mystery and stop trying to analyze or interpret them [the films]," he responds that he enjoys reading interpretations and finds it "refreshing to read what others think my films mean. It helps me think about my next film."³⁸ He also describes how many aspects of his films come from his own memories and therefore cannot be recognized directly; in other words, he encourages the audience's interpretation and relates it to his interest in making something that comes from his and others' memories but that resonates with people around the world. Again, strategic ambivalence is prominent in his willingness to relinquish interpretation of his own work.

Weerasethakul is less interested in anyone's understanding or interpretation of his films than in his films' creating an experience. Speaking of *Tropical Malady*, Weerasethakul has stated that "the break in the middle of the film is a mirror in the center that reflects both ways,"³⁹ a statement that simultaneously rings true poetically and paradoxically leads further away from a causal narrative interpretation. There are aspects to both halves that seem to mirror each other, or seem to reflect two alternate-universe versions of the same story, but again any attempt to understand it logically elides the experience of the film. As Scott contends, "An allegorical relationship between the two halves is hinted at, but this is the kind of movie that frustrates all analysis. After a while, you give up on trying to understand it and surrender either to fatigue or to its teasing, dreamy ambience."⁴⁰ The idea of surrendering is another narrative theme that *Tropical Malady*, particularly

in its second half, shares with *Blissfully Yours*, but it also refers to a stylistic attribute that they share. That is, one surrenders to the films' address to the senses or the experiential aspect of Weerasethakul's cinema. After nearly an hour of immersing us in the everyday sounds and sights of the jungle, his work conjures our sense of identification that is different from what we experience in most films. A fellow Thai filmmaker, Anocha Suwichakornpong, describes Weerasethakul's ability: "He's one of the very few directors who can make films that speak to the senses. If I go in a cinema and watch his films, it doesn't matter what the film is about. It's a sensory experience."⁴¹

This comment recalls Luca's description of a type of filmmaking that appeals directly to viewers' senses rather than to their intellect. Luca is primarily discussing artists who focus on the long shot, and while Weerasethakul uses this technique frequently, his films actually contain more editing than one would think. Just as popular cinema is edited with an intention to be conspicuous, Weerasethakul's is so focused on the environment and the slow pace of the acting and action that we tend not to notice the editing. The second sequence in *Tropical Malady* in some ways mimics an "action" film (and recalls several specifically: critics have compared it to *Predator* and *Apocalypse Now*) with its jungle setting and its montage of shots—but since we do not really know what the soldier/ranger is tracking, the more conventional editing retains a sense of mystery. What's more, the editing remains unobtrusive or organic and in sync with the environment. The ever-present noise of the jungle and the performance of Keng, whose bodily interaction with the environment makes us feel as though we were there. If we let go of the questions we

might have about what he is pursuing and what will happen when he encounters it, and instead identify with his experience of being in the jungle, we have an almost physically different experience. This feeling is not without tension, but if we surrender to the atmosphere of the jungle, the feeling may also be exhilarating. The immersive tempo of the editing and action slows our anticipation and produces an experience that resembles meditation.

Indeed, in one scene in *Cemetery of Splendor*, he literally guides the audience through a meditation practice. In a scene in the small hospital where mysteriously sleeping men are gathered, their caregivers, including Jen, are gathered and are led through a meditation instruction. As the instructor supplies the instructions for focusing their minds on the breath, and we are shown the subjects closing their eyes and listening to his words (Figure 5.7). Weerasethakul focuses our attention on them and his voice, and his typical unassuming, undirected style has the effect of forcing us to participate, either following the instructor's words ourselves, or imagining what the participants in the film are imagining. These two possible perspectives seem to merge and create more possibilities when the scene changes to shots of the landscape outside the building, seeming to drift outside and not clearly encompassing anyone's point of view. It is almost as if the film itself has gained consciousness and is following the instructions. Again, Weerasethakul seems intent on making us experience this technique and merging it with the experience he is creating.

Perhaps more than any or the other filmmakers in my work, Weerasethakul creates "imagined worlds," a phrase that Appadurai coined in reference to

Anderson's imagined communities—stretching the concept by removing from it the idea of national boundaries and applying it to the transnational and globalized world we dwell in today. Weerasethakul's experiential technique constructs a world that we can temporarily inhabit, where oppositions break down, and energy radiates and permeates via “deeply perspectival constructs, inflected very much by the historical, linguistic and political situatedness of different sorts of actors.”⁴² He is one of many filmmakers who “withdraw to the sphere where they are not bound by the regulations of their respective nation states (their ‘official minds’) anymore.”⁴³ Weerasethakul's dialogue with “official minds” and “official nationalism” is not a direct one, but is rather accomplished by his unique address to the senses.

A Brief Political History of Thailand

Before analyzing examples of the political landmarks in Weerasethakul's films, I want to provide a bit of background on Thailand's political history. Like Taiwan and China, Thailand has a complicated history of “the colonial,” but this history has often shaped its political history. Thailand is the one country in Southeast Asia never to have been formally colonized by a European country. Situated between Burma (a colony of Great Britain) and Laos and Cambodia (colonies of France), it served as a buffer zone between the two colonial states for some time, remaining a monarchy until 1932. However, Thailand has been in the middle of opposing world forces for much of the twentieth century, caught between the influence of its immigrant Chinese (*luk jen*) population, the national forces hoping to shape Thailand into a Western democracy, and the United States, with its interest in

“development,” after World War II. Since World War II Thailand has remained an ally of the United States, whose influence pushed the nation to embrace a more democratic process in the 1990s, culminating in elections that eventually made business tycoon Thaksin Shinawatraby the leader in 2001. His ousting in 2006 was the catalyst for turmoil that continues to the present.⁴⁴

In the early twentieth century the notion of modern nationhood gained traction in Siam among the then-forming middle class. This nationalism was popularized by an increase in exposure to international media and in the tens and twenties, specifically, anti-royalist journalism and stories in novels and films. Many intellectuals tried to shift the meaning of the word *nation* from referring to the different peoples enclosed in a geographic area to one “defined by ethnic origins and a common language.”⁴⁵ However, the large number of Chinese, primarily in the commercial center of Bangkok, disrupted this idea. Some Chinese identified with the Siam national identity, but some Thais saw the Chinese immigrants and their offspring as harmful to the Thai identity and nation. In the years leading up to World War II, Thai leaders even compared the Chinese to European Jews and increased barriers to immigration and made business more difficult for the Chinese. Thai leaders hoped their country could become a “great power” by annexing parts of Cambodia and Laos and changing the definition of “Thai” on the grounds of race. However, World War II changed their plans dramatically.

After the war, “struggles to define the Thai nation and control the Thai state were now skewed to the pattern of [the] Cold War,” and yet the “Thaification” begun before the war was also inextricably tied to this development.⁴⁶ In general, the

United States saw in Thailand “an ally and base for opposing the spread of communism in Asia,” as well as a place to experiment with “development” in the postwar world. Thai leaders embraced American ideas of development, and the ruling classes became educated about American-style business practices, eventually becoming the business elite of Thailand. Some of these were second- and third-generation Chinese.⁴⁷ The involvement of the United States brought many changes to the landscape, population, and, therefore, society, and while the United States supported the Thai government, Thai citizens visiting the United States experienced a closer realization of its ideals there than at home.

At times, cultural difference in Thailand was treated as a threat. Isan, in the northeast, where Weerasethakul grew up in the 1970s, was one of these threats with its proximity to communist nations and large population of poor who spoke a different language. The ethnic violence and communist purges that occurred there during the 1960s and 1970s had a lasting effect on the area. The nation-state’s leaders believed they could strengthen the nation by bringing the idea of a common language and history to areas like this one; nevertheless, many people “felt they belonged to a different world from that imagined by the Thai state.”⁴⁸ The undercurrents in Weerasethakul’s films show us that these feelings may never have fully gone away, revealing the alternative, at times transnational imaginary that maps a different kind of belonging.

In the 1980s, Thailand latched on to China’s rise to prosperity, making the luk jen the proud inheritors of a burgeoning economy and the dominant social force of Thailand’s middle class. It was during this era that Thaksin, who came from the luk

jen community, became so successful, and in 2001 he became prime minister. Also during this time, however, the vision of “Thai-ness” envisioned in the early part of the twentieth century fractured, in part because Thailand’s traditional emphasis on the “royal and rural” held less meaning for this generation of middle-class urban dwellers.⁴⁹ In addition, the emerging mass media portrayed a society in which “the imagined unity of the nation was fragmented” because of the variety of its “ethnic makeup, the complexity of its history, the diversity of religious practice, and the scale of social divisions.”⁵⁰ The spaces between these fragments reveal the importance of the details in Weerasethakul’s films.

That is, just as Jia’s focus on the personal narratives served to critique the national narrative, Weerasethakul’s depictions of northeastern Thailand overlap with his own memories and the memories and lives of his parents (doctors who relocated to this impoverished area motivated by a desire to help people), as well as local folklore and traditional belief systems. These elements work within Weerasethakul’s overall realist style to give those watching his films the feeling of walking through someone else’s memories or dreams.

Weerasethakul began to blend realism and fantasy in *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2002) by winding historical details into its already complex narrative and specifically the historical timeframe, which remains uncertain throughout the film. The film is the culmination of an experiment in storytelling using the French surrealist technique known as “Exquisite Corpse” in which one person begins a story and the narrative is handed off from person to person, each one adding something to the story. Weerasethakul weaves these tales and the people telling them together with

depictions of these narrators' stories, which at times seem to take on a life of their own. The story, which revolves around a young boy and his caretaker, Dogfahr, creates interweaved and multi-layered framing narratives so complex that they blur the normal lines between fiction and realism. Toward the end, we hear a radio broadcast announcing "the end of the Pacific War" and summarizing a new law that requires Thais to honor Americans by buying American products, sending young people to be educated in America, and giving Americans in Thailand "privilege" plus a 25 percent discount at "night entertainment venues." We do not know whether this was part of one of the narrator's story or not, as it occurs in between scenes of two teenage girls' very enthusiastic contributions to the story in sign language. The girls later refer to Dogfahr's becoming a singer in a bar, during which time Weerasethakul intercuts two scenes of a beauty pageant and one very murky shot from inside a strip club. These references to Thailand's sex industry and its relationship to the American military presence are some of the most overtly political moments in Weerasethakul's films, and they subtly reveal his awareness of the deep and complicated relationship between politics and desire.

Another irruption of the political into the personal occurs early on in *Mysterious Object* when the first storyteller, a woman working in a fishmonger's truck, is telling the story of how she and her parents were stranded with her uncle. "We were staying at my uncle's," she explains. "I really respected him. My Dad told him, 'We don't have money for the bus home.'" Weerasethakul tells her story through a medium shot of her in a fishmonger's truck, mostly looking at her hands as she fidgets uncomfortably. After she says "I really respected him," Weerasethakul

cuts to a view down an unknown street on the right half of the screen while the left foreground shows a political poster with drawings and names of political candidates (Figure 5.8). The appearance of these faces at this particular moment, sandwiched between references to the narrator's uncle and father, is somewhat ominous. As the narrative continues with the father speaking, Weerasethakul cuts to one of the faces, which seems to stand in for the absent speaker. As the father speaks the crucial line (as retold by his daughter), "You can have my daughter in exchange for the bus fare," Weerasethakul cuts again to sky that is filled by a tree, but the shot also includes another political poster in the upper right quarter of the screen. In Quandt's view, this cut to the overblown, smiling faces of the politicians "insinuate[s] a critique of patriarchal exploitation and neglect, which corresponds to little in *Mysterious Object*, and so remains conjectural—left, like the posters, hanging in the air."⁵¹ Quandt reminds us that though Weerasethakul's films are not overtly political, they always contain a shadow of the political backdrop.

Quandt is correct that these shots of the political posters correspond to little else in the film, but this sequence introduces us to Weerasethakul's method of mixing the personal, political, and national. As in Jia's work, the national and political spheres always form the backdrop to a personal story or memory. However, these images do not seem specific; they are more like inserting the notion of the political, rather than Jia's insertion of a particular figure. The sequence containing the reference to the Pacific War is a kind of dramatized retelling or intentional confusing of the first narrator's initiating story: before the news bulletin a man is trying to convince another to accept one or more of his children as helpers in the other man's

shop. The father seems eager to have his children taken on, even for free, implying that he is doing so for their own welfare, unlike the father in the woman's story. Again, however, this story of parents and children and work conditions is interrupted by a political or national narrative—one that is more direct compared to those of the later films and akin to Jia's "signposts" of the national in the background of his own films. Although Tsai does not include these kinds of signals in his films, their settings, contexts, and forms function as the political critiques. In subsequent films, Weerasethakul weaves both methods into his vision and method.

What Weerasethakul presents in *Blissfully Yours* as a simple afternoon idyll in the jungle actually includes many hints of the conflict surrounding Burmese migrants in Thailand, a conflict over immigration found in many different nations, including the United States, in which migrants seek both economic opportunities and refuge from persecution. The suture of the film's narrative with this political national problem is elusive. The film is not about this conflict per se, but Weerasethakul's avoidance of the topic combined with his unmistakable references to it constitute a unique contribution to this conversation. To ask whether the film is "about" the immigration debate is to ask the wrong question. What the film depicts is how the debate over Burmese migrants is one that is woven into the fabric of Thai life in this region and how the immigrants' lives are part of this fabric. "The deployment of bodies on screen and at the cinema" is at the heart of Weerasethakul's depiction of this conflict.⁵²

In the first part of *Blissfully Yours*, we watch Min, Roong, and Orn go about their business, and Min, silent, is questioned about his silence by the doctor. Roong

says that Min's throat hurts too much to talk, but the doctor cannot find anything wrong with him. "Nothing's wrong with him. Are you really in pain?" she asks. Min shoots a glance at Roong, who answers, "No, he can't, doctor." This interaction glides quickly by, but the doctor picks up on its suspicious quality. Min still will not speak later on, when a man talks to him as he waits for Orn at her husband's office. While waiting for Roong to excuse herself from work, however, he suddenly strikes up a conversation with a few security guards at her factory. For an English-speaking viewer, this dialogue is notable because it is not subtitled, which often indicates a change in language. And once Min and Roong are alone, he speaks freely. In a voice-over, Min describes Roong teaching him to write, and he refers to his difficulty with language during another conversation with Roong—one of many elements of the film that is never fully explained. *Blissfully Yours* specializes in resisting explanations of major narrative elements at the same time that it sows the seeds of context.

More clues to Min's status come during a five-minute sequence at the doctor's office in which Orn discusses Min's treatment with the doctor, imploring the doctor to issue a health certificate for Min so that he can get a job. The doctor hesitates, asking to see Min's ID card first. Orn says that her husband, Sirote, will bring it in later, but the doctor still refuses. Orn appeals to the doctor since they are personal friends, which is apparent from their conversation at the beginning of the scene when they discuss Orn's health and the health of her boarding-house business. Later, Orn and Sirote discuss her conversation with the doctor in his office, and they seem not to know what to do about Min, but the situation is never totally

explained. In fact, this is the closest the film comes to referring to Min as an illegal immigrant, but once understood, this fact informs much of what happens in the rest of the film.

Weerasethakul drops another subtle reference to the northeast and its history after Orn rejoins Min and Roong near the stream. She emerges out of the bushes, interrupting Min and Roong's idyll, and after Min asks why she did not follow the path, she replies, "I'm not a Karen. How should I know the way?" She refers to the Karen people, an ethnic group with historical claims to land surrounding the Thai-Burmese border, who in the twentieth century have fought with the government of Myanmar over the use of this land. Orn's reference is interesting because it points to the Karen people's association with the land, something that has been used to justify their remaining in northeastern forests due to their "special knowledge of plants and forest conservation."⁵³ At the same time, when Orn's lover, Tommy, runs away after chasing a motorcycle rider, she yells after him, "You fucking Karen!" and reveals that for some the Karen are unwelcome in Thailand.

This thematic element of the Burmese migrants and the Karen people comes directly from Weerasethakul's inspiration for the film, an incident in which two illegal Burmese immigrants were arrested in a Bangkok zoo.⁵⁴ In thinking about these women and how their personal and political situation related to their being in a place of leisure like a zoo, Weerasethakul began to wonder how a lighter side of life shines even through a very dark situation:

Did the Burmese women enjoy the zoo as much as the other people there, before they were captured that afternoon? This question was the inspiration

for *Blissfully Yours*—the idea of moments of happiness existing in an oppressive environment, the idea of the coexistence of lightness and darkness, of pleasure and suffering.⁵⁵

By depicting this notion in such an unusual way in *Blissfully Yours*, Weerasethakul's film allows us to see the contact points between bodies, language, people, and nations. Again, this example underscores the notion of the immigrant being a part of the society they immigrate to.

This mingling of light and dark lurks in the background of Min and Roong's relaxing afternoon and manifests as Min's skin condition, which becomes a metaphor for his illegal status and emphasizes the difficult physical conditions endured by immigrant workers. At the same time, his condition focuses our attention on his ability to still enjoy life despite his current conditions. Quandt writes that "skin conditions are often evidence of psychic and emotional anxiety," which is not evident in the narrative but which is implied in Min's voice-over narration.⁵⁶ "Min's inner condition is literally written on his skin."⁵⁷

After the long afternoon idyll, several scenes show Roong, Min, and Orn relaxing and napping. The film contains no more narrative action to speak of; we simply see everyone as they rest. One of the last shots is of Roong lying by Min's side, possibly falling asleep to the soothing sounds of the forest and the stream (Figure 5.9). After nearly four minutes, Weerasethakul cuts to a sky framed by several trees, a few clouds drifting to cover the sun (Figure 5.10). It could be a reverse shot, but Roong was not looking up at the sky. This shot is followed by a cut to a long landscape view that does not correspond to any of the characters' last

points of view (Figure 5.11). Then we cut back to Roong turning to look squarely into the camera for three seconds before a cut to black (Figure 5.12). This look back at us, the last shot of the film, is arresting after the long and languid scenes that preceded it, all the more so because it is punctuated by a cut to black rather than a fade. The subtitles that follow tell us that the friends' relationship was fleeting: Roong is back together with her boyfriend, and Min is "waiting for a job at a casino" on the Thai-Cambodian border. These statements lack the sense of relaxation that permeated the final scenes of the film and keep us from seeing or experiencing with the characters as we have up to that point.

Uncle Boonmee contains several pointed references to immigration.

Boonmee and Jen have been discussing Jaai, a Laotian who works on Boonmee's farm and who has been acting as a kind of foreman for the mostly immigrant workforce, as well as a makeshift nurse for Boonmee, helping him with his dialysis when the workday is over. "Aren't you afraid of illegal immigrants?" Jen asks Boonmee. "They can rob you, kill you and disappear." "Don't worry," Boonmee responds, "the Lao are more hard-working than Thais." Referring to Jaai, he adds, "I can't get by without him," and Tong (the same actor, and possibly the same character, as the Tong in *Tropical Malady*) tells Boonmee and Jen, "[Jaai] tried to talk to me, but I couldn't understand the Isan dialect." Jen reminds him, "Not Isan, Tong. It's Lao, remember?" "Lao?" Tong repeats. They are fully aware of Jaai as an outsider, but perhaps he is not aware of it until he is introduced to Boonmee's ghost wife and monkey-ghost son, after which he says in disbelief, "I feel like the strange one here."

Like Jia, Weerasethakul allows the personal narrative to take precedence over the national one, recognizing the intertwined lives of migrants and the people connected to them, along with the everyday nature of their worries, relaxation, and moments of fulfillment. Weerasethakul's strategically ambivalent mixture of these elements and peoples—together with his refusal to proselytize—creates imagined worlds that evoke a more inclusive definition of “Thai-ness” and is removed from any “official nationalism.”

“Understanding” Weerasethakul’s Vision of “Thai-ness”

Weerasethakul's next film, *Tropical Malady*, has fewer political references or signposts, but as Benedict Anderson discovered, its political or national backdrop comes into relief by an “understanding” of the film. Anderson became familiar with Weerasethakul's work in the mid-aughts after doing some of his own research in Thailand. The two became acquainted. Anderson wrote about Weerasethakul and *Tropical Malady* in particular, relating the film to his own groundbreaking work, comparing Weerasethakul to the influential Thai Marxist historian Chit Phumisak. “Like Chit, Apichatpong reveals the stories that official history excludes, the voices of the poor that cannot be incorporated into the triumphant narrative of the modern, and the ‘nonhuman’ beings at the margins of capitalism that do not fit squarely within the time and space of the nation-state.”⁵⁸ Anderson's analysis raises some of the same questions I raised in my discussion of Hou Hsiao-hsien and his critical reception. On the one hand, Anderson writes about “getting” Weerasethakul's work and the assumption that its obliqueness is intentionally constructed for the benefit of

Western film critics. On the other, his analysis also makes a case for Weerasethakul's films as antagonistic to the "official nationalism" that Anderson himself describes in his landmark work *Imagined Communities*.

Inspired by his own reaction to *Tropical Malady* and a subsequent experimental documentary film that includes Thai viewers reporting their reactions to the film, Anderson did his own research and came up with an interesting conclusion: whether the film's story was considered "understandable" depended on the class and ethnicity of the viewer. In short, middle-class urban intellectuals said the film was too "abstract," "difficult," and mysterious to be understood by people in rural areas. "It would be over the *cheuy* ["hick," i.e., unsophisticated] heads of the *khon baan nork* [up-country people]."⁵⁹ At the same time, the rural people from these "up-country" areas said that there was "nothing 'yaak' [difficult] or 'lyk lap' [mysterious] about it." "They say they understand it perfectly."⁶⁰ Anderson explains this discrepancy by observing that the middle- or intellectual-class Bangkok viewers are "accustomed to films about themselves and their social superiors,"⁶¹ whereas rural characters are often used for comic relief or as the butt of jokes, as they are in many other cultures. Therefore, we should not be surprised if they find *Tropical Malady* "mysterious" or "difficult" when they cannot find their own typical (superior) subject position within it. At the same time, "to be able to dismiss it as 'meant for Westerners' is to show one's own patriotic Thai credentials against the implicit threat that the film provides."⁶²

The Bangkok middle class, the *luk jen*, like and praise films such as *Tropical Malady* because they are "*sakon* [international, global]."⁶³ The *luk jen* want to be

seen this way as well and so align themselves with “foreign talking heads, film critics, and well-educated aficionados of ‘world cinema’” who have “a long intellectual tradition” of not expecting “to ‘understand’ a film in any fixed unambiguous way” and whose “intellectual investment is in the aesthetics of the film.”⁶⁴ However, this investment is difficult to make for the Bangkok bourgeoisie, since they want a film like *Tropical Malady* to be both global and also “Thai.” That is, it makes little sense for them to say that they do not understand it but also that it is Thai, especially when Weerasethakul makes a point of saying that the film is “completely Thai and rooted in Thai traditions, including Thai popular film traditions,” which, as Anderson points out, is not this social group’s genre of choice.⁶⁵ Western reviewers can show their ignorance of these traditions even through praise,⁶⁶ but for the luk jen to do so places them in a difficult position in the national conversation. The luk jen cannot align themselves with global bourgeois culture and also maintain that they do not understand it since they are “Thai.”

For them, the “implicit threat” of *Tropical Malady* or any of Weerasethakul’s films is the way in which it counters their definition of “Thai-ness,” some of which comes from the popular culture produced within the country. This negotiation of meaning dates back to the previous century and its constant realignment of what “Thai” meant, which shifted between modes of inclusivity and exclusivity among this emigrant Chinese population and the various other indigenous groups in the north and south. More recently, defining “Thai-ness” has been particularly important because of the rise of a powerful leader like Thaksin, who identifies himself as Thai and whose ousting has caused so much unrest in the nation. “Even if they are Thai

films, the meaning has changed because the word *Thai*, like the words *yellow* or *red*, have also changed.”⁶⁷ As Weerasethakul’s references to the “red shirts” and “yellow shirts” indicate, challenging this meaning has become even more urgent in the decade since *Tropical Malady*.

How does Weerasethakul challenge or redefine “Thai-ness”? Quandt notes that Weerasethakul’s references to Thai popular culture and “traditional Thai culture . . . commemorate . . . national forms of storytelling, a past or vanishing civilization.”⁶⁸ *Tropical* both takes the perspective of the people in the northeast, but also exposes our senses to that physical and cultural environment. *Blissfully Yours* mixes Burmese immigrants into that experience. *Uncle Boonmee* emerged from Weerasethakul’s interest in his home region and what he describes as “political history that arose in Isaan in relation to central Thailand’s colonization of the rest of the country.”⁶⁹ The violence in the region during the 1960s and 1970s caused many of its residents to be treated as outsiders to the nation, which is constantly questioning and defining who is inside and who is outside. In a long scene of conversation with Jen, Boonmee tells her that his illness is a result of his karma: “I’ve killed too many communists.” “But you killed with good intentions,” Jen responds. “You killed the commies for the nation, right?” “For the nation? Or what?” Boonmee asks as he slowly arranges himself into a resting position. “What a pain in the ass,” he reflects. He could be commenting on his health or his history. It is this sense of guilt and inner conflict that Weerasethakul is attempting to capture, but without the cinematic drama that might attend such a conversation. Instead the exchange occurs in the middle of an otherwise meandering, restful conversation that

lasts five minutes in only a few long shots. “There isn’t anyone who is focusing on the memories of this space, this region,” Weerasethakul has stated. “Uncle Boonmee, like me, attempts to reclaim his memories.”⁷⁰

Crucially, Weerasethakul cites not “history” but “memories,” which imply a looser, more subjective quality and an acknowledgment of their inherent subjectivity. Although history has to consist of memories at some level, we know them to be unreliable and inconsistent. Weerasethakul’s cinematic style reminds us of that subjectivity and ambiguity. Memory is sometimes like a waking dream—a visualization of something we thought had happened—as is cinema itself, blurring the lines between reality and truth. In revealing these blurred lines and showing us the limits of history, Weerasethakul’s work functions as a subaltern past.

As *Tropical Malady* transitions from one half to the other, there is a strange moment when the narrative seems to be continuing as it was before, but is actually slowly morphing into something else. First we see Tong sleeping in a small room, a green pasture outside his window. He stirs and then sits up. Suddenly Weerasethakul cuts to a tight shot, from a handheld camera, of Keng in the same living space, looking around. Another cut and we have the same view of the bedroom as before, but Tong is not there. It appears they have missed each other, while Keng sits on the bed and looks at a few photos of Tong. As he sits, we hear talk coming from outside the window about “a monster” that is killing cattle in area. We cut to a close-up of the photos: Tong as a younger man, on a boat; Tong with another young man. As we linger on this photo, the image flashes out suddenly, then is partially back in view, then flashes out again to black. The screen remains black

for twelve seconds before a painted image of a tiger begins fading into view. This is the beginning of the second part, titled “A Spirit’s Path.” It is hard to know what happened to change the film’s course. Perhaps Keng fell asleep, perhaps he was attacked by the monster. Perhaps the second half is his (or Tong’s) fever dream remembering the happiness that once was. “Perhaps the illness of the English title is not malaria, unrequited love or amour fou, but the malady of remembering.”⁷¹ Perhaps this malady is felt at the national level as well—and perhaps it is the result of using memory to define “nation” or “Thai” anew.

Weerasethakul attempts to capture the subjectivity of memory with an appeal to the senses rather than the intellect. He is “trying to make a film, not ‘about’ the world of the *chao baan* of Siam, but rather ‘from inside’ that world, from inside its culture and its consciousness itself,”⁷² rather than taking the more typical view of culture from the outside. Anderson’s distinction is an important one. Cinema has historically been used by the Western anthropological gaze to strengthen notions of “colonial difference,” whether political or cultural.⁷³ Weerasethakul calls attention to this concept and specifies that the difference here is often one of class. He acknowledges that he is from a different class than his characters but is striving to “present work that speaks well about a different class but isn’t typically ethnographic: this is something I am still struggling with. I feel like I’m still in the beginning of figuring this out.”⁷⁴

Anderson argues that *Tropical Malady* challenges the “official nationalism” offered by the state by asserting that “Thai-ness” comes from more than one origin and is embodied by more than one way of being. In Weerasethakul’s work, as in *The*

Puppetmaster, memories, folk customs, legends, and a different relationship with the environment produce a different understanding of what “the nation” is. Guided by class, language, and culture, people affiliate themselves with each other in ways different than those prescribed or projected by the state. *Tropical Malady* is a film made from the perspective of, and is perhaps addressed to, the rural inhabitants of Thai villages, in particular those of the northeast, an area that has been “under-represented in national historiography and politics.”⁷⁵ Weerasethakul’s insistence on recognizing the multivalent identities that people and regions occupy carves out a space for that representation, and his attention to immigrants and ethnicities within the nation change the way the nation imagines itself.

Weerasethakul’s narratives and characters are consistently undefined in national or regional terms; they exist within a “knot of national and regional imaginaries.”⁷⁶ Moreover, their subjectivity and ambiguity are entirely appropriate to Weerasethakul’s vision of a nation: “In this nation of mixed and murky ethnic origins, its conflicts as acute now as ever, this strategic ambivalence is crucial: it ensures that the memories of individuals and communities come largely unmediated by the monolithic patriotism that typically frames public experience.”⁷⁷ In other words, the ambivalence of Weerasethakul’s films is important because it immerses his audience in the “malady of remembering”: an experience of “Thai-ness” that differs from the major narratives of official Thai nationalism. It is these unmediated narratives and experiences, coming from outside “official nationalism,” that function as border gnosis, or as subaltern pasts, revealing knowledge that has been suppressed by the nation or modernity.

As Weerasethakul was working to finish his 2016 film *Cemetery of Splendor*, he included a statement about his upcoming film (then titled *Love in Khon Kaen*) on his website:

I write this film as a rumination on Thailand, a feverish nation. It will be the first film that takes place entirely in my hometown, Khon Kaen. It's also a very personal portrait of the places that have latched onto me like parasites—the elementary school, the hospital, the library, the lake. Like the sleepers in this film, I shun the malady of reality, and together we take refuge in dreams of forever.⁷⁸

It seemed a decidedly foreboding introduction to me, and I wondered if the new film would have a darker tone than his previous works. Perhaps the malady of recent history in Thailand had affected Weerasethakul.

As it turns out, *Cemetery* contains the same verve and originality of Weerasethakul's previous films and maintains a sense of possibility and positivity despite a tinge of ominousness, given the sleeping men in the film's uncertain status and the uncertain tone of the ending. Indeed, it is one of Weerasethakul's most pointed and striking endings. After having an encounter with one of the sleeping soldiers (Banlop Lomnoi, who played Keng in *Tropical Malady*), Jen looks on longingly as he falls back asleep, saying, "You're right. This is a good place to sleep." Another scene of dancers in a park is accompanied by a relaxed groove, which accompanies Jen in the next shot as she watches some boys playing soccer on piles of dirt, the result of the digging referred to earlier. The last shot is of Jen simply sitting with her eyes wide open without blinking for a full 35 seconds, as the

music fades to the sound of the boys in the background, Jen wordlessly seeming to try to keep awake (Figure 5.13). Even though it is a “good place to sleep,” perhaps she feels she has shunned “the malady of reality” for too long, or perhaps she has lost track of what it is to be awake and what it is to be dreaming. Immersed as she is in this place with a troubled history but vibrant local culture and personalities, perhaps it is the “malady of remembering” that she hopes to transcend.

¹ Teh, “Itinerant Cinema: The Social Surrealism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul,” 602.

² Baumgärtel, *Southeast Asian Independent Cinema Essays, Documents, Interviews*, 182.

³ *Ibid.*

⁴ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 126.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁶ Strecher, “Magical Realism and the Search for Identity in the Fiction of Murakami Haruki,” 267.

⁷ Slemon, “Magical Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse,” 21.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Andrews, “Weerasethakul’s Waking Dreams.”

¹⁰ Rich, *New Queer Cinema*, 90.

¹¹ Somerville, “Queer,” 191.

¹² Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 13.

¹³ Even though they describe *Tropical Malady* in detail in the Introduction to show the possibilities, it’s also worth noting that due to Thailand’s history with immigrant Chinese people and their lasting impact on Thailand’s culture and society, one could potentially make an argument for Thai cinema being “transnational Chinese cinema,” but neither I nor Bergen-Aurand, et al make that claim.

¹⁴ Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 11.

¹⁵ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 14.

¹⁶ Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 25.

¹⁷ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, 108.

¹⁸ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 14.

¹⁹ Martin, “Extraordinary Joe,” 19.

²⁰ Lim, “Apichatpong Weerasethakul,” 341.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 25.

²³ *Ibid.*, 24.

²⁴ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 35–36.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 126.

²⁷ *Ibid.*

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 188.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 49,63-4.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 50.

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- ³¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 221.
- ³² Quoted in *ibid.*
- ³³ Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 25.
- ³⁴ "Tropical Malady." Weerasethakul quoted on his website, kickthemachine.com.
- ³⁵ Scott, "Cannes, AKA Asia West."
- ³⁶ Lim, "To Halve and to Hold." Quoted in Quandt.
- ³⁷ "Apichatpong Weerasethakul (Complete)."
- ³⁸ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 131.
- ³⁹ Lim, "To Halve and to Hold" This is a quote from Quandt.
- ⁴⁰ Scott, "Cannes, AKA Asia West."
- ⁴¹ Fuller, "Politics and Film With Apichatpong Weerasethakul."
- ⁴² Appadurai quoted in Baumgärtel, "Imagined Communities, Imagined Worlds: Independent Film from Southeast Asia in the Global Mediascape," 24.
- ⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25.
- ⁴⁴ "King, Country and the Coup."
- ⁴⁵ Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 112.
- ⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 138.
- ⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 154.
- ⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 174.
- ⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 233.
- ⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 234.
- ⁵¹ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 34.
- ⁵² Bergen-Aurand, Mazzilli, and Hee Wai-Siam, *Transnational Chinese Cinema*, 11.
- ⁵³ Baker and Phongpaichit, *A History of Thailand*, 229.
- ⁵⁴ It is worth noting that "illegal" here might have been a matter of timing. In 2003, a year after *Blissfully Yours* was released, a memorandum of understanding was signed between the Thai and Burmese governments to legalize the migration and include a temporary work passport system for migrants. See McGann, "The Opening of Burmese Borders: Impacts on Migration."
- ⁵⁵ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 219.
- ⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 47.
- ⁵⁷ *Ibid.*
- ⁵⁸ Chua, "Apichatpong Weerasethakul," 41.
- ⁵⁹ Anderson, "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast," 159.
- ⁶⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 165.
- ⁶² *Ibid.*, 168.
- ⁶³ This recalls Jia's use of the World Park as a way to critique China's national ambitions to participate on the global stage, or of having a cosmopolitan or multicultural outlook.
- ⁶⁴ Anderson, "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast," 170.
- ⁶⁵ Noted in Anderson, "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast" as well as "Benedict Anderson: Outsider View of Thai Politics:" "the bourgeoisie continues passively to swallow up Hollywood junk, repetitive Chinese martial arts junk, imported videogames and trashy soaps."
- ⁶⁶ Quentin Tarantino, reportedly said of *Tropical Malady*, "It is wonderful, and I don't understand it." Quoted in Anderson, "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast," 170.
- ⁶⁷ Chua, "Apichatpong Weerasethakul." Emphasis in original. Red and yellow signify different political affiliations in the tumult of Thai culture and politics in the last decade or more.
- ⁶⁸ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 80.
- ⁶⁹ Chua, "Apichatpong Weerasethakul."
- ⁷⁰ *Ibid.*
- ⁷¹ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 80.
- ⁷² Anderson, "The Strange Story of a Strange Beast," 165.

⁷³ Mignolo, *Local Histories/Global Designs*, 3. The phrase “colonial difference” is Mignolo’s, used throughout his work to signify the underpinning global notions of racial and technological differences that support Western dominance and colonialism. For further analysis of film as a mechanism of the Western-European anthropological gaze, see in particular the writing and films of Trinh T.Minh-ha and especially *The Third Eye: Race, Cinema, and Ethnographic Spectacle* by Fatima Tobing Rony, Duke University Press, 1996.

⁷⁴ Chua, “Apichatpong Weerasethakul.”

⁷⁵ Teh, “Itinerant Cinema: The Social Surrealism of Apichatpong Weerasethakul,” 600.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 601.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, 602.

⁷⁸ “Kick the Machine.”

Conclusion

The reason I've always been skeptical about what I've learned in my history classes is based on the fact that it has never recorded what I have personally witnessed, even for a time as recent as the 1950s.

It is horrifying to think that man might have deprived his own species of the truth for hundreds of years. Luckily there are enough clues left by the great minds of the past in their art, their architecture, their music, their literature, etc., to help their future generations to somewhat reconstruct the truth and restore our faith in humanity.

Films must serve the same purpose for our future generations.

A Brighter Summer Day is a story about a time when the Chinese people, on the mainland and in Taiwan alike, have been too intimidated or too conformed by the official versions of history to have the interest to remember. This deliberate forgetfulness left vast spaces in our minds, prey for misunderstanding and misinterpretations so easily exploited and manipulated by the authorities of various kinds. *A Brighter Summer Day* is a story about human dignity and self-respect under such conditions.

—Edward Yang, 1991

As they were repackaging Edward Yang's 1991 film *A Brighter Summer Day*, the Criterion Collection included with it the director's statement that accompanied the film at the 1991 Tokyo International Film Festival. Since it was a project that took at least six years, the Criterion Collection could not have known how relevant these words would be to the political reality of 2017. Yang might have been another subject in this paper if his work were more readily available, *Brighter* being only the second widely available film of his to see a major home video release. A contemporary of Hou, Yang was the urban chronicler of Taiwan, but with similar stylistic tendencies. After I obtained the Criterion Collection's version of the film in January of 2017, I read Yang's words with astonishment at the confluence of events that both summarized one of my work's central arguments while also making that argument seem newly relevant in relation to current events. Yang's eloquent

statement can be seen as an affirmation of my argument about film as a tool for history that antagonizes national power, combined with a compelling message for us in the United States in 2017. Yang articulates something that the filmmakers in my study do and something that suddenly has become very relevant: foregrounding history, narratives, and perspectives that the nation attempts to write over. Yang's words express the same ideas as Chakrabarty, Mignolo, and Trouillot regarding the telling of history, but like my work he specifies cinema as a tool for rewriting history and representing people.

Yang's words echo Trouillot's emphasis on the ways in which the production of history (which Mignolo and Chakrabarty would extend to the production of knowledge, or an entire way of thinking) is unequally distributed between groups of people and individual who have unequal access to the means of producing that history and knowledge. Trouillot's, as is mine, is a process of exposing the means by which those with the disadvantage have still been able to tell their stories; in my case the way they tell those stories cinematically is part of their power. "The forces I will expose are less visible than gunfire, class poverty, or political crusades. I want to argue that they are no less powerful."¹ That is, the "clues" that Yang refers to that allow future peoples to "reconstruct the truth and restore our faith in humanity," are found everywhere, including films, especially those countering the notion that we are "prisoners of our pasts."²

My work has shown that film can indeed be a powerful force for revealing reality and reconstructing the truth of history, in doing so enriching the transnational imaginary, that space of "imagination as social practice." The filmmakers I have

studied prove that not only resistance but negotiation, compromise, concession, and perhaps finally understanding can be found in “gestures of the imagination.”³ Hou Hsiao-hsien’s multilayered and dialogic presentational narrative uniquely uncovers truths about Taiwan and China’s relationship. A different form of this dissertation could have easily focused purely on his work on that topic, including his historical works like *City of Sadness* (1989) and *Good Men, Good Women* (1995), but even including contemporary ethnographies like *Goodbye, South, Goodbye* (1996), *Millenium Mambo* (2001) and *Café Lumière* (2003). Jia Zhangke’s insistence on foregrounding personal narratives of his characters against the backdrop of extraordinary circumstances in his nation’s recent history should become a cornerstone against which any review of China’s history should be compared. Again, his career could have provided ample opportunity to study in more depth, even the films I analyzed, also including *Xiao Wu* (1997), *24 City* (2008), *A Touch of Sin* (2013), and *Mountains May Depart* (2015). Another focus could have been on Jia’s alternation between narrative cinema and his documentary output—the interstitial space I hope to have illuminated. Tsai Ming-Liang’s address to the senses using silence, slowness, and stillness, leading to a sense of drift as knowing and being, also challenge that assumed knot of Western thought by queering the norms of narrative and subjectivity. While I focused on *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* and *What Time is it There?*, one could trace this idea through his entire oeuvre, including *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), *Vive L’Amour* (1994), *The River* (1997), *The Hole* (1998). His final two features (Tsai has said that he has retired from filmmaking), *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* (2006, filmed in his native Malaysia), and *Stray Dogs* (2013) potentially

offer a slightly more pointed critique, as they turn toward more abject, homeless, and downtrodden characters. He has also engaged in making shorts, known as the “Walker” series, that appear to challenge modernity, narrative and movement. In them Lee Kang-sheng stars as a monk in various settings simply walking as slowly as humanly possible. Finally, Apichatpong Weerasethakul’s address to the senses and “strategic ambivalence” provides us an unmediated experience of Thai-ness through his films that challenge the official history of his home nation. As with Jia, though I touched on most of his feature length films, there is more to delve into even in those works, but there is also his broad range of other shorts (sometimes part of larger multi-media art installations like *Primitive*), or documentary shorts.

Comparisons or Synthesis Between the Four Filmmakers

Throughout I have mostly resisted making many comparisons between the artists, but it might be instructive at this point. Part of the reason for my choice was to allow each one his own context, yet there are unavoidable similarities and differences, as well as definite influence. These are both on the level of cinematic style and approach to the political or national. For me, Weerasethakul achieves just the right balance of the styles of Hou, Jia and Tsai: his insistence on filming the everyday and personal narratives, an emphasis on the body, references to regional culture and folklore. And yet he resists doing so directly, just as he resists definition on a national or regional level. On top of this I just find his style instantly relaxing and meditative in a way that exceeds his precursors. There are triangulations of influence within the group, but Weerasethakul’s have been the most direct and

evident to me. That is, he has called out Hou and Tsai on different occasions, even naming *The Puppetmaster* and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* as two of his top ten favorite films.⁴ Weerasethakul even included scenes of characters in movie theaters in at least two films that could be seen as an homage to *Goodbye* (in *Tropical Malady* and in *Cemetery of Splendor*). He has stated about Tsai's film that it is "one of the best movies of our time," and that it brought him back to his memory of his home town, and this seems appropriate since so much of his films are about memory.⁵ This makes Hou an obvious influence as well since *The Puppetmaster* is so much about historical and personal memory. But where Hou's film is an attempt to narrate the memories of Li Tienlu, Weerasethakul includes his own memories and the memories of others without warning or identification. While it was well publicized that *Syndromes and a Century* was a story of his parents as doctors in Isan, the film contains two versions of that story, intermixed with no doubt his own and others' memories of that time and place, which in the second version seem to mix and merge with the present as well.

It is also interesting how though Tsai and Hou share the most potential similarity given their home base of Taiwan (and this seeming similarity was one of the germinating thoughts of this work), and the legacy of a style of realism based there. However, as I learned about the history of the Taiwanese New Wave as a true movement that included cross-collaboration and shared goals within a specific point in time, it became clear that Tsai Ming-Liang was not part of this movement. And the more I studied the original movement the clearer it was that Tsai's goals were entirely different from both a narrative point of view and a stylistic one. His films

continued to focus almost exclusively on the present and are more focused on urban settings. A comparison with Edward Yang might have been more apt, and yet his staunchly persistent gaze outlasts Yang's more active, yet still staid, camera. Tsai's one slight venture out of a present-day setting is also his other similarity with Hou: 2009's *Face or Visage* is a more traditional film within a film story starring Lee Kang-sheng as the director of a film based on Oscar Wilde's *Salome* in Paris. This was the second time Tsai has filmed in Paris and even the second time he employed Jean-Pierre L aud, the star of star of numerous Francois Truffaut films and other French films. Hou has also made a film in Paris, *The Flight of the Red Balloon* (2009), and this is his second film outside Taiwan or China after *Caf  Lumiere*, which despite its title was filmed in Tokyo and the language is Japanese.⁶ While Tsai has stated his retirement, Weerasethakul has also reportedly made his last film in Thailand. I look forward with anticipation where he might look to aim his camera.⁷

Jia seems to me to be the most boldly political, as it seems his films at times take the challenges of his nation almost head-on, even if his cinematic approach makes it seem oblique. Yet compared especially with Tsai and Weerasethakul, Jia seems to come right out and state that he's commenting on the state of his nation. This is much easier to read in his scenes with historical "signposts" and direct mention of historical events (again, that would be more readily recognizable to a Chinese audience) in *Platform*, and much more difficult to read from 30 minutes of lounging by the stream in *Blissfully Yours*, though I think their political statements are no less strong. One could make the argument that Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness* is the most directly political film of any of the four filmmakers' output, given

that it deals directly with the prelude and aftermath of the February 28 Incident, where acts of violence were carried out on Taiwanese citizens by the KMT, and given that its release coincided quite closely with similar events in Tiananmen Square protests in China in 1989. However, because the events are not depicted directly and are referred to so obliquely that someone not familiar with the context could easily miss that it referred to such an event. And again, like Jia, the narrative focus is on the effect of these events on a family and their acquaintances and friends, and his output since his historical trilogy (*City of Sadness*, *The Puppetmaster*, and *Good Men, Good Women*) has been less directly political in terms of narrative content.

Though Weerasethakul is almost exactly the same age as Jia Zhangke, his reaction to national turmoil is to look inward rather than out. Whereas Jia takes a direct, raw approach to documenting the personal stories that parallel the nation's, Weerasethakul delves even deeper, into memory and desire. Jia documents the materiality of personal stories, while Weerasethakul records the feel of the experiences themselves. Jia and Hou very consciously place in their films reminders of or landmarks for periods in national history, which reveal the political nature of their films. Weerasethakul includes fewer of these landmarks, and in any case many of them would be unfamiliar to someone who did not know Thai history or current events. Often, Weerasethakul's landmarks take the form of bits of dialogue that place the characters and their location in the northeast into political context. And yet the unrest in his nation is simply unavoidable by the time we get to *Cemetery*, with the military literally falling asleep, the constant excavation and disturbance of the

ground, “beneath this film’s typically warm and relaxing atmosphere, a national and political crisis is more angrily apparent than ever.”⁸

What is common to all of them is a sense of endurance and the preservation of (following Yang) “human dignity and self-respect,” despite the drastic change they depict. That is, they are not all quite optimistic, but they are not as grim as one might expect. Their films all depict a sense of perseverance in the face of uncertainty. As noted in Chapter 1, the dismantling of the plane at the end of *The Puppetmaster* is strangely optimistic, and places Žižek’s detritus of capitalism in a more practical light. The final scene of Jia’s *Platform* is an ambiguous but comfortable scene of domesticity, Cui Mingliang falling asleep on a chair as a teapot boils, its tone echoing the train whistle heard at crucial scenes throughout the film. The dreams of youth may have been bested by middle-aged resignation, but the scene could be interpreted as blissful, and includes the hope of the next generation in the form of Mingliang and Ruijian’s child. Even as the ticket woman leaves at the end of the night in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* this sense of fortitude in the face of failure persists. Finally, it is this sense of dignity and positivity that I feel most strongly in Weerasethekul’s work, where the relaxed and meditative rhythms and tones, the invitation to breathe and slow down seem to evoke a sense of endurance in the face of change and uncertainty.

Further Research

There are of course a number of ways that several of my general theses could have been supported by a completely different set of filmmakers and films beyond these four, and these could very well be incorporated in the future. There are many different directions my work could take as a continuation of my approach and themes. As has been noted elsewhere, the general style of extreme realism that the filmmakers in my work practice has not by any means been local to southeast Asia. Some of these directions spring from the other two most famous names that seemed to recur as I began research in the early 00s: Bela Tarr and Abbas Kiarostami. Tarr would be particularly interesting to compare to any of these filmmakers in that his films have always been seen in light of the legacy of communism in his native Hungary. How would this kind of political history be comparable to the post-colonial situation? How might his style compare to other Eastern European cinematic practices such as Krzysztof Kieślowski or the filmmakers of the Romanian New Wave (led by Cristi Puiu, known for *The Death of Mr. Lăzărescu* (2005), Cristian Mungiu, known for *4 Months, 3 Weeks and 2 Days* (2007), and Corneliu Porumboiu, known for *Police, Adjective* (2009)). Such a comparative study could also include the Belgian Dardenne brothers, whose realist style has been repeatedly associated both with a more hand-held camera style as well as narratively with immigrants or the unemployed.

With regard to Kiarostami, in the early 00s he was the most well known Iranian filmmaker worldwide, with the exception of contemporary Mohsen Makhmalbaf, and his method of revealing reality in his core early works of

masterpieces with the “Kolker trilogy” (*Where is the Friend’s Home?* (1987), *Life and Nothing More...* (1992), and *Through the Olive Trees* (1994)) as well as 1990’s *Close-Up* still stand today as masterpieces of a kind of postmodernist yet realist cinematic narrative style, as well as their oblique political stance in a much more repressive environment. Of course, in the ensuing time several more filmmakers directly indebted to Kiarostami have become well known (Jafar Panahi and Asghar Farhadi) and their evolution in style would be fascinating to bring into the dialog.

Other filmmakers in the general heading of “slow cinema” would also make Another filmmaker Sissako.

Of course, since the 1990s many other artists around the globe have contributed to this unofficial style of “slow cinema” or intense realism including Abderrahmane Sissako (Mauritania; his 1998 film *Life on Earth* is particularly similar to Weerasethakul, and more recently turned his camera towards radical Islam in Africa in *Timbuktu* (2014)), Pedro Costa (Portugal; *In Vanda’s Room* (2000), *Colossal Youth* (2006)), Lav Diaz (Phillipines; *Evolution of a Filipino Family* (2004), *Norte, the End of History* (2013)) or Lisandro Alonso (Argentina; *Liverpool* (2008), *Jauja* (2014)). In addition, there have been some notable interventions into the documentary realm that have revealed fascinating political truths even as they problematized the nature of documentary and realism, all the while being troublesome subjects in the realm of ethnography. Joshua Oppenheimer’s *The Act of Killing* (2012) and *The Look of Silence* (2014) resemble Weerasethakul’s or Tsai’s method in some way, insisting that what he’s showing us is “real” even as he

encourages the bizarre behavior of his subjects in order to reveal multifaceted political truths.

The phenomenon of extreme realism or slow cinema has also extended to the United States. Established independent filmmaker Gus van Sant, inspired by Tarr, created some of the most provocative films of recent memory by employing some of the interesting methods of revealing reality. His depiction of school shootings in *Elephant* (2003) have remained a touchstone as debates about gun violence continue. Jim Jarmusch could be argued to have influenced all manner of international slow cinema since his early work in the 1980s (*Stranger Than Paradise* (1984), *Down by Law* (1986)), and continues to the present with works like *Patterson* investigating everyday life of the working class in great detail. The work of Kelly Reichart seems particularly ripe to trace as it has contributed to a discussion of class and gender in the United States (*Old Joy* (2006), *Wendy and Lucy* (2008), *Certain Women* (2016)) Her work also reminds us of a conspicuous absence in both international filmmaking but also in my work, that of the work of women in film. Her precursors are many and many worked in a mode of revealing reality as well, including in particular Claudia Weill's *Girlfriends* (1978), and Julie Dash's amazing *Daughters of the Dust* (1991).

Concluding Thoughts

This project began in the early 2000s under the still distinct shadow of September 11th and the period following when, under the guise of American empire and false information the United States invaded Afghanistan and Iraq. The early

notions of the project was a way of combining my interest in world cinema with an investigation into what “foreignness” meant in the context of American nationalism.

That this stage of my project ends in early 2017, at the beginning of what could prove to be an even darker time within the nation came as a very unwelcome surprise. The waning years of the Bush Presidency and the Obama era may have made us complacent to the rhetoric of nationalism as its volume seemed to fade-- even as our entanglements in international situations did not. Now we face a future where the only known quantity is a reliance on an official nationalism and history that never fully existed that being used as the blueprint for the future, and racial, ethnic and cultural differences between our citizens, immigrants and refugees have been deployed as measures of how “great” our nation is. That this will continue to bring a more grandiose notion of what our nation is not hard to imagine, but the transnational imaginary might be a tool for keeping it at bay. This is where Yang’s, Trouillot’s, Mignolo’s, and Chakrabarty’s words and the work of Hou, Jia, Tsai and Weerasethakul hold their importance. Film is one of the ways that the stories that parallel, skew, antagonize, and criticize official nationalism can be expressed and can endure.

In closing I will attempt to make a point of clarification with this in mind. Promoting or highlighting alternative narratives, some of which employ fantasy in order to depict those narratives, is something altogether different than what we now call “alternative facts.”⁹ In the current climate where accusations of “fake news” fly in all directions, I have been troubled by the notion that my argument could be construed as emphasizing an idea that something that is “not real” is more real than

real. It recalls criticisms of postmodernist theory, which came too close to the notion that there is no “truth,” and just at the same moment that many people were gaining a voice (in the academy, the rise of ethnic studies but even to the post-Civil Rights era in general). That is, misrepresentations of the truth for the purposes of gaining political power by the already powerful and to retain control is not the same as giving voice to the voiceless. Mine is not a call for absolute relativism where there is no truth, and perspective is all. It matters a great deal, but it is not everything. Rather, my celebration of these techniques calls for a cinematic landscape that begins to even out the past mis-representations of history and of people whose subjectivities have been left out of a given nation’s history. Two recent examples from the United States that I encountered coincidentally with this writing are instructive.

As a film, Raoul Peck’s James Baldwin documentary *I Am Not Your Negro* (2016) includes more cinematic analysis than I expected, but as such apparently remains true to Baldwin’s thought, weaving a thesis that should be familiar to any film studies or American Studies scholar, but is rejuvenating to see articulated in a wide-release, Oscar nominated film. Baldwin often highlights how American film in general depicts the subjectivity of its nation: the white male moving west; the general wealth and privilege available to the white male in America. Baldwin’s key realization as a young man that he is not John Wayne, but he is the Native American. These films perpetuated the myth that white privilege in the US is not unusual and is not based on a history of multiple genocides and crimes against humanity.

What would Baldwin have thought of the existence of *Moonlight* (2016)? Its representation of many subjectivities that have rarely been seen at all in American

film (a Cuban immigrant turned drug-dealer, an African-American drug addicted mother, a queer African-American boy, teenager, and adult), let alone as an Oscar winner and widely seen release, is something that Baldwin unfortunately did not live to see. When the film was up against the expected winner of the Best Picture Oscar, *La La Land*, one could not have plotted a more perfect showdown between nostalgic Hollywood fantasy and a kind of realism. Though *Moonlight* does not share precisely the same aesthetic as the films in my study, it shares the same line of influence and is certainly in the same family of realism that reveals truths using a uniquely cinematic technique.¹⁰ As with Yang's statements, there is hope in the reconstructed truth of our nation, the human dignity, the self-respect in *Moonlight* that Baldwin could not have foreseen and that no one else might have predicted given the political climate. May it live on and shine brightly.

¹ Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xix.

² Yang, "Director's Note"; Trouillot, *Silencing the Past*, xix.

³ Lim, "Apichatpong Weerasethakul," 341.

⁴ "10/10."

⁵ Quandt, *Apichatpong Weerasethakul*, 253.

⁶ Hou's attention to language is one similarity in particular to Weerasethakul that is notable and particularly ripe for investigation, though one I am particularly unsuited for given my unfamiliarity with the languages. Hou has made films primarily in Mandarin, but has also worked in Cantonese and even Classical Mandarin always included Taiwanese and other Taiwanese dialects in his films where it is relevant. Similarly, Weerasethakul has made a point of the difference between Thai and the dialect in the North and Isan. There are several references to this dialect in his films.

⁷ May I suggest the American Southwest? Such pan-Pacific intercultural artworks have been recently completed, and the opportunities for synergy are unique and intriguing. See "Ai Weiwei's Unexpected Navajo Art Collaboration."

⁸ "Cemetery of Splendour."

⁹ "Kellyanne Conway Says Donald Trump's Team Has 'Alternative Facts.' Which Pretty Much Says It All."

¹⁰ I wasn't aware at the time I was drafting this conclusion that there *was* a direct line of influence between

Moonlight and my work. When asked what films were in mind when he was developing his film, director Barry Jenkins' immediate reply is "*Three Times* by Hou Hsiao-hsien." He goes on to detail a direct homage to Hou's 2005 film in a pivotal scene in *Moonlight*. Rapold, "Interview with Barry Jenkins," 45.

Appendices

Appendix A. Figures

Figure 2.1



Figure 2.2



Figure 2.3



Figure 2.4



Figure 2.5

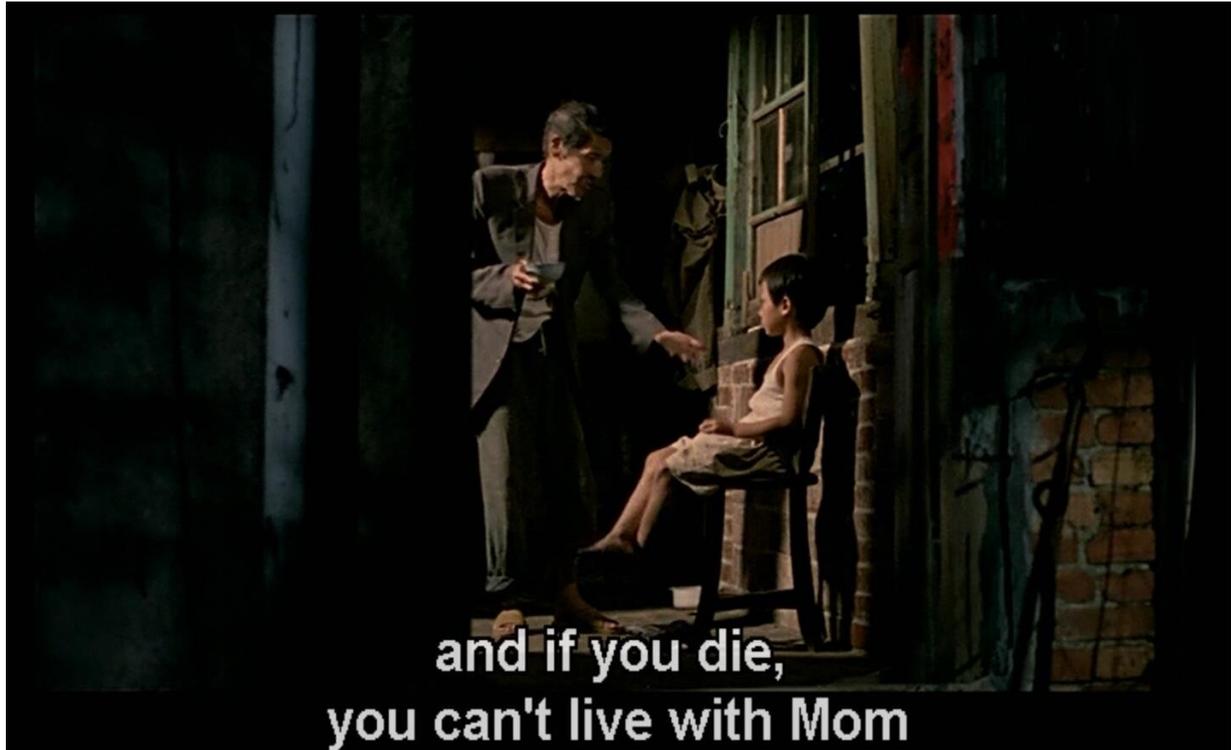


Figure 2.6



Figure 2.7



Figure 2.8



Figure 2.9



Figure 2.10



Figure 2.11



Figure 3.1



Figure 3.2



Figure 3.3

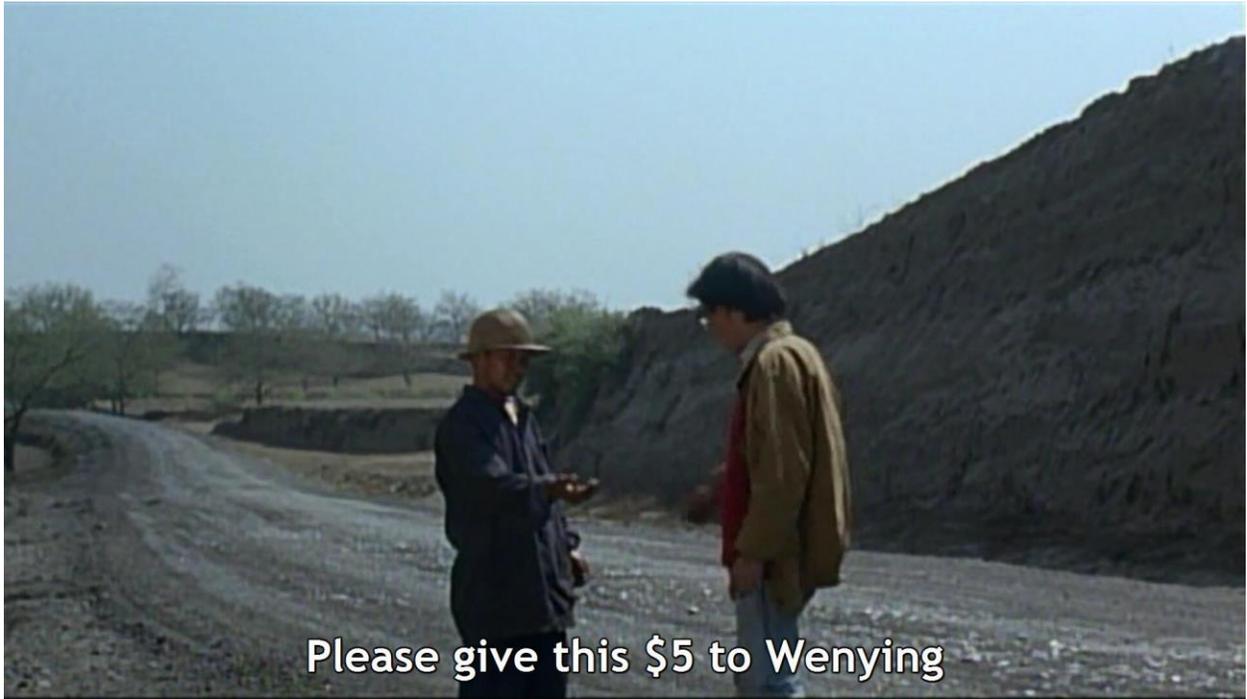


Figure 3.4



Figure 3.5



Figure 3.6

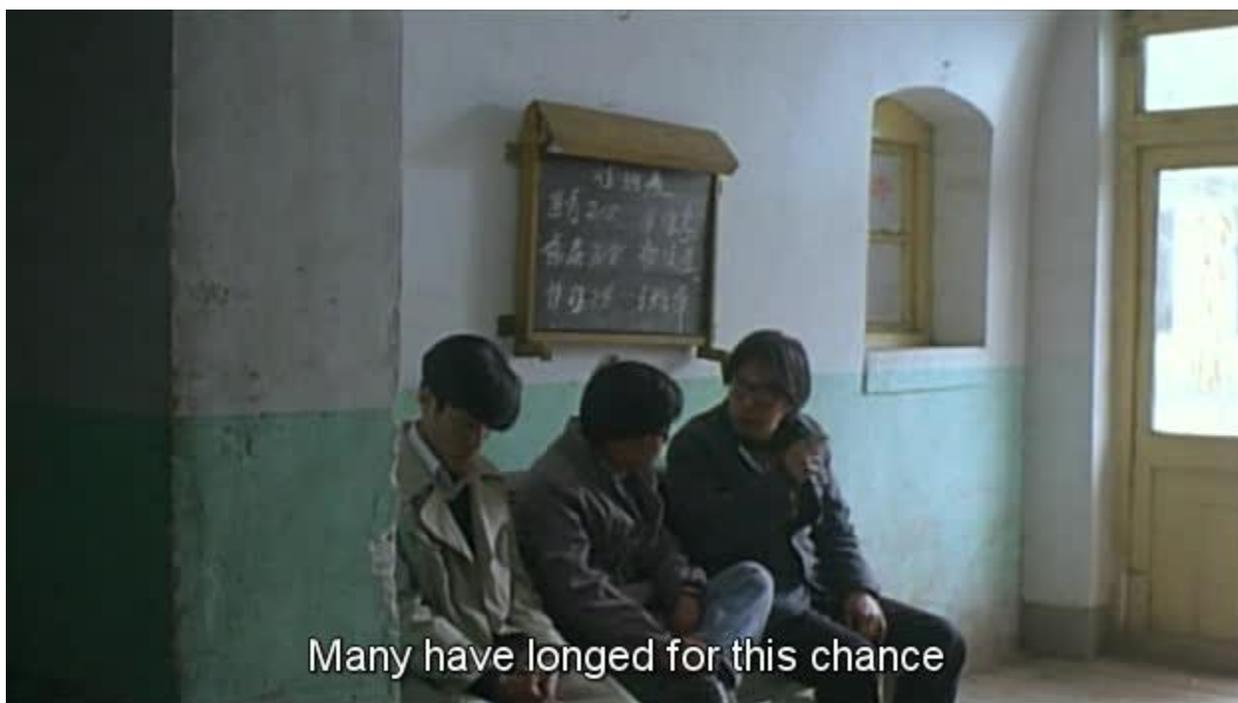


Figure 3.7

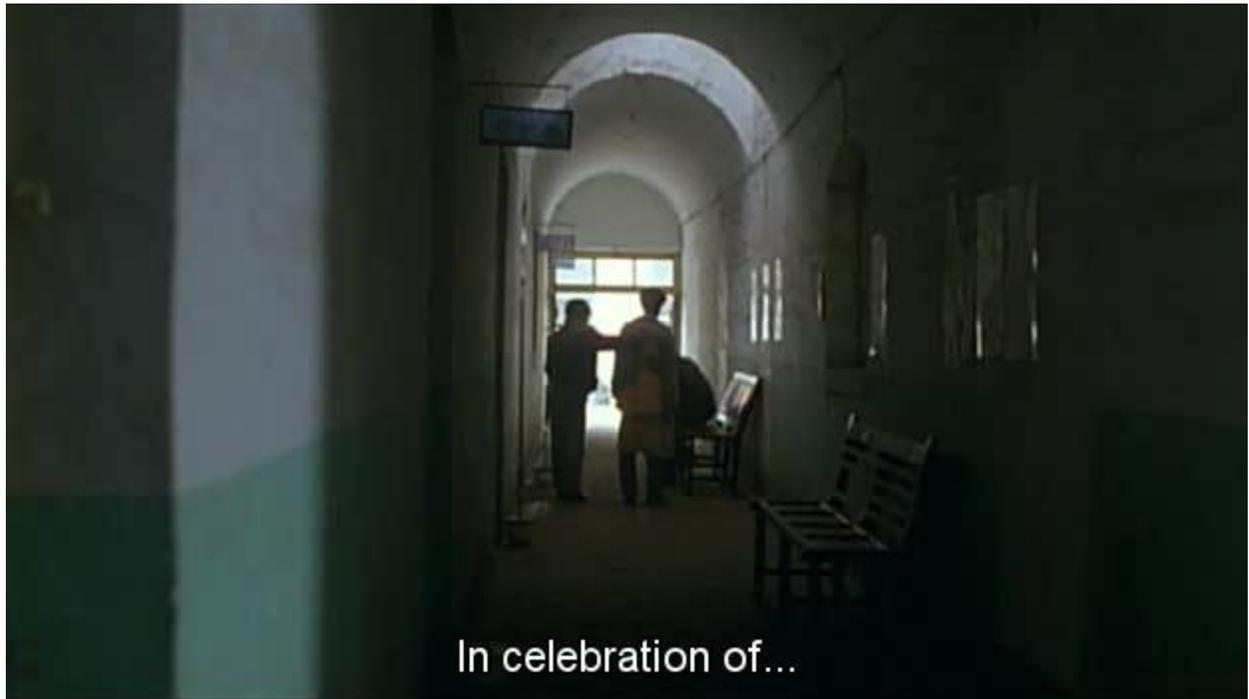


Figure 3.8



Figure 3.9



Figure 3.10



Figure 3.11



Figure 3.12



Figure 3.13



Figure 3.14



Figure 3.15



Figure 3.16



Figure 3.17



Figure 3.18



Figure 3.19



Figure 3.20



Figure 3.21



Figure 3.22



Figure 4.1

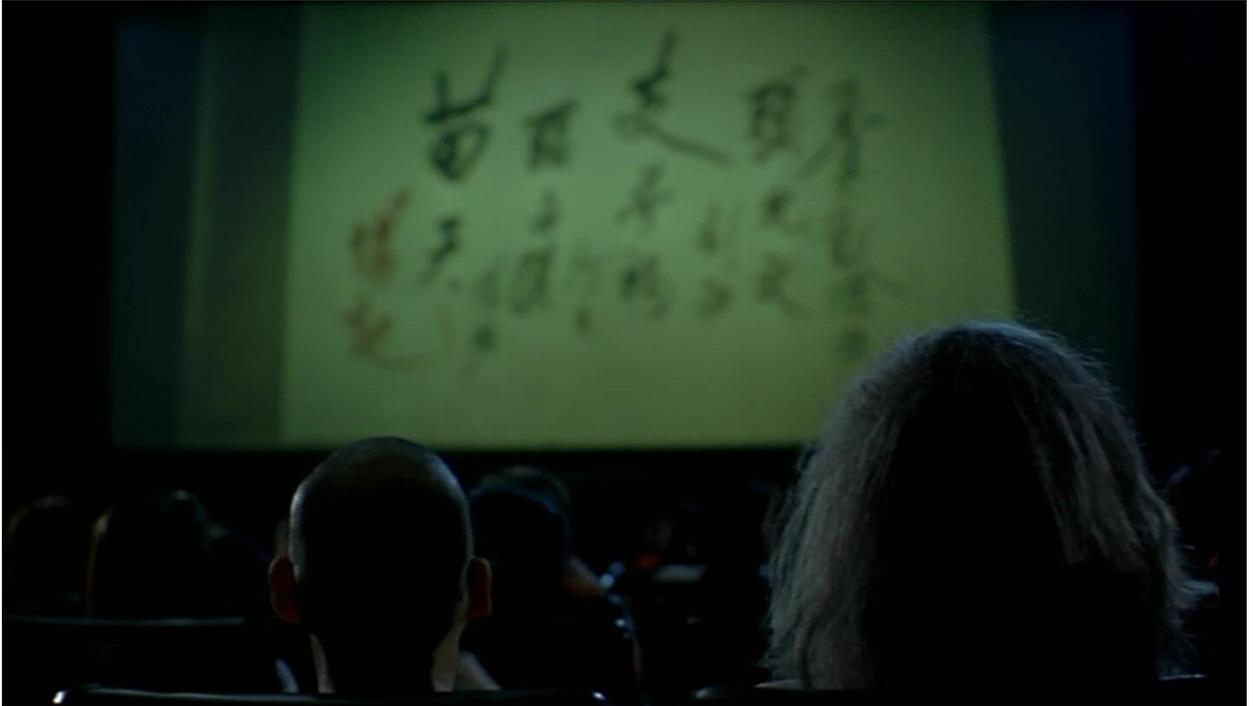


Figure 4.2



Figure 4.3



Figure 4.4



Figure 4.5



Figure 4.6

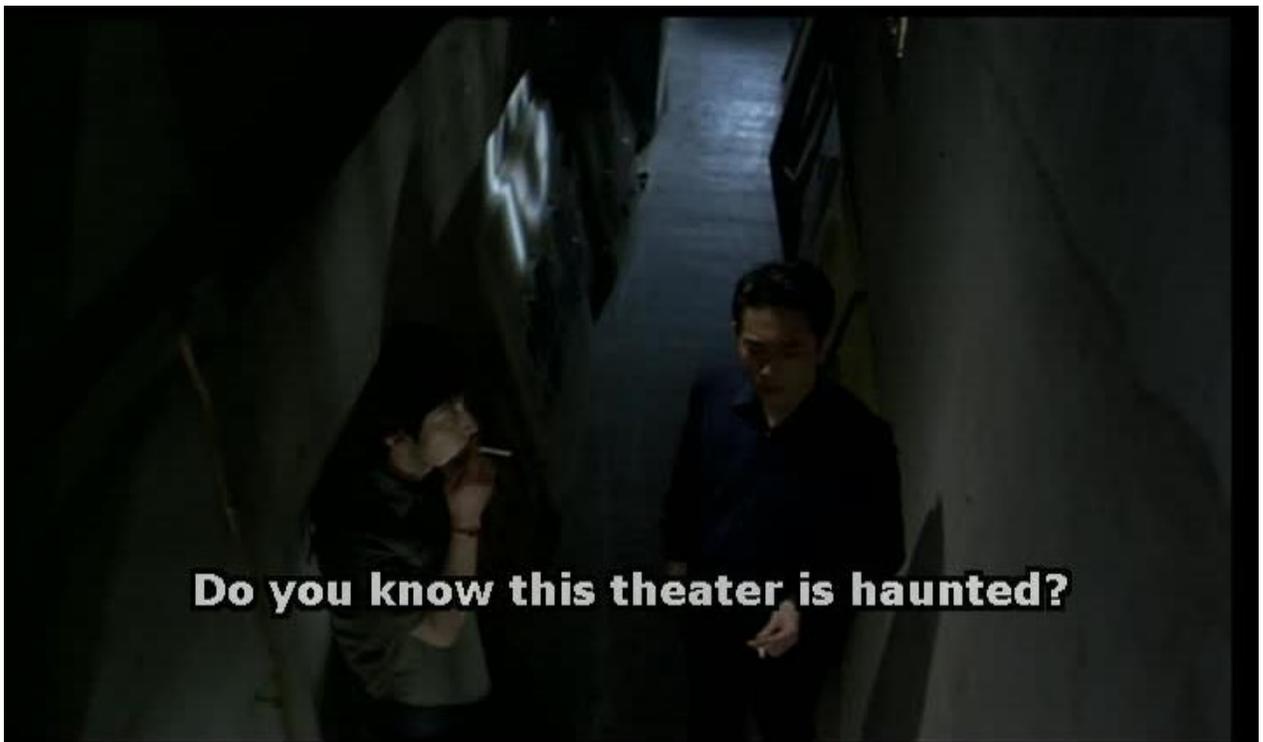


Figure 4.7



Figure 5.1



Figure 5.2

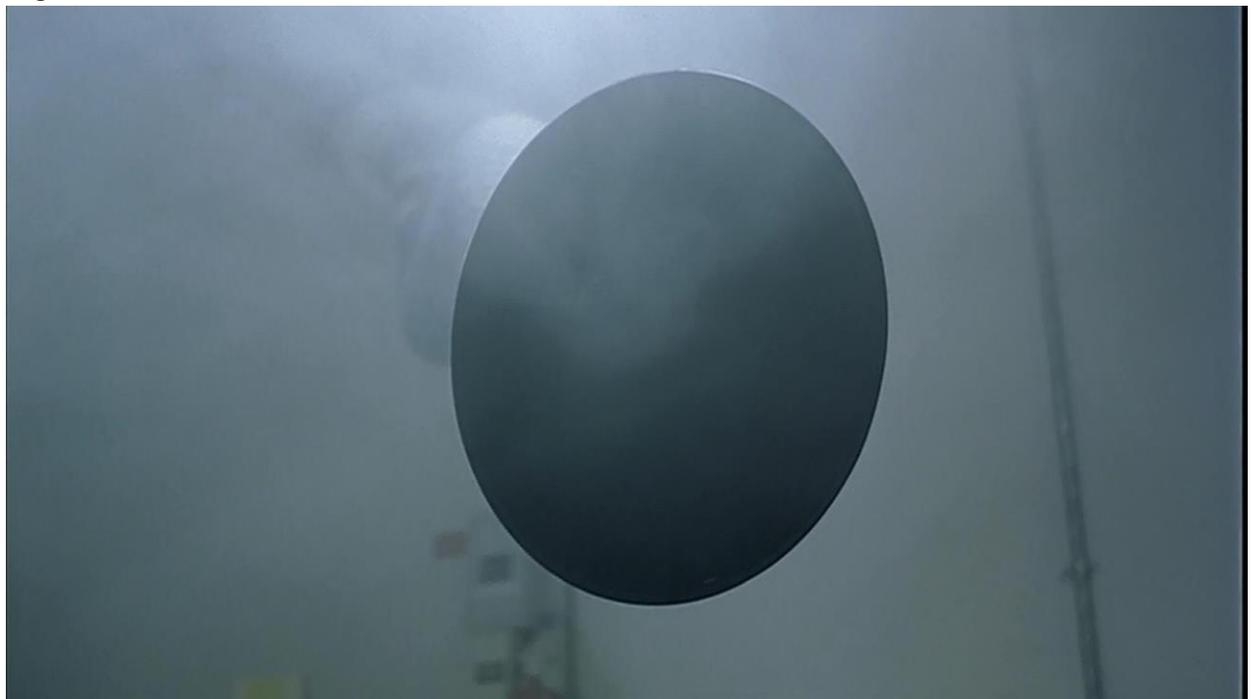


Figure 5.3



Figure 5.4



Figure 5.5



Figure 5.6



Figure 5.7



Figure 5.8



Figure 5.9



Figure 5.10



Figure 5.11



Figure 5.12



Figure 5.13



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