

DOCTORAL THESIS

Post-Traumatic Time Travels: Facing History in the Nonlinear Temporalities of Contemporary East Asian Cinema

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Post-Traumatic Time Travels:
Facing History in the Nonlinear Temporalities of Contemporary East
Asian Cinema

Abraham OVERBEEKE

A thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements

for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

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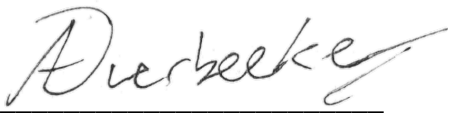
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07 2023

Declaration

I hereby declare that this thesis represents my own work which has been done after registration for the degree of PhD at Hong Kong Baptist University, and has not been previously included in a thesis or dissertation submitted to this or any other institution for a degree, diploma or other qualifications.

I have read the University's current research ethics guidelines, and accept responsibility for the conduct of the procedures in accordance with the University's Research Ethics Committee (REC). I have attempted to identify all the risks related to this research that may arise in conducting this research, obtained the relevant ethical and/or safety approval (where applicable), and acknowledged my obligations and the rights of the participants.

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Abstract

This thesis examines a selection of contemporary films from East Asia that together inhabit a narrative mode of ‘wayward time travel’ in which protagonists suffer from a kind of time sickness and an obsessive desire to turn back time and fix the course of history. This tendency is understood as a specific expression of the broader phenomenon of self-reflective time travel narratives that have exploded in popularity in contemporary East Asian popular culture, and which have been read in various contexts as responding to conditions of time pressure under compressed modernity. The corpus of films under discussion here never regain control over time and turn aimless or wayward, rather than focusing the story on regaining of control (or making use of) the anachronistic situation as in most time travel fiction of the same era. Scholarly discussion has often assigned to these films a sense of political subversion, positioning them in opposition to dominant notions of linear temporality that overlook regional and cultural unevenness under the guise of development and progress. Their cinematic temporalities are recognized as expressing the coming-together of incommensurable yet coexisting times that challenge the homogeneity of Western modernity’s secular historiography, while also producing cathartic counter-histories that respond to repressed national traumas.

This thesis fits within such interpretative projects of moving beyond a national cinema framework to examine shared experiences of compressed modernity in regional and translocal contexts while at the same time exploring the limits of these films’ critical potential. Close analyses of selected films across the region demonstrate a returning contradictory co-existence of linear and repetitive times, which mirrors historical conditions of rapid change at the same time as there is a failure of ‘moving on’. A lingering suspension of time is hidden under the guise of capitalist development in such contexts as the “50 years of no change” of Hong Kong, the integration of Chinese border regions into the national high-speed rail network, the Japanese lingering “long post-war”, and South Korea and Taiwan’s Cold War militarized states which endure even in the post-democratization era. The films at hand very consciously inhabit these historical moments and the plurality of times they produce, while simultaneously attempting to open up new horizons of future imagination – attempts which time and again end up in failure, obsessive repetition, or escapist fantasy. As such, these texts emerge as promising yet compromised projects of temporal critique that show the difficulty of thinking outside of the seemingly all-subsuming promise of progress.

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Table of Contents

Abstract.....	ii
Acknowledgements.....	iii
Introduction: Wayward Time Travel.....	1
Why 21st century East Asia? Time travels and compressed modernity	
Inter-media travelling across Korean, Japanese, and Sinophone contexts	
Art cinema as temporal critique	
Why wayward time travel? Inhabiting the spaces of time lag	
1. I want to go back! Layered inscriptions of time in <i>Peppermint Candy</i> , <i>Crosscurrent</i> , and <i>Cities of Last Things</i>	29
Standing for the nation: metonymy and national time	
Retracing the past and the times of the river	
From the future to the past: substitution without history	
2. Navigating the time of the Other: Guizhou as temporal environment in <i>Kaili Blues</i>	56
Poetry, poetics, and the political	
Photographing the ‘Other’ in Guizhou	
Dangmai: the long take as time travel	
3. Animating explosive temporalities: Fantasies of reversal/escape and the disappearance of history in <i>Mind Game</i>	89
Possible worlds: between history and fantasy	
Decisions make diverging worlds: <i>Mind Game</i> ’s video-game temporality	
4. The long shadow of Hong Kong’s suspended time: a belated reading of <i>2046</i>	123
A superimposition of unresolved times: the train to 2046	
The secret in a mode of repetitive storytelling: the ‘tree hole’	
From suspension to circulation	
Conclusion: Wayward time travel as intermedial mode.....	156
Bibliography.....	162

Introduction: Wayward Time Travel

In the end, as everyone expected, Li Xianji beat the game.

A door really did appear and it allowed him to go back to the past. At the same time, he discovered that this door was only one of many. When passing through these doors, one could arrive back at the first second of playing through the game, or perhaps at the first second after one's birth.

Li Xianji just wanted to go back to the first time he saw Wang Qian. So, until he found the right door, he could only repeat the same thing over and over again: to enter the world behind one door, play through and beat the game there, then enter another door and hope that behind it is the past he wants to go back to.

During this long process, Li Xianji began to become smooth ... His hands acquired a strange, unpleasant smell from rust, and his skin failed to detect the landing of mosquitoes in the summer...

Lee's Adventures (2009)

These final scenes of the animation short *Lee's Adventures* describe how the young Beijinger Li Xianji, detached from everyday life, obsessively attempts to go back in time to the moment before he and his girlfriend broke up. Li suffers from *chashizheng* (差時症) or “temporal dilation disorder” which makes him experience moments as short as minutes in a timescale of years, and vice-versa. The rare syndrome seems to be inspired by scientific understandings of general relativity as well as ostensibly universal feelings of romantic longing in the modern age – in the sense that waiting for a response to a mediated confession of feelings seems to freeze time. Furthermore, his drive towards time travel through the video game (which promises a portal to go back to the past) responds to the pressures and conditions of everyday life in an overworked, algorithmic world – governed by a tightly controlled linear temporality, within which a deviation from those norms is here pathologized. Under these repressed conditions, the gameric time travel offers a fantasy – not so much of escape from this world and its time, but one of return and the correction of mistakes.

Despite this desire of return, Li's travels serve to alienate him from his environment. For example, he suddenly realizes in one scene that the “People's Park” where he is about to meet someone, was demolished and should not exist anymore in the present. More than a year

has unknowingly passed by, and the park had meanwhile been rebuilt to its original state after “strong protest of the people.” Through incidents of misrecognition like this, time traveller Li is shown to negotiate not only his inner longings, desires, and pathological relation to his past, but his obsession negotiates (and tries to seek answers to) such things as the fast changing urban landscape under accelerating conditions of compressed modernity in 21st century urban centres like Beijing.

Although ‘temporal dilation disorder’ is described as a rare disease in the film, Li is hardly the only confused time traveller suffering it within the broader context of contemporary East Asian popular culture, where we can find many such post-traumatic instances of time travel. In fact, the film directly references another animation in which a frustrated young man obsessively travels in time to resolve failures: the 2004 Japanese film *Mind Game*. *Lee’s Adventures* borrows from this film not only the music for its opening scene,¹ but the short film’s animation style is also clearly inspired by *Mind Game*’s eclectic mix of photography, video game graphics, rough sketches, and traditional animation. Most importantly, *Mind Game*’s world also breaks down following the protagonist’s attempt to wrest control over time: his video-game style return to a previous point in narrative time (from which he attempts to correct his mistakes) becomes an endless mix of possible worlds that ‘could be’, just as Li discovers a world of doors that promise control but end up in an obsessive return.

In the same year as *Mind Game*, another film premiered which presents an unexpected connection, as it inhabits a starkly different genre. The protagonist of Hong Kong arthouse filmmaker Wong Kar-wai’s *2046* (2004) takes on a similar journey of time dilation and return, through the mechanism of a train which can bring one to a time where one can ‘recapture lost memories’. The time travel is here afforded by the act of writing science fiction stories – the protagonist is a pulp fiction writer who has to produce thousands of words

¹ *Lee’s Adventures* opens with the bossa nova song “Viva!” by composer Seiichi Yamamoto and singer Fayray, produced for the film *Mind Game*. In both that film and in *Lee’s Adventures*, the music accompanies a supercut-style montage of various scenes of life flashing by in quick succession that do not seem to share temporal continuity.

a day to make a living – and thus evolves under a similar time crunch as Li’s obsessive video game. The writer also suffers similar symptoms of time dilation: as he struggles to write, we see thousands of hours pass by within seconds of screen time. Both the pen hovering above the page as well as the characters within his science fiction story remain frozen in time, as the writer waits for his love interest to respond to his letter and break this extended moment of suspension.

The travels in each of these cases spring from a romantic failure or a traumatic loss of possibility of heterosexual union, suffered by the male protagonist before the start of the narrative. While romantically motivated, their post-traumatic time travels simultaneously seem to function as a strategy to cope with modern phenomena of temporal compression – as their time travels are in every case intimately wound up with the machines that work through modern time regulation such as trains, clocks, and digital media. Why do the confused time travels of these protagonists, which start out in clear response to such common issues but end up in an obsessive return rather than resolving them, find such remarkable resonance across the borders of East Asian audio-visual culture in the 21st century? This thesis examines this phenomenon through an analysis of a selection of films that together inhabit a narrative mode that can be called *wayward time travel*. These films exist on the fringes of the broader common genre of ‘time travel’ yet, as we will see, they are usually not approached academically as such. Traveling in time is however what they all do – although from a more inward-looking, existential dimension. Like the broader genre of time travel texts which have experienced a boom in popularity in contemporary East Asian popular culture, the narrative revolves around a loss of control over time which forces an introspection with regards to personal memory and identity in relation to history. In contrast to most such time travels, in which the narrative often revolves around regaining of control (or making use of) the anachronistic situation, the corpus of films under discussion here never regain control over time and turn aimless or wayward.

In this sense, the films inherit (and sometimes explicitly refer to) a cinematic lineage of films that work with a non-linear drifting temporality, such as those analysed by Gilles

Deleuze under his concept of the ‘time-image’ and which according to a broad body of scholarship extends from post-war European cinema into the edges of global art cinema today. In contrast to the wandering protagonists of the time-image’s “pure optical and sound situations” (Deleuze 1989: 3) though, there is actually a strong desire and drive for resolution, which however does not ultimately arrive. *Travel* then – an intended movement with destination in mind, but turned *wayward*.

The recognition of the protagonists’ travels as meaningful outside of their personal predicament is implied by the films themselves: they gesture towards larger meanings, even if it remains unspecified what its conclusions entail. Protagonists in every case seem to ‘stand for’ something – for example, the given name of Li Xianji (獻計) is not only a meta-joke as a near-homonym of *lixianji* (歷險記, ‘story of adventures’), but also literally means to ‘offer advice’: while Lee’s time travels might end up obsessive and unfruitful, his super-human scale of temporal experience should mean something beyond mere play and adventure. Meanwhile, *2046*’s title and story imply a connection to the year 2047, the end date of Hong Kong’s so-called “50 years of no change” of its transition to Chinese rule from 1997. As we will see in this film and the other examples of wayward time travel, the protagonist may be variously expected to stand for national consciousness, for a new generation, or for some other collective body that shares the kind of anxiety or trauma in response to which time travel is imagined as a way out. These implied ‘representations’ raise critical questions with regards to the protagonists and their actions: who do they represent (since they are all men), what do they teach us (since they all fail), or what ‘advice’ can their failures provide in response to the shared ‘disorder’?

The targets taken on by these films are always greater than what they can accomplish, but these failed attempts to overcome history will reveal the limits as well as the power of cinema to shape time in the contemporary context in which the medium is no longer the dominant force that it was in the era of high modernity. Through narrative structures that seem to promise a liberation from the unrelenting progress of time, the films actually

emphasize the impossibility of escape, and thereby offer a view into the contradictions of the compressed modern experience. Their stories all arrive at a situation where the key trauma cannot be located: the wound is there, the pain lingers, but any search for its origins end up in a failed repetition. As we will see, this occluded trauma is the shared experience of compressed modernity – a condition that is expressed and understood within specific national contexts, but the commensurability of these conditions in fact becomes visible and legible through this shared cinematic mode of wayward time travel. As pieces of speculative fiction, these works each enter into a ‘what-if’ mode of temporal exploration in response to the context at hand. Understood from this perspective of compressed modernity then, the question becomes how these films’ time travels *make literal* some of the temporal contradictions arising from their historical conditions. And, even if their obsessive temporal returns may not solve the predicament of failed progress, how are these encounters with the logics of time under modernity insightful, and are they able to produce a substantive critique of time?

Why 21st century East Asia? Time travels and compressed modernity

The cross-border time syndrome suffered by these protagonists is a specific expression of a broader phenomenon of self-reflective time travel narratives that have exploded in popularity in contemporary East Asian popular culture, and which have been read in various contexts as reflecting the conditions of time pressure under *compressed modernity*. This concept was coined by Chang Kyung-sup to understand the squeezed temporality of modernization experienced in South Korea, where a lot of economic and social changes occurred within a short period of time during the economic boom era: the ‘miracle on the Han river’ of the second half of the 20th century. Korea’s engagement with modernity under these high-growth conditions happened through a “radically extensive and unprecedentedly condensed process of simulating, materializing, and utilizing the modern (reads Western or American) systems of political, economic, and sociocultural life” (Chang 2022: viii). Originally posited in 1999, the concept is born out of a post-1997 moment in the shadow of the Asian financial crisis,

when the country's economy verged on total collapse and was bailed out by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) under stringent austerity conditions. The crisis produced a sudden wavering of trust put into this compressed modernization process, and triggered re-evaluations of the country's economic miracle that brought into focus the consequences and costs of such unprecedented development. These conditions also allowed for (or, forced) a moment of reflection on the workings of this time compression, which had led to "the dynamic coexistence of mutually disparate historical and social elements" (Chang 2010: 320) in South Korean society.

This uneven coexistence of temporalities expresses itself in a paradox whereby seemingly excessive progress and stasis in some ways characterize the same period. Even as the nations of East Asia have undergone rapid changes in various waves, a set of perpetuating regional stalemates which linger in the background. Taiwan and South Korea for example, despite transitions to democratic governance in the 1980s and a seemingly successful integration into the international world of capital, are still militarized states whose recognition depends on the antagonism with their northern neighbours. The Cold War is still very much ongoing in these contexts, frozen into a state of suspended war or 'non-war' which still impacts everyday life and the long term planning of its people. Hong Kong similarly languishes in an incomplete project of national wholeness, where a surreal political promise of 'no change' had to be made in anticipation of the 1997 Handover to Chinese sovereignty which suspended the shock and the friction that this realignment of history and identity would cause.

Such contradictions between stasis and change furthermore result from a collective experience of the promise of the 'economic miracle' – as much a prophetic prediction as a description of a supernatural present state. The continuous expansion necessitated by this promise relies on the labour of bodies that it promises to liberate. This mechanism of the economic boom, along with its mobilization of gendered bodies and affect, presents itself as a collective experience in the region even if it is experienced asynchronously. As a set of waves rippling across the region, these 'miracles' have successively functioned as shifting reservoirs

of labour, natural resources, and markets for investment to serve the ever-expanding capitalist world since World War II (as already postulated by Akamatsu Kaname in 1935 through the model of the “flying geese paradigm”, in which Asian economies catch up to the West and develop in turn, relying on the advances of their more advanced neighbours – thus placing all on a linear developmental temporality). The repetitive promise is invariably followed by disillusion and failure, which in 21st century East Asia is expressed in such terms as the *Sampo* generation (삼포, three giving-up) in South Korea, the *Satori* (悟り), enlightenment) generation in Japan as well as the more recent phenomenon of ‘lying flat’ (*tang ping* 躺平) in Mainland China. All of these signify a collective response of ‘giving up’ on the dreams of a successful career and the establishment of a nuclear family in light of the socio-economic realities and labour demands that these dreams seek to reframe.

While the conditions described here seem initially to focus mostly on an economic perspective (compressed modernity as a development of aggressive expansion that has human costs and carries inflated risks), the experience of compressed modernity is found in every aspect of society in everyday life, where temporal acceleration can be found to be very unevenly lived. Chang Kyung-sup, himself as a social scientist, emphasizes that film and other popular media often most deeply articulate these experiences, and enable their resonance beyond the inward-looking national discussion:

In a stark contrast to the virtually *intended inefficacy* of conventional social sciences in analyzing South Korean realities, ... many of South Korea’s films, television dramas, novels, and various performing arts have quite admirably articulated what its people and society have gone through in the endlessly turbulent but frequently spectacular moments of its modern history. Their skillful mastery of South Korea’s social realities and experiences often enjoys such praises from media and expert critics as would elicit strong jealousy from academic social scientists. ... Their global popularities attest to a sort of transnationalized (aesthetic) reflection on common or diverse conditions of human life and society in reference to the South Korean context. (Chang 2022: 5)

This movement of transnational reflection and referencing is interesting for our discussion here, as it is the shared time experience of the various ‘national’ cinemas or cultural production centres that this thesis aims to understand. Within the social sciences, the concept of compressed modernity has already been fruitfully adapted to discuss other East Asian

contexts where it has found resonance in understanding similar historical conditions, proving its relevance for example in the Chinese Mainland context (Shi 2017, Pun and Zhang 2017, Liang and Sun 2022), in Taiwan (Lan 2014), Japan (Ochiai 2014), and in comparative East Asia cases (Chang 2010, Richey 2022).

Focusing on media and specifically film, it is interesting to note that while cinema is no longer the dominant medium of the 21st century, it did provide the start for this phenomenon of *hallyu* (the ‘Korean Wave’) as mentioned by Chang in the above discussion, and he references the Academy Award-winning film *Parasite* (2021) there as the epitome of narrating South Korean’s experiences under compressed modernity which resonated across the world. In this example and in many others that we will discuss, the medium of film retains relevance in the digital age with its accelerated expansion of media forms that are much more capable of capturing people’s everyday attention. Within the context of contemporary transnational Asian popular culture, film is still able to function as a resonating ‘event’ that captures the moment of its production and/or reception, which can then continue to accrue relevance as an object of shared memory or continued meaning-making (as a ‘cult’ film or ‘classic’). The survey of texts below will demonstrate that the genre of time travel fiction provides an ideal vantage point from which to understand how cinema as an aging medium continues to play a role in these transnationally reverberating ‘reflections’ that Chang hints at. The examples of the broader phenomenon of time travel narratives in 21st century East Asia that follow, highlight cinema’s evolving role within an expanding media ecology. We will see that time-bending stories often rely heavily on medium-specific affordances to facilitate their temporal exploration, while they simultaneously play out across different media (e.g. in franchise models of cultural production or other forms of adaptation, branching, and repetition) and through such inter-media movements often ‘borrow’ the temporal workings of other media into new hybrid forms. This broader view of transnational echoes as well as intermedia borrowing that characterize these time travel narratives will set the stage for the analysis of our specific subset of ‘wayward time travel’ narratives later, which can be seen as reacting to and attempting to overcome some of the limitations of the genre.

Inter-media travelling across Korean, Japanese, and Sinophone contexts

Since the late 1990s, as many scholars have observed, the explosion of time travel narratives coincides in many East Asian contexts with a moment of pause, in which a sense of stepping back and reflection the recent history of compressed development is possible. In the case of South Korea, its economic crisis and the accompanying loss of trust in the ideology of developmentalism as well as its compromised democratic system of government, created the backdrop for what would be described by Joseph Jonghyun Jeon (2019) as ‘IMF cinema.’ The films that belong under this conception present epistemologically uncertain stories where characters attempt (but mostly fail) to figure out *what happened* – a “common question in the post-IMF Crisis period that expresses in dismay the sense that Korean modernity—its so-called compressed modernity—happened too fast” (Jeon 3). Within this broader moment of cinematic reflection, time travel narratives suddenly emerged as a common genre that allowed an unpacking of the complexities of compressed temporality, or as David Martin-Jones describes it, as “decompressing” modernity (46). He analyses how the films *Calla* (1999), *Ditto* (2000) and *2009: Lost Memories* (2002), explore the consequences of choices as well as chance encounters through protagonists who can travel back in time. In most cases however, their wish to change history is denied. The possibility of return in these narratives seems to hint at a radical alternative to known history, yet these films’ conclusions entail rather a mourning of the ‘inevitable’ recent past – and this insistence to “lay the past to rest” coincides with romantic storylines that “suggest that immanent national rejuvenation is possible by reaffirming a particular, conservative gender politics that developed under compressed modernity” (Martin-Jones 46). This analysis demonstrates how a potentially radical narrative strategy of revising history is easily folded back into the reproductive politics of the developmental state – a movement that we will see repeats itself in many contexts.

While Martin-Jones stresses in this analysis that time travels often negotiate *national* identity in their specific (South Korean) context, and that similar narratives in other national cinemas are not “necessarily prompted by similar concerns” or “[function] to the same ends” (46), a comparative exploration of the contemporaneously emerging East Asian time travel

narratives will show a large extent of resonance of similar anxieties over the working of history in relation to compressed modernity. In the Japanese context, time travel narratives already appeared frequently since the 1970s in novels, manga, and anime, yet the turn of the century similarly heralded a turn towards reflexivity and an explicit engagement with history. Ulrich Heinze (2012) describes the earlier ‘phase’ of time travel narratives in Japanese popular culture as “marked by the technological control of time travel, which enables the heroes to carry out missions to alter the past” (164), whereas more recent texts such as the manga *Zipang* (2001) and *JIN* (2001) in what he describes as the second phase, are marked by a loss of control over time, where protagonists are inadvertently sucked into a historical moment which proves hard to change. This temporal return however works in such texts as a learning moment, its function then is not so much a mission or conquest but a meaningful encounter with (and reminder of) history (Heinze 165). This type of narrative is furthermore followed up in Heinze’s argument by a third phase which turns away from history, inward, to a more ‘postmodern’ exploration of the psyche. In such texts – examples include the manga *Kimi to boku no ashiato* (2010) and the manga/anime/film franchise *Thermae Romae* (2008-), the protagonists “no longer rely on machines or technological devices, and travel by losing control and tumbling into a swirl, a drift or a whirl wind” (Heinze 175). Rather than producing an instructive encounter with history, the loss of control of these ‘postmodern’ time travels “[fulfil] an almost psychotherapeutic function” (Heinze 165) which resonates with audiences “in a time of crisis and uncertainty” (166).

It is interesting to note that Heinze does employ a transnational comparative approach in this analysis of such ‘phases’ of time travel, with American and European popular culture (especially Hollywood cinema) as the grounds for comparison here. Read in relation to those contexts, the Japanese examples are understood as “inevitably affected by and perhaps echoing patterns in Western narratives but with a certain time lag” (Heinze 164). The similarity in language – *time lag* – to descriptions of compressed modernity, with its delayed digestion and adaptation of Western modernity, are striking. Indeed, the initial explosion in popularity of American time

travel narratives was much earlier around the 1950s, while a self-reflexive turn occurred from the 1980s with films such as *Back to the Future* (1985) and *Groundhog Day* (1993). While the theoretical implications of lag or delay (and their origins in the conditions of uneven development) will be explored later, the juxtaposition of Japan and ‘the West’ is not as central to our concern here. Instead, Heinze’s analysis and its positing of these ‘phases’ of Japanese time travel is striking in its temporal alignment or *coevalness* (rather than lag) vis-à-vis the shift in Korean cinema discussed earlier. This quite straightforward (yet not expansively explored) connection hints at the necessity for a comparative East Asian approach beyond the existing ‘national cinema’ as well as ‘Asia-West’ frames of reference. A further exploration of similar themes at similar times in Chinese popular culture will demonstrate this.

In the Chinese context, time travel narratives similarly emerged in popular culture since the 1990s in cinema, TV series, as well as the medium of online novels or “internet literature” within which “time-travel writing has become one of the dominant genres” (Xu 113). Starting with cinema, a key film which launched the genre to centrality in the Sinophone world is Stephen Chow’s *A Chinese Odyssey* (1995), a comically subverted version of the classical Chinese novel *Journey to the West* (c. 1592). Its subversion of the original text is produced primarily through the manipulation of time: the story is set 500 years after the novel’s events, when a reincarnation of the Monkey King uses a ‘moonlight treasure box’ to travel back in time to save his lover who has committed suicide. Aside from the intricate mechanisms of time travel and comedic and philosophical plot points in the film itself, it is the film’s reception which paints the clearest picture of the changing relation to time travel in the Chinese popular culture context. On its release in 1995, *A Chinese Odyssey* was not an instant success, having a mediocre box office performance in both Hong Kong and Mainland China. Over the years thereafter however, the film slowly gained popularity across Chinese college campuses, and ultimately even gained a major cult status which spawned its own genres of remixes, memes, and everyday references to scenes and pieces of dialogue from the film (Qian 308). This striking ‘time lag’ can be explained from different angles – on the one hand, its initial unpopularity could just be due to the lack of promotion by Mainland

distributors who did not expect there to be much of an audience for such a local *mouleitau* (冇厘頭) film – a specifically Hong Kong comedy genre which relies on nonsensical Cantonese jokes. On the other hand, it could be that this genre was only later understood and appreciated by the Mainland audience, as Kun Qian argues: “Only by the turn of the 21st Century when the critical terms such as ‘postmodernity’ and ‘deconstruction’ became popular on campus, did scholars and students realize the charm of [*mouleitau*] and the contribution of the movie to Chinese cinema” (Qian 324). Finally, the technical invention of the VCR player (and its associated practices and industries of pirated film copies) which had become widely available in the later 1990s made the film’s growing popularity possible. As Xiao Liu argues, it is this device which allows for the necessary repeated viewing of scenes from the film (its time travel plot is convoluted enough to baffle audiences upon first viewing) that works something akin to the ‘moonlight treasure box’ that the Monkey King uses to traverse time in the film itself – and this name *yueguang baohe* (月光寶盒) was subsequently even used in colloquial parlance to refer to similar home cinema devices (Liu 886).

The unprecedented spread of this time travel film through new technological networks mirrors the workings of Chinese internet literature, where writers of time travel fiction have gained popularity through interactions with fans and by collaborative writing. Within the literary genre of *chuanyue* (穿越), which comprises stories of protagonists who travel back in imperial Chinese history, one of the key works is the ongoing novel-series *Illumine Lingao* (2009-) by writer Chuiniuzhe (吹牛者). This story revolves around a group of travellers who go back from the present day to the late Ming-era to establish a utopian industrial society based on current-day knowledge. Its origins can be found in online bulletin board discussions from 2006 where a group of internet users were speculating how they could change history if they were able to bring back modern technologies to the late Ming era, and these discussions grew into a larger collective world-building exercise that the writer of *Lingao* then produced into the novel form, including in the process many of his fellow worldbuilders as characters (Gaffric 196).

While this may seem on the surface as an escapist, ahistorical utopian project (which necessarily avoids confrontations with modern history too sensitive for Mainland Chinese fiction), the temporal return still produces a provocative engagement with history. The choice in *chuanyue* novels to go back to the imperial age and specifically the Ming dynasty, when China was ruled by a Han ethnic dynasty and was at its height of regional Asian power, signals a kind of ethno-nationalist nostalgia – in bypassing the modern era and the century of ‘national humiliation,’ writers allow the “‘rising’ modern Chinese to be sent to the other side of a ‘humiliating’ history, to ‘fix’ that history for their ancestors” (Li 141). In such analyses, the fixing or correction (*xiuzheng* 修正) of history uses the same language as the fixing attempted by Li Xianji in his personal quest discussed before, but more explicitly extended on a national scale. These *chuanyue* writings can thus have a kind of nationalist tendency, but at the same time the genre is often critiqued by conservative Chinese newspapers or state media. In fact, *chuanyue* TV series, that are often based on such online novels and have gained massive followings in China as well as elsewhere in Asia, have come under great scrutiny and were even banned from state broadcasting networks in 2011 in a statement that explicitly labelled them as “incorrect creative works.”² After all, these stories do offer possibilities of “counter-writing of history”: they show a “desire to transcend the established laws of space–time to rethink the historical conditions of China’s development [which] undoubtedly reveals a consciousness of the existence of alternative paths” (Gaffric 199).

The paths offered to *chuanyue* protagonists produce something of a video game narrative, where time seems as malleable from the perspective of the player as space. As in the other examples of time travel media however, the limits of such control over history once again take centre-stage, when these narratives “at the same time self-consciously [acknowledge] the virtual setting as a temporary suspending of the extradiegetic world” (Liu 886). The protagonists once again run up against an unchangeable history despite their

² “Notice of the State Administration of Radio, Film and Television on the Announcement of Records of Nationwide Television Drama Shooting and Production for March 2011.” 广电总局关于 2011 年 3 月全国拍摄制作电视剧备案公示的通知 http://www.nrta.gov.cn/art/2011/3/31/art_113_5301.html

seemingly extraordinary abilities – in the case of modern protagonists visiting the imperial past, their “‘prescient’ knowledge is almost useless except for giving the time-traveler a sense of doomed ending that is given to her even before her own story unfolds, just like a game player who knows that the plot is preprogrammed” (Liu 887).

The discussion of this genre then, together with the earlier examples, demonstrates the wide occurrence of time travel narratives across East Asian popular culture since the mid-1990s, whose themes in each case revolve around the question of return and correction. Despite their escapist tendencies, these temporal returns inevitably respond to recent history – often in a national context, but these responses show a striking resonance despite the difference between the specific historical events relevant to the story. The psychological backward movement and search for alternative historical paths in these media shows a close affinity with the experience of compressed modernity, especially as the narratives in each case gravitate towards examinations of ‘development’ as a temporal condition and questions of an individual’s control over time within this seemingly unchangeable logic of perpetual change.

Furthermore, these examples show that time travel is necessarily an intermedial affair that connects online cultures to literature and audio-visual culture both in consumption and narrative structure. It is no coincidence that these time travels emerge simultaneously with the advent of the digital age, as video-game and database style temporal logics of branching and repetition find their way into the older time-based media of film and TV. The coming section will further elaborate on the ways such nonlinear temporalities have been theorized in film studies, and how in many accounts they are related to a sense of subversion and resistance to dominant structures of time control. This question of resistance then becomes an important point of discussion when we return to our specific subset of wayward time travel, in which attempts to regain control over time repeatedly lead back to a point of failure. The back-and-forth between the ways these narratives on the one hand adapt nonlinear temporal techniques born from the conditions of compressed modernity, and on the other how their exploration gets swallowed up by the same repressive logics that they attempt to overcome, will then gain

contextual relevance when we return to the regional and local experiences of compressed modernity. It is in 'local' (always in relation to a larger entity such as the nation, or the globe) experience of time that these films try to intervene and make meaning, and it is through comparisons of their local negotiations toward the larger region that we can draw out clearer understandings of how compressed modernity is lived – unevenly, yet ubiquitously – across contemporary East Asia.

Art cinema as temporal critique

In the previous pages, I have contextualized the phenomenon of wayward time travel mostly in relation to pop cultural tendencies within which cinema is but one of many sites across which such time travel stories are able to be conceived, distributed, and experienced in hybrid forms. From a more cinema-centred perspective, the time since the 1990s is however also one in which a cinema explicitly engaged with the workings and experience of time has become recognized across East Asia, spurred on by a global art cinema circuit that creates demands for regionally defined cinematic styles. Internationally acclaimed auteurs such as Tsai Ming-Liang, Wong Kar-wai, and Park Chan-wook, as well as more 'local' works of genre cinema have been read under varying temporally inflected frameworks such as slow cinema (eg. Lim 2014), temporal drift (Ma 2010), immiscible times (Lim 2009), moribund masculinity (Yoo 2012), atemporal cinema (McGowan 2011), and hybrid movement-/time-images (Martin-Jones 2006). The theoretical engagement of this thesis shares interest with many of these approaches which focus on films that call attention to time in a particular way: not so much to its passing (as is the focus of 'slow' cinema), but through temporal intersections of different times in the same place. What is at stake is much more causality (and the failures thereof): what can characters do, what kind of temporal path can they carve, and how do these paths intersect with other paths? The grounds of possibility for asking such questions is a technical intervention in the flow of time, or a form of 'time travel' or nonlinearity which can be motivated in different ways. The encounter with events and characters 'out of order' forces us

to question the routes and directions of time, and can make visible the present of different 21st century East Asian locales as palimpsests. Before delving into these more regional and local understandings, it is worth discussing more global approaches to such nonlinear temporalities in cinema to show how this phenomenon can generate sometimes contradictory readings depending on theorists' frames of reference.

For Todd McGowan, in his book *Out of Time: Desire in Atemporal Cinema* (2011), this kind of film does something opposite to Gilles Deleuze's conception of the "time-image" that dominates much writing on temporal experimentations in narrative cinema. Whereas in Deleuze, the experience of the passage of time functions as the soul of cinema, the time in the films discussed here becomes abstracted from the immediacy of its flow. And whereas the purpose of cinema in Deleuze is to "restore our belief in the world" by reconnecting man "to what he sees and hears" (172), these films instead produce worlds that time and again emphasize their artificiality and exactly the failure of belief. They produce instead an *atemporal* alternative: "Though the cinema can present an authentic experience of temporality, it can also create a world where time as we understand it no longer exists, and the latter has recently emerged as the radical edge of contemporary cinema" (McGowan 30). For McGowan, this radical edge consists of films that reproduce, through their unusual plot structures, the temporality of the psychoanalytical drive. From this perspective, such films can be read as a 'countercurrent' in cinema that rejects notions of progressive time by emphasizing the foundational moment of tragic loss, which is constitutive of the subject and which produces a lack that, no matter how much time passes, can never be filled:

Time promises the possibility of a pleasing escape, but this is a false promise. Though cinema has been implicated in this promise, there have always been countercurrents within cinematic history, and the atemporal mode brings cinema's ability to disrupt time into the foreground. The close relationship between film and the experience of time is explicitly displaced as these films thrust the spectator into the logic of the drive and its repetition of loss. (McGowan 14)

McGowan's account provides an interesting point of tension in reading these films as 'atemporal', as this implies a move to read time in spatial terms. Critical theorists from have

often scrutinized the links of the spatialization of time with “exploitation and regimentation”, as McGowan acknowledges, yet he argues that this “atemporal cinematic mode challenges this identification and makes the case for an ethical possibility inherent in the spatialization of time” (20).

An opposing view is taken by Bliss Cua Lim, who identifies a conflict in the form of what she calls ‘immiscible times’ in several Asian films in her book *Translating Time: Cinema, the Fantastic, and Temporal Critique* (2009). Working with ghost movies and other ‘fantastic’ films in Philippine, Chinese, Korean and Japanese cinemas, Lim finds a “persistence of supernaturalism, of occult modes of thinking encoded in fantastic narratives” which complements the occurrence of “multiple times that fail to coincide with the measured, uniform intervals quantified by clock and calendar” (2). She labels the subversive temporal elements in these films as ‘immiscible’, since they resist the act of “translating plural times into homogeneous chronology” (Lim 18), a project which “[casts] the nonmodern as a precursor to modernity” (19). Through supernatural elements which cannot be ‘mixed’ (hence immiscible) into a unified present, these films then build on a critique of homogeneous empty time that Lim traces back to the thought of Henri Bergson as well as postcolonial theory. In the latter of these two, the most significant theoretical framework is Dipesh Chakrabarty’s critique of how Western secular historiography systematically dismisses temporalities outside that of modernity (and thus ‘translates’ them into homogeneous time). For Bergson, the problem of temporal translation lies in the spatialization of time in everyday linguistic renderings as well as in such technologies as the clock, which leads to “the misconstrual of heterogeneous time as homogeneous space—which leaves us unable to recognize our own freedom and duration” (Lim 17).

By positioning these films as critique of the process of temporal translation (both in the Bergsonian sense of spatializing time, and the postcolonial sense of imposing a universal temporality onto heterogeneously lived histories), Lim recognizes them as performing a *temporal* critique, rather than an *atemporal* one. Her analyses emphasize the existence of locally rooted temporalities that resist subsumption under universal logics of time, rather than

embodying a universal failure of the subject under the inescapable logic of time as argued by McGowan. This starkly different approach could be partly explained by their choice of films: when it comes to Hong Kong cinema, Lim focuses on the 1987 film *Rouge* which examines questions of change and progress through the returning ‘premodern’ figure of the ghost; McGowan focuses on the beforementioned *2046* in which time travel is instead afforded through modern technologies. Both approaches share however a position that these films produce a subversion of the notion of progress. McGowan’s reading recognizes in them the circular logic of the psychoanalytical drive that proves the falseness of the fantasy of linear time, and proposes *juissance* and an embrace of this logic as a way out of obsessive return. Lim’s approach sees them as provincializing the linear time of Western modernity as one of many, and exposing this temporal logic as a necessary illusion, or in Chakrabarty’s terms as an “indispensable but inadequate” (Chakrabarty 6)³ logic that provides the grounds for a critique that resists its universalization.

While both approaches are convincing and provide important contributions in recognizing the role of cinema in the negotiation over contemporary experiences of time, their focus on these films as critique may at times downplay the ambiguity of the position taken by many of these time-traversing films. As we will see in the later analyses, these films’ time travels are often revealed to be self-obsessed and fruitless, reinforcing temporal return as an inward-looking masculine endeavour that reifies the ‘rules of the game’ (i.e. the laws of linear time) or ends up emphasizing the impossibility of overcoming the forces of history. While this repeated spectre of failure is recognized in McGowan’s argument, he ultimately positions failure precisely as the ground of possibility to *overcome* linear time. In his analysis of *2046* for example, he understands this film to position ‘eternity’ in spatial rather than temporal terms, arguing that the translation of the time ‘2047’ into a physical rail destination

³ Chakrabarty is referencing European thought more generally in this passage, but Lim borrows this phrase to demonstrate how linear time cannot be fully repudiated or done away with; as with European thought in the case of understanding non-European modernities, linear time provides critical tools and grounds for critique even as it is at the same time a limited framework for understanding experiences of modernity.

or a hotel room makes it accessible in a way that the temporal ‘eternity’ desired by the protagonist was not. As I will revisit in my analysis of *2046*, such a reading of the train as a ‘solution’ to the problems caused by the figure of progressive time is difficult to uphold within the context of Hong Kong history to which the film is talking. I will argue, building on Lim’s account of the co-existence of multiple immiscible times, that the temporalities in films like *2046* layer on top of each other to produce an ambiguous palimpsest that tries to temporally renegotiate the possibilities of the local vis-à-vis the larger geopolitical situation – the spectre of national integration in the case of this specific film. Within such a project, the failure of the escape from history (attempted by both the protagonist and the film itself) can show us how identity and locality are temporally determined in the situation of compressed modernity. In this approach, the films can tell us about the ambiguous experiences of compressed modernity across East Asian locales without resorting to postmodern conceptions of such places as ‘rootless’ – since these time travels do often try to go back to a sense of rootedness which exists but which is always already haunted by another spectre of imperial or colonial history.

Another theoretical approach that traces the ghosts of such history from a cinematic chronopolitical perspective and emphasizes the ambiguity of these films in the process, is Jean Ma’s *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema* (2010). Ma argues that Chinese art cinemas, especially the works of Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-liang, and Wong Kar-wai, have “crafted a distinctive idiom, a cinema of time, across the realms of national and transnational film culture” (4). This distinctive idiom displays many similar aesthetic and narratological qualities such as a “sense of asynchrony and disjointed time”, “uncanny doublings and juxtapositions of seemingly unconnected moments and places, flashbacks and digressions that confuse the boundaries among temporal planes” (Ma 7). These phenomena are read in the context of contemporary Chinese cinemas which have become more reflexive with regards to historicity, and have responded to issues of migration and diaspora between China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and the rest of the Sinophone world. The films she studies can then be seen as forming a “chronopolitical undercurrent” which looks for “aesthetic and

political possibilities of cinematic contingency as a basis for alternative imaginings of identity and narrative” (Ma 15).

One such possibility emerges from Ma’s analysis of *A City of Sadness* (Hou Hsiao-hsien 1989), which highlights the intersection of subjectivity and history that will become crucial in the discussions to come. Ma describes how flashbacks in the film are interwoven in such a way that the discernment of where one begins or ends becomes difficult, which troubles the understanding of whose perspective (or whose time) we are seeing. This technique of temporal ambiguity, deployed in a film which was the first to openly address the repressions that became known as the White Terror in Taiwanese history, creates a kind of “plural subject of memory emerging across time, collectively authored by an exchange of stories and objects” (Ma 40). This observation is part of her argument that Hou Hsiao-hsien’s films not only question the ‘accepted’ national histories by providing a kind of ‘history from below’, but that they also interrogate the process of history itself by complicating notions of memory and identity.

The work of Hou, and the Taiwan New Cinema (TNC, 1982-1990) movement more broadly, is another legacy that is evoked by the post-1990s wayward time travel films under examination here, which rely on similar techniques to engage history from a locally inflected cinematic temporality that has transnational aspirations. This ‘art cinema’ legacy works as a frame of reference alongside the emergence of time travel genre media discussed before, and just as in that context, the reworking of the themes of TNC in 21st century East Asian films brings up questions of belatedness, time lag, and uneven development. A key filmmaker in whose work such questions repeatedly emerge, and whose style can function as something of a bridge between the serious ‘art cinema’ aspirations of TNC and the more genre-inflected films discussed in this dissertation, is Tsai Ming-liang, who ‘comes after’ the TNC and is considered part of the ‘Second New Wave.’ This temporalization of Tsai is significant: as Ma points out, these successive ‘new waves’ that together constitute the New Chinese Cinemas “circulate through the well-worn channels of distribution and reception carved out by the first wave of art cinema of the 1950s and 1960s, embodied in the *Nouvelle Vague*” (73). Both in

the sense of film networks then, as well as ideologically (relying on the modernist promise of newness and a break from tradition that signals a national artistic development), these waves are ‘new’ at the same time as they are positioned as a belated repetition of a faraway cultural phenomenon.

Tsai and other new wave filmmakers are of course not simply emulating mid-20th century European art cinema, as evidenced for example by the wealth of references and homages to Chinese cinemas in his films. Yet there is a tendency, by both filmmakers and critics, to understand Tsai and his contemporary’s works from a perspective of belated modernity. Ma brings up Fredric Jameson’s analysis of TNC director Edward Yang’s *The Terrorizers* (1986) which, he argues “seems to raise the question of the belated emergence of a kind of modernism in the modernizing Third World, at a moment when the so-called advanced countries are themselves sinking into full postmodernity” (ctd. in Ma 85). Elsewhere, Jameson lists Tsai among a small selection of contemporary art filmmakers who “seem to renew the claims of high modernism in a period in which that aesthetic and its institutional preconditions seem extinct” (Jameson 1). Without delving further into Jameson’s arguments, it is worth noting how in these observations and in Tsai’s own positioning of himself vis-à-vis mid-20th century *auteur* filmmakers, the ghost of European cinema infuses the transcultural citation of his films with a sense of time lag. In an essay on Tsai’s *What Time is it There* (2001), Fran Martin denotes this sense as ‘temporal dysphoria’ or time-sickness, a conceptualization reminiscent of the ‘temporal dilation disorder’ experienced in *Lee’s Adventures*. *What Time* revolves around Hsiao Kang, a watch salesman whose father has recently passed away, and Shiang Chyi, a woman who buys a dual-time travel watch from Hsiao Kang before setting off to Paris. The film shifts between the times of Taipei and Paris as well as the time inhabited by the deceased father, whose ghost appears in various forms. A key plot point that performs temporal dysphoria is Hsiao Kang’s urge to consume French culture (including Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) which is cited extensively) and his obsession with setting clocks back to Paris time, after his encounter with the traveller to France. The protagonist’s obsessive temporal return comments at once on the “strongly

hierarchized relations between centre and periphery; west and non-west; and, arguably, between European film and its ‘others’”, while also performing Tsai’s own cinephilia and “mirroring the film’s own self-reflexive desire to ‘turn back time’ in order to re-inhabit the lost moment of the *nouvelle vague*” (Martin n.pag).

While these scenes have already been discussed extensively and insightfully by Martin, Ma, and others, the relevance of this film to our discussion here is, on the one hand, to demonstrate how such ‘time sickness’ extends beyond pop cultural time travel narratives to find resonance in an art cinema discourse that is concerned with questions of repetition and belatedness vis-à-vis European cinema. Furthermore, it raises key questions for the broader phenomenon of shared ‘temporal dysphoria’ – beyond *What Time* and Tsai’s work – of how the protagonist’s desire for return (motivated by failed expectations of heteronormative union) exists alongside the framing of that desire by the film, as well as the “film’s own desire” to turn back time. This question becomes key when investigating the wayward time travel films in which the protagonists *do* in fact get to live out their obsession of temporal return in some form (whether only within their interior psychology is often left ambiguous), in contrast to Hsiao Kang who is stuck setting clocks and watching old films. Lastly, this example shows how the ‘time lag’ haunting these narratives of obsessive return are haunted by uneasy geopolitical structures of centre and periphery. Although the mythologized ‘Europe’ of Second Wave Taiwanese cinema disappears somewhat to the background in the regional ‘wayward time travel’ films discussed here, its place as temporal Other is taken over by alternative centre-periphery dynamics on the regional East Asian and national scale, as the next section will discuss.

Even as ‘Europe’ as a signifier in these cases mostly disappears, the spectre of ‘time lag’ continues to haunt the screen. For the regional time-obsessed films of the new millennium, Taiwan New Cinema in some ways takes over the role of cinematic interlocutor from mid-20th century European art cinema. Lim Song Hwee hints at such a next ‘wave’ of citation and doubling in the conclusion of his book on *Taiwan Cinema as Soft Power* (2021), which is concerned with the “Afterlives of Taiwan New Cinema.” Lim ends his discussion by

comparing a key shot of Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* (discussed at length later) to one from Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996) which it stylistically quotes (img. 1.1). To Lim, "Bi Gan's homage shot epitomizes TNC's afterlife: a textual haunting that acts like a palimpsest that would allow a knowing viewer to see Hou's shot beneath it, an audio-visual resurrection brought back by alien filmmakers through cinephilic obsession" (Lim 2021: 154). As will be discussed at length later, Bi Gan's film constructs its own complicated referential interplay in which Hou is one among many reference points that make up a 'palimpsest' of different times, alongside for example Andrei Tarkovsky's cinema as well as Buddhist aphoristic scriptures. The aim of this dissertation is then to discern the layers of these palimpsests, especially attending to how they negotiate issues of individual or local identity in relation to national and regional temporal regimes. The following section will elaborate this point, showing how these wayward time travel films place their protagonist in a temporally marginalized position from which they aim to gain control over their temporality, but in each case face up to larger forces of history that are beyond escape.



Fig. 0.1 *Goodbye South, Goodbye* and *Kaili Blues*

Why wayward time travel? Inhabiting the spaces of time lag

In the discussions above, we have encountered three realms in which a condition of belatedness becomes attached to East Asian locales: the lateness at the roots of 'compressed modernity,' the spread of time travel narratives 'after' Euro-American science fiction, and the new waves of Chinese cinemas haunted by mid-20th century art cinema. Time lag furthermore

comes up in more regional cross-border contexts such as the belated success of *A Chinese Odyssey* in the China, and other cases that will be discussed below. Acknowledging that any argument on ‘belatedness’ is at heart problematic and must avoid reinscribing regimes of linear developmental time, these phenomena at the same time allow us to investigate the historical conditions that produce such instances of time lag, and to question how being out-of-time enables space for positioning oneself in relation to dominant historical formations such as the nation state. This section will survey the films that make up the mode of ‘wayward time travel’ and demonstrate how they each perform such a positioning by inhabiting versions of time lag specific to their ‘local’ context within a larger transnational history.

Examples of the experience of compressed modernity found above and elsewhere often focus on urban phenomena, yet the analysis of wayward time travel films demonstrates how such experiences branch from centres such as Hong Kong (*2046*) or Osaka (*Mind Game*) further into the countryside, the nation, and the region – such as the ‘natural’ landscape of the Yangtze (*Crosscurrent*) or the Guizhou countryside (*Kaili Blues*). These places, seemingly so stagnant and distant from the eye-catching transformations of the metropolises of East Asia, become the site of time travels that channel through media technologies and (trans)national infrastructures and logistics, emphasizing time and again how these seemingly remote places fail as places of escape out of the grasp of time compression. As the films analysed in this thesis demonstrate, experiences of ‘remoteness’ become exactly the theatre of obsessive time travels that rely on a false promise of escape.

The first chapter develops such a comparative centre-periphery approach to understanding shared experiences of being out-of-sync, through a reading of three films from South Korea, China, and Taiwan. *Peppermint Candy*, whose protagonist fails to join in the collective forgetting of the traumas underlying South Korea’s transformation into a modern capitalist nation-state, travels back in time through a metaphorical train journey that begins at the end of his life on the train tracks. The train as a technology of national integration and synchronization will return in many of the films discussed here, where its functioning as a

symbol of temporal progress can at the same time often be inverted. In *Peppermint Candy* it too has this double meaning as a technology which on the one hand produces a shared linear time embodied by the tracks, that on the other hand fails to include the multitude of actors, their responsibilities, and crimes, in the process of nation building which are revealed through the protagonist's inversion of the train's temporal trajectory. The film's geographical travels often place the protagonist at the centre of national traumatic events that are each time located at the periphery or the outskirts— such as the film's reproduction of the 1980 Gwangju Massacre where the protagonist accidentally kills a young girl on the grounds of a train depot.

While this film (and its discussion in critical and academic discourses) is very much focused on the national scale, a comparative analysis with *Crosscurrent* highlights how its engagement with history through modern logistics networks becomes a regionally shared phenomenon – just as these networks themselves extend beyond the borders of the nation-state. This film takes even more distance from urban centres, as its ship captain protagonist starts his journey at the mouth of the Yangtze river at Shanghai, whose cityscape, far away from the river docks, we never see. He then goes on a long journey upstream toward China's western hinterlands, that doubles over a passage made by his father decades ago. The recently deceased father left a book of poems that inscribe the landscape with meanings which the captain's ship slowly retrace. This journey of deciphering and re-inscription draws attention to the ways the river and its communities have been moulded to fit the demands of modernity through developments such as the construction of the Three Gorges Dam. This dam, we will see, functions as something of a blockade for the captain's time travels, at the same time as it functions as a cog within the extended network of the nationally symbolic Yangtze river that establishes it within a global infrastructural network of container shipping. Such a move from elements symbolic of national history and synchronization toward a transnational mode of time travel is extended in *Cities of Last Things*, which as mentioned plays with its (Chinese) title and themes to Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness*, while pluralizing and generalizing the 'city.' Although its setting returns to the urban centres of time compression, the film plays towards a generic, regional urban as it never establishes the place of its city/cities. The film's

suicide and temporal return mirror *Peppermint Candy* but also aesthetically mimic the Foxconn suicides (Shenzhen, 2010) and their cinematic adaptation in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013), thus establishing this trauma in relation to regional regimes of labour and the pressures of capitalist development. Each protagonist of these films thus performs a belated commentary on a widening scale from nation to region, in which they make use of the infrastructural networks born out of compressed modernity in failed attempts to reverse the traumas that underlie their construction.

A similar journey is undertaken in *Kaili Blues*, which as mentioned similarly borrows from Hou's cinema, and which also incorporates the train as a central mechanism through which the protagonist navigates conditions of belatedness. The 'periphery' from which questions of time lag are brought up here is Kaili and its outskirts in rural Guizhou, which has become geographically and ethnically marked as 'remote' and 'backward' in the Chinese Han imagination just as is it simultaneously brought into the fold of national synchronization through high-speed railway infrastructure. The third chapter then discusses how the film's time travels, embodied in a long take that follows protagonists wandering through a village landscape that is located in an ambiguous mythical temporality, draw attention to the ways such recent developments have brought the area 'closer' to the nation and vice versa. The film inhabits a vague sense of time that presents itself as Other. Its Buddhist and Miao cultural elements, mixed with the director's own poetry, may not be fully legible to its audience. Through an at times seemingly auto-Orientalist mode, the film questions such fantasies of a time-place 'away from' modernity, to the point where in one scene characters recite factual information from a tourist guidebook while crossing the river, inscribing the landscape with an objective language that places it within the time of capitalist development. *Kaili Blues'* protagonist once again fails to fulfil the longings that motivated his temporal return (which is an echo of the previous generation, as in *Crosscurrent*): he meets his deceased wife but is too late to reunite with her, and fails to bring the set of sentimental items to his elderly colleague's old lover, who has just passed away when he arrives.

A similar generational failure haunts the animated film *Mind Game* discussed in chapter 3. While its story revolves around the urban centre of Osaka, much of the film ends up taking place in a kind of heterotopia that is the insides of a giant whale who swallows up the main group of characters. When they meet an old man there whose story mirrors that of the young male protagonist, he tries to comfort them by sobbing (overcome by emotion after seeing other humans for the first time in 30 years) that he has a radio – which however doesn't receive any signal from the outside world. The fishy interior in this film then seems even more removed from time than the 'remote' spaces of the preceding films: the only bridge to the shared modern time is through their shared fantasies which they express creatively during their time stuck in the whale. The film's narrative however emphasizes the worthlessness of such being out-of-time exactly because of its disconnection with this shared temporality of national and global synchronization: its protagonists lament how their removal from time forecloses 'real' futures from materializing. The temporal escape comes to an end when they, delightedly, hear radio broadcast messages about an upcoming football world cup match – bringing them back into the fold of national time embodied by grand sports events and the broadcast media that enable them. *Mind Game* is part of a larger ecology of multiplying story-worlds in Japanese animation, film and games that adopt temporal logics from different media to explore modern experiences of time, yet unlike other much-discussed works such as Kon Satoshi's *Perfect Blue* (1997) and *Paprika* (2006), the protagonist is here once again unable to regain control over time. Instead, the film revels in its own wayward times as it proclaims of its own story that it "never ended", leaving us at the end of the film with a supercut of many possible outcomes of its characters' lives which all seem equally (un)real. The inability of the protagonist and of the film itself to choose a path forward reveals itself as one of the debilitating symptoms of temporal dysphoria which once again positions temporal return as a doomed endeavour.

The final chapter moves to *2046*, which negotiates the relation of Hong Kong's diasporic inhabitants within national and regional times through the aforementioned train to '2047', a place dreamt up by a constantly travelling protagonist, where one goes to 'retrieve

lost memories.’ This brings us to the final stop along the journey of the train, which functions across these films as the most central (trans)national technology of time synchronization and producer of conditions of belatedness. Where the train tracks pin the protagonist’s time travels back to an unescapable traumatic shared history in *Peppermint Candy*, they function as a portal to a mysterious Other time in *Kaili Blues*, where the train becomes a liminal space for the projection of an ambiguous insider/outsider gaze on the landscape. A reminder of the inescapability of the logic of compressed modernity in each case, the train emphasises *Mind Game*’s all-consuming logic of contingency, such as in the repeated split-second moment of train doors closing just before/after a character is able to board, each time deciding whether or not the protagonists will meet and the film’s story will take place. This dual logic of certainty (of the fateful, linear tracks) and uncertainty (as the time of linear progress carries protagonists into seemingly more and more volatile times) comes to a head in *2046*, where the train becomes a vehicle for misplaced hope and longing without end. The reading of this film becomes itself a practice of belatedness as, 19 years after its release, the temporal conditions of suspension explored in the film – the “50 years of no change” promised before Hong Kong’s 1997 integration into the Chinese nation-state – have already made way for new futures in which the city’s temporal relations vis-à-vis the nation and the world are reconfigured. As a text that is hyper-aware of the impossibility of promises of suspended time, it bridges a belatedly narrated 1960s past with a future-oriented thought experiment to attest the failure of the maxim that ‘time heals all wounds.’ Through a transnational cast of Cantonese, Mandarin, and Japanese voices, the film’s temporal obsession with the past and future of one place can be located simultaneously in the shared condition of time-sickness that these wayward time travel films together try to overcome from their in each case belated positions toward history.

1. I want to go back! Layered inscriptions of time in *Peppermint Candy*, *Crosscurrent*, and *Cities of Last Things*

It's quarter past twelve. No trams with second-class seats.... The street's teeming with white collar workers... A fat guy in the tram wants to go to Repulse Bay for a steak... Hey, Lau! Long time no see. How's things? ... The roast chicken in On Lok Yuen is sheer torment if you are too poor to afford it... Half past twelve... Girlie calendars on the Western bookstalls are bestsellers... Hong Kong and its culture of women-only zones... Yam Kim-fai, heart-throb of every Hong Kong maid-servant ... Tensions ease in Cuba... King's Theatre under reconstruction... Yiu Check-yin, man of the match... Headline: Young Woman Groped in Dream... Noisy crowd in Li Yuen Street East... Metamorphosis.... Thought palsy... Two gangsters, hardened killers.... Shop-window Temptation... Big Sale on at Wing On Department Store....

- Liu Yichang, *The Drunkard*, 83

Repetition, reversal, and other nonlinear temporal disturbances in fiction have the ability to produce a palimpsest-image, which bears inscriptions of various times superimposed on one surface, a layered surface that draws attention to its form, to its artificiality. Liu Yichang, in his stream-of-consciousness take on 1960s Hong Kong, produces here such an image.

Everyday banality mixes seamlessly with various signs of the times – whether they are clock time, geopolitical times, time to eat, or “long time no see.” The juxtaposition of celebrity culture and capitalist consumption against the backdrop of history produces a sense of irony, as the various urban and global developments anchor us in a time-space of “easing tensions” and “reconstruction” while commenting on the unevenness of class and gender in the coming-together of the post-war metropolis. Liu's layered snapshot temporalities, rendered through a specific stylistic narrative mode (as visible in the multitude of ellipses in the passage above) produce a sense of newness – *The Drunkard* is considered to be the first Chinese “stream-of-consciousness” novel (Larson 90). At the same time, his temporal inscription positions itself as a response or repetition: this passage “evokes the roving, cinematic, fragmentary depiction of Dublin in *Ulysses*” (Hordern 320), and the lines of Liu himself reference this doubling of a living place-time 40 years prior.

Liu's superimposition of times and historical registers (between the vulgar, commercial, and political) similarly seems to resonate across the times with a cinema of time

that emerges half a century later. In this moment, palimpsestic times have extended from the site of a postcolonial metropolis into a broader movement that ripples across the ‘new waves’ of art cinemas across East Asia. These films share with Liu’s stories an attention to time, but not so much to its passing or even the experience of its duration (as is the focus of ‘slow’ cinema), but to temporal intersections of different times in the same place. As set out in the previous chapter, the protagonists of these ‘wayward time travel’ films share with *The Drunkard*’s unnamed narrator a pathological relation to time. Liu’s writer-narrator laments the condition of Chinese literature in the present day to which he considers himself simultaneously too late and too early, and he fails to secure heterosexual bonds with women because of their age, working hours, or his own alcohol-filled schedule in which time seems to disappear. Stuck between the double effects of change (“metamorphosis” 蛻變) and stasis (“thought palsy” 思想枯竭症), the novel inhabits a perspective of failure to investigate what one can do – what kind of temporal path one can carve within a broader environment that is already filled with ongoing historical transitions that pull one along through seemingly inevitable forces alike those of a river current.

The films discussed in this chapter continue such an investigation, led by their time-sick protagonists who each attempt to reverse the flow of time in a desire to overcome a fate that seems to be pre-inscribed. Inhabiting a perspective of masculine desire within the promise of the nation state, these narratives all start from a male protagonist’s failure to build a nuclear family – or in fact, *after* this failure, which is consistently established as something that has already happened. The failure to achieve success in their cases is only failure within a specifically circumscribed framework of a national expectation of an upward looking future, which depends on the labour and heterosexual reproduction that this version of the ‘good life’ facilitates. Their falling short within the expectation of this temporal regime triggers their time travels, which they undertake in a sense not by their own ‘will’ but by a kind of necessity, a necessity to untangle the trauma of failure that is the condition of possibility of their narrative.

These constitutive traumas of our protagonists in every case revolves around a missed opportunity of locking down a love interest which leads to an obsessive compulsion to return, a stasis which at the same time cannot stop moving. The love interest functions as the object through which the men believe they can be part of something like this promised prosperity. Strikingly, their traumas are all to a degree self-inflicted, as much caused by them as done *to* them, as well as a result of their *lack* of action. As the time travels over the course of these films embark on something of a truth-seeking mission as much as enacting fantasies of escape, this ambiguous responsibility haunts the conclusions of these films with questions about individual agency and temporal control, as well as about the impossibility of mourning or sharing grief. The protagonists' complaints cannot be heard: they all struggle to articulate what has been done to them, even though they are not actually silenced but allowed to speak.

These attempts to escape a pathological relation to time then embody the possibility of 'standing for' a shared experience of the failures of progress or the foreclosure of a promised future, even though such metonymic equivalency will be shown to be problematic. Nonetheless, these temporal returns confront us with the logics of temporal inscription which make visible the present of different 21st century East Asian locales as palimpsests. While the protagonist fail to 'pull the breaks' and revert the inevitable rush of linear time, they do in fact return and thus reveal how every return in time is a doubling, a re-inscription. When each protagonist is on a quest for truth-seeking or the correction (starting over) of a personal history, these projects of *eliminating* averse possibilities end up *doubling* them in unexpected ways.

The first of these narratives of obsessive temporal return discussed here is *Peppermint Candy* (Lee Chang-dong 1999), a seminal South Korean film that follows a man's life backwards from the moment of his suicide at the start of the plot. Its innovative structure and strong metaphorical commentary of then-recent national history inspired many other works of 21st century East Asian cinema, among which *Cities of Last Things* (Ho Wi Ding 2018) is an interesting example. This Taiwanese film too moves backward from a

somewhat puzzling suicide, and its Chinese title “Happy City” (幸福城市) attempts to place such a narrative within a tradition of engaging cinematically with national history, riffing off Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *City of Sadness* (1989) and featuring one of that film’s central cast, an aged Jack Kao. *Crosscurrent* (Yang Chao 2016) functions as something of a bridge between these two stories. This film traverses time backwards up the Yangtze river, where the seafaring protagonist encounters the same women, appearing younger each time, across different stops.

In all three films we experience a journey toward a source, and each film presents us with a mystery. Reverse chronology here seems to promise a deductive hermeneutic, where with each step towards the past we may imagine ourselves digging deeper into the roots of the unexplained trauma, narrowing down its cause and the history of its repression. However, as Lee Carruthers notes in her analysis of a few other key reverse-chronological films (*Irréversible, Betrayal, 5x2*), the hermeneutic of such films turns out quite different:

The effort to locate a cause in the past that might illuminate the present would seem psychoanalytic in its premises, as though the very structure of the films were primed to perform a kind of auto-analysis. But for these films, the suggestion is not that root causes have been hidden or repressed, as such, but that the way they belong to the present is obscured because they are held apart from us, in time. (Carruthers 69)

This observation will prove accurate in our discussion here, as in our films the promised ‘source’ or answer is missing in each case, and their journeys follow an additive (rather than deductive) logic, in which the pasts layered on top of each other produce a superimposition of times. This layered time crystallizes in moments of recognition and misrecognition across the three films, which are highlighted by the reversal of time. On many occasions, characters recognize others or are themselves recognized in ways which are initially puzzling, since we as viewers don’t yet know these people. In other moments, characters are misrecognized as someone else (from the past), or only belatedly recognize the other, when it is too late and the possibility of mutual recognition has passed.

Beyond the temporal quality of these (mis)recognitions already, the temporal reversals and ellipsis (selectively jumping across decades) link these moments together in a way that lays bare the workings of memory in the construction of identity. Through the specific cases of individuals who don't fit in, these reversed stories highlight the loss of self (or misrecognition of the self) required in the construction of an acceptable identity in contemporary global capitalism. While such themes are not exceptional in contemporary critically engaged cinema concerned with the performance of identity (or the contradictions of the 'individual' as something constantly re-constructed in the contemporary world), what stands out about these films is how they highlight the temporality of this reiterative performance. Identity is nothing without being recognized, and recognition (*re-cognoscere*) is always to *know again*: it must be a repetition of earlier encounters (e.g. a friendship) and inscriptions (e.g. a passport).

Any act of (mis)recognition which allows for the temporary production of identity always has a subject and an object, which link together to produce a community within which the sense of identity can be rooted. As Stuart Hall famously argues, cultural identity is produced through enunciation, and “though we speak, so to say 'in our own name', of ourselves and from our own experience, nevertheless who speaks, and the subject who is spoken of, are never identical, never exactly in the same place” (392). In these films, such a subject-object relation through which 'identity' is produced is closely aligned with the nation state, its institutions and infrastructures, that together make up what Benedict Anderson called the 'imagined community'. Nationalism, as Prasenjit Duara argues, functions through the misrecognition of history as a linear progression which connects together an ancient past to future aspirations. The story of an (always emerging, never yet complete) national subject is produced out of the recognition of a “people”, which “developed a sovereign right to the territory they allegedly originally and/or continuously occupied” (Duara 330). The reversal of time in these films directly engages with this dialectic of (mis)recognition at the intersection of national institutions and infrastructures and individual stories of everyday life. And, in some films more explicitly than others, the issue of national identity rises up from this

intersection, which invariably questions the promise of progress afforded by a linear view of history.

Standing for the nation: metonymy and national time

The film to most explicitly make this connection is *Peppermint Candy* (hereafter *Peppermint*). This film tells the story of Yong-ho, a businessman recently ruined by the Asian financial crisis, who in the opening act shows up uninvited to a reunion picnic, where his appearance and erratic behaviour cause an awkward scene. He ultimately runs off screaming, with limbs flailing, and climbs up to a nearby railway bridge with suicidal intent. As the camera assumes the perspective of a rapidly approaching train, Yong-ho yells “I want to go back!” The shot freezes on his desperate facial expression, fades at first to black and then to a musically accompanied visual of a train journey (once again in point-of-view) that serves as an interlude to the next chapter. In this way, we visit seven vignettes along the backward ‘train journey’ of his life between the Spring of 1999 and the Autumn of 1979 – thus including several key developments in recent South Korean history including the coup d’état by general Chun Doo-hwan (1979), the subsequent declaration of martial law and the responding Gwangju student uprising which resulted in a massacre (1980), as well as the democratisation process (starting from 1987) and the 1997 Asian financial crisis which hit South Korea particularly hard.

Yong-ho is directly implicated in these events in his actions as a soldier, a police officer, and finally a businessman – roles through which he seems to function as a ‘representative’ of the nation. Firstly⁴, when serving for military draft, his unit is called to quell the aforementioned student uprising where he is struck by a stray bullet (i.e. ‘friendly’ fire) and finds himself stranded alone by some railroad tracks. As he waits to be picked up by his unit, a girl appears who he initially misrecognizes as his girlfriend Sun-im. She explains

⁴ These key events are reproduced in chronological order here, whereas in the film, the scene at the Gwangju uprising for example is positioned at the climax – the 6th chapter out of 7.

that she is lost and he wants to send her on her way, but when his fellow soldiers approach while she still lingers around uttering gratitudes, he anxiously fires warning shots and accidentally kills the girl. Later, in his work to track down union organizers as a police officer, he is pressured by senior colleagues to torture someone for information. He does so with a level of aggression and conviction that surprises his colleagues, since many around him see Yong-ho at this point still as a soft and gentle man. In events such as these, he performs the control and repression required by the state in its response to the crossroads it encounters (imagined as diverging rail tracks) on the path of developmental linear temporality, while he also seems to represent the victim - those crushed by this same state repression.

This question of representation brings us back to the dialectics of recognition, as it is exactly their representatives through which bodies such as the nation and its subsidiaries are recognized, and vice versa. While the workings of such a substitution (where one stands for the other) seem to speak for themselves in the case of *Peppermint*, which is invariably read as a national allegory, it is precisely this question through which we can find a shared problematic resonating between the films under discussion here, and it thus requires some unpacking. To do so, let us juxtapose some of the writings on the film which employ a methodology that posits Yong-ho's body as a representative of the nation and of national temporality. Most of these texts recognize *Peppermint* within a body of post-democratization films that excavate the repressed traumas of the martial law years in order to open up alternative histories and possibilities of healing, referring back to the National Film Movement and the political 'Changsan'gonmae' film group which were mostly active in the years directly following the relaxing of media censorship laws in the second half of the 1980s (Lee 148). Placed in this legacy, the film is produced as what Kim Soyoung calls a "privileged text for understanding the historical burdens of Korean society" (60). Through its hermeneutics of revelation (by way of reverse chronology), for many scholars the film produces a critique of historicity and the workings of national time itself. However, the object of the film's critique, the way "forward" it proposes, as well as whether or not the film

actually overcomes the problematic historical readings it critiques – these elements vary wildly between the accounts of *Peppermint* over the years.

One argument which squarely focuses on remembrance of trauma is that of Aaron Magnan-Park, who positions the film within the dialectics of forgetting and remembering through which a nation is produced, as contested in the debate spanning from Ernest Renan to Benedict Anderson and Homi Bhabha. The latter's pointed reading of Renan reveals that the unitary appearance of the national past and present, the national subject and the concept of a national "will"⁵, rest on an "obligation to forget" certain traumatic events of the past that threaten disunity (Bhabha 310). *Peppermint* functions in Magnan-Park's argument as a response to this obligation by inverting it into a hypothetical nationalism which obliges "not to forget":

[the film] embraces this alternative ethos of national engagement by returning to cinematic memory aspects of South Korea's recent history that were formerly repressed by the state. [Director Lee Chang-dong's] will to remembrance, his wilful act not to forget, is courageous on the individual level and coincides with the government's relaxing of its rigid hold over official history. It celebrates South Korea's political passage from military to full civilian rule, and a collective desire to redress those repressed aspects of its military-dominated past ... [Lee's] auteur insistence *not* to forget, despite the pain and the shame, serves as a cathartic elixir to insure South Korea's idea of its nationhood is enhanced by repositioning it as a remembering national community that is worthy of continuation. (Magnan-Park 160)

The final (or from the narrative perspective, the original) desire of Yong-ho before his death - "I want to go back!" - here serves as a collective desire of revisiting and healing, which the nation may achieve through an "unbiased *rapprochement* with itself" (ibid.). The narrative reversal of time serves in this analysis however not just to emphasize remembrance, but furthermore elaborates Yong-ho's struggle with memory as caught up between the contrasting temporalities of psychoanalysis and historiography as described by Michel de Certeau. From this perspective, historiography produces a temporality of succession and disjunction (where no two times are the same), whereas psychoanalysis recognizes the existence of the past in the

⁵ The will to nationhood is, according to Renan, the the foundation upon which the nation rests, rather than ethnic or linguistic identity (Bhabha 310).

present through repetition and ‘mnemic traces’ (Magnan-Park 166). Indeed, while the chronological ordering of distinct events (even though in reverse) seems to emphasize the causality and linearity of history in the film, there simultaneously appear many recurring traces that link together scenes in ways more akin to a spectral return (such as the reappearance Sun-Im in the accidental killing scene described earlier). The *rapprochement* for Magnan-Park entails finding a way out of the obsessive return and imbricated time of psychoanalysis: “For Yong-ho and the Korean nation to break from psychoanalysis and regain historicism’s linear temporal trajectory, the *déjà vécu*, that which has already been lived, requires direct acknowledgement rather than active repression” (68).

A reading of the film as invested in the continuation of the nation state is perhaps contextually appropriate, considering the fact that director Lee Chang-dong entered national politics as Minister of Culture just three years after the release of *Peppermint*. However, the notion of acknowledgement, remembering, and recognition as the cure or “elixir” rubs against the repeating moments that signify the impossibility of recognition in the film itself. We have already visited the double misrecognition at Gwangju – where Yong-ho mistakes the girl for his girlfriend, and moments later misrecognizes their conversation as improper in the face of his military peers which, through his panic, leads to the girl’s death. Such moments of misrecognition are woven throughout the film, highlighted by the reversed temporality which confuses the relations between characters yet unknown to us (in the beginning), or inversely presents us with characters about whose futures we know ‘too much’ and whose actions we cannot but read ironically (near the end).

A sequence of events early in the film, not much discussed in the extensive writing on *Peppermint*, provides a good example of the former. Three days before his death, Yong-ho has lost his family and drives around alone, buying a gun with his last bit of money. We witness five successive encounters of increased intensity with as-yet unknown people, starting with a failed assassination attempt. The targeted businessman calls out Yong-ho’s name in surprise as the latter shoots at him and runs away, hinting at a prior history between them. Before we have a chance to contextualize this event, Yong-ho already finds himself in another

violent encounter after returning to his car. He finds a parking ticket which he attempts to peel off, and an officer approaches to ask him whether he is the car's owner (fig. 1.1). At first Yong-ho confirms that he is, but then suddenly denies it and attempts to walk away once the officer asks for his identification. The officer insists and Yong-ho pushes him to the ground before sprinting off. Now wandering around without a car, we are introduced to his family situation through a final encounter with his ex-wife, who doesn't let him inside to see their daughter (fig. 1.2). Finally, he returns home to his dilapidated shed, as a man smoking in a car awaits him – his face mysteriously veiled by the rain-soaked windscreen (fig. 1.3, 4). The man repeatedly asks “you are Kim Yong-ho right?” but the latter only looks in his direction and once again refuses to reply. After the man helps him to get inside (which we see through another veil, this time the screen covering the shed entrance, fig. 1.5), Yong-ho comments somewhat jokingly on his wretched living condition, aware of his perception in the eyes of the well-dressed stranger. Fully embodying the role of a victim and recognizing the stranger as somehow implicated in his struggles, Yong-ho draws his gun and threatens to take the man with him in suicide, launching into a tirade that lists all the people he considered taking down with him: stock broker who made him go broke, the loan shark who charged him excessive interest rates, the business partner who ran away with his money, or his ex-wife... However, the stranger reveals that he is the husband of Yun Sun-im (his first love, with whom he lost touch after the events at Gwangju) and that she wants to see him. Yong-ho's eyes immediately widen but he once again feigns ignorance (“who is Yun Sun-im?”) before acknowledging this history. Clearly, layers of irony and hostility once again shield Yong-ho against the vulnerability of recognition.



Fig. 1.1



Fig. 1.2



Fig. 1.3



Fig. 1.4



Fig. 1.5



Fig. 1.6

Before we move to the poignant encounter between the former lovers that follows, already a pattern becomes visible here. The film's exposition – the narrative stage that introduces us to the main characters and their interlocking relationships – occurs not only reversely at their *final* encounters, but also inversely through a *failure* of recognition tangled up with violence each time. Yong-ho's (as we will learn later) former business partner and his first love's husband are both introduced at gunpoint, and each relationship is already in a state of post-failure from the start, as the closing door on Yong-ho's face (fig. 1.2) signifies. The tensions of authority and power with the threat of lethal violence in each of these encounters become

critical when we return to the issue of national recognition which is always inevitably tied to violence.

The final part of this sequence in the film then introduces us to Sun-im, who turns out to be critically ill. When the pair of men arrive at the hospital, they learn that she has lost consciousness just a few hours prior, and the husband laments that it is “too late.” Yong-ho nevertheless insists to “see her face,” offering a glimpse of hope toward recognition. He talks to her at her bedside and offers her a jar of peppermint candy, reminiscing how she used to send these same candies to him when he was in the army. He tears up and says “I’m sorry, Sun-Im” for as-yet unknown wrongdoings – notably his only apology in the film – and rushes out of the room. The camera moves to a close-up of the unconscious woman as a tear trickles down her face (fig. 1.6). Just as the reunion and apology come “too late,” this belated tear fails to be noticed by Yong-ho who has already rushed away, thus standing in the way of recognition and reconciliation. The missed encounter of course offers hope toward an outcome that “could have been” as we subsequently go back into a history that offers seeds of hope.

However, the very final shot of the film mirrors this tear and turns out to contradict the possibility of such a hopeful return, which furthermore inhibits a ‘healing’ reading of the film. In this final scene we witness the original group picnic, 20 years before the reunion of the opening scene at the same spot. Here, Yong-ho takes a walk with his then-love interest Sun-im, and he shares with her his sense of *déjà-vu*: “Strange... I've never been here before. I feel like I've been here before. That river, that railroad, I've seen them all before. I know this place.” Sun-im replies that he might have seen it in his dreams, and that she hopes it is “a good dream” – something which we cannot but read ironically, having seen the full nightmare. They re-join the group who are singing together a 1978 song titled “What Shall I Do”, which not only anchors the time frame but also retroactively foreshadows the themes of the film, with its lyrics about a hypothetical future of loss, separation, and confusion. Yong-ho wonders away mid-song, secluding himself from the rest of the group just as he did in the beginning of the film. He lies down under the very train tracks on which he will one day meet

his end, stares at the trains passing over, and sheds a tear (fig. 1.8). The frame freezes just as it did when gazing upon his fatal expression at the point of suicide, imprinting an unchanging and repetitive image before fading to credits. While this tear could be read several ways (expressing a sense of exclusion or alienation unrelated to the future events, or signifying a sense of somehow knowing what is to come), suffice to say that this final image introduces ambiguity by revealing that Yong-ho's existence is tainted by unhappiness even before his conscription into the militarized nation state. This subverts the 'age of innocence' that the scene and the entire temporal structure of the film seemed to promise.



Fig. 1.7, 8 The first shot of Yong-ho (7), lying under the same train overpass as in the final image (8) twenty years prior, shedding a tear in both occasions

One author who acknowledges the significance of this moment as a sign of continuing failure is McGowan, whose Lacanian reading of the film in his *Atemporal Cinema* produces a temporality of psychoanalysis in a similar vein to Magnan-Park. However, whereas the latter reads the film as providing a way out of the imbricated time of psychoanalysis for the nation through acknowledgement of the repressed trauma, McGowan's argument on the film's attachment to the nation takes quite a different turn:

The personal tragedy of Yong-Ho ... *operates as a synecdoche* for that of the nation. The film's rejection of forward-moving time and progress *is at once* a rejection of the nation as a historical entity ... Nation, as the film conceives it, is the product of an investment in the idea of progress, the idea that the future will realize a national identity that always appears on the horizon. The struggle against nationalism *becomes* the struggle against the typical conception of temporality in which subjects are moving through time toward a novel future. (McGowan 183, emphasis added)

The reversal of time in this reading subverts the notion of linear time itself, which is equated with the nation through the figure of Yong-ho. To understand the metonymic function of Yong-ho's body here, I have highlighted the copulas suggesting equivalence above. What is striking here is that while Yong-ho once again *stands for* the nation, in McGowan's argument his story reversely *stands against* the promise of national identity which is revealed as empty. Where he sacrifices his happiness and romantic relationships in order to fit into the 'national body' or indeed to *become* this body, McGowan emphasizes that the idea of national identity works akin to the Lacanian *objet petit a* – that object of desire which is always produced by the subject's constitutional lack, and can never be fulfilled. However, the split representation of *standing for/against* required to produce such a subversive argument against national temporality is put under pressure by the ambiguity of the film, as we can see for example in McGowan's analysis of the opening scene at the picnic. There, the old friends group who stand by passively as Yong-ho commits suicide, "*stands in for* the average subject in Korean society" (McGowan 200, emphasis added). Although Yong-ho shows up to this gathering, he was not invited, and his "absence is constitutive for the group's pleasure because *he represents* the series of national traumas that the group cannot acknowledge" (McGowan 201, emphasis added).

McGowan's somewhat muddled allegorical language here brings us back exactly to the ambiguity of Yong-ho as a problematic representative in the critique of national time. The notion of him "standing in for," notably in the context of suffering and death, is reminiscent of the language of sacrifice. Smith and Doniger write that "substitution, the use of a 'stand-in' in place of an original which then 'represents' it, is at the very heart of sacrifice" (189). Does Yong-ho, taking on a messianic pose at the frozen instant of his death (see fig. 1.9, 10), die for the sins of the South Korean nation? Or for those of Korean masculinity under patriarchy? What does his martyrdom imply?



Fig. 1.9,10 Yong-ho stands against the train that is about to crush him, assuming the pose of the crucified hero as he yells that he wants to go back in time

In an interview with the director, film critic Kim Young-jin asks a seemingly general question about the film's characters, but which importantly brings our issue of representation to bear on the characters beyond Yong-ho, asking: "Young-ho ... experiences all the tragedies of Korea's modern history. Sun-im represents more than one woman. Why did you portray the characters this way?" (62). Answering this double question, Lee Chang-dong explains that Yong-ho's story is meant to show that "people have a similar experience in common" with regards to the "last 20 years of social and political upheaval... I wanted the audience to identify with him emotionally. He could be any of us" (ctd. in Kim 62). However, with regards to the women in the film, a different kind of substitution takes place which does not include an "us": "Except for the wife, all the women in the film could be the same person. ... I once considered letting Moon So-ri [who portrays Sun-im] play all the female characters in the film" (Lee ctd. in Kim 62). Such problematic metonymy is condemnably pointed out by Kim Soyoung in a close reading of a text on *Peppermint's* website which presents a similar narrative:

Who is the "we" searching for this innocent love that has been lost? ... The "we" refers to viewers who, like Kim Yeong-ho, are assumed to have lost something. Therefore, they want to take a trip in search of this lost object. The viewers are thus located at the same point. However, as long as Sun-im is the object Yeong-ho has lost, the "we" excludes women. (Kim Soyoung 77)

Following the simple tracks of metonymy here points out the subject-object dynamic recognized by most readings of the film (indeed McGowan's essay is titled "Affirmation of

the Lost Object”), but clearly undermines these readings’ acceptance of Yong-ho’s trauma as a shared national (or even universal) one. There is however more at stake than recognizing this trauma as gendered. In the film’s metonymic confusion, produced by its backward time and repeated misrecognition, it seems to confuse victim and perpetrator in the full view of the nightmare that is swept under the rug of democratization. Yong-ho’s suicide in this context becomes significant in that it represents what Kim calls a “self-punishment drama of a male subjectivity that is based on narcissism, as well as on a delusive guilt that has resulted in the loss of the ability to mourn” (81). For Kim, this drama fits within a broader “close-minded self-punishment structure” (ibid.) that draws away accountability from global powers such as the United States in the ever-continuing Cold War in Korea, which forms the critical background for the militarized nation state and the traumas it inflicts as they are revisited in the film, from the Gwangju massacre to the 1997 IMF crisis.

The perpetual Cold War here generates a condition of suspended time that contradicts the narrative of development and democratization. As we have seen in the discussion here, *Peppermint* and its protagonist wrestle with the contradictions of this double temporality by attempting to reverse time and revisit past traumas, yet these temporal explorations turn into an obsessive-compulsive mode of contemplation that seems to end where it started. As we have also seen here and as will come up again, these obsessive time travels invariably get tangled up with a repetitive logic of substitution that needs to be untangled carefully so that we can identify who or what is left behind at the end, what has come into view and what has disappeared behind the onslaught of narrative confusions. These films all register discontent, trauma, or failed promises, which they address through time travels, recognitions and substitutions that can smooth over narrative cracks and tie together a web that is convincing through its overwhelming nature. If these temporal and metonymic mechanisms are too easily accepted, this allows for a more straightforward reading as subversive cinema. However, as the analyses in this dissertation will show, these films “flow” more often than they resist, and with every substitution something is sidestepped. Time travel may often work exactly *not* to confront the issues directly foreclosing the future for our protagonists and the contexts from

which they emerge. This is the position where these films appear: somewhere between a historical awareness of a time of great contradictions, an obsessive urge to get to grips with a temporality that is always beyond grasp and out of our hands, but also eager to escape the pressing nature of this history, and always leaving open other paths and ready to return to the beginning.

Retracing the past and the times of the river

Moving forward in time to the late-2010s, we will now focus on two films whose temporal structure mirrors that of *Peppermint*. Their journeys backwards in time similarly see the main protagonist killed along the way, which does not spell the end but instead opens up further pathways into the past. Although they do not reference the history of the modern nation as explicitly, their time travels can also (even if problematically) be read as a critique – based on an ecologically focused approach that focuses on the river as ‘source’ of (Chinese) civilization in the case of *Crosscurrent* and through a more shared yet unspecific global urban fatalism in *Cities of Last Things*. In both cases, a woman once again appears as the object of desire of the male protagonist, and the time travel is exactly motivated by finding the lost ‘original’ in the face of ephemeral substitutions and failures of recognition. Both films are furthermore indebted to texts that came before in different ways, producing an extra layer of complexity in which the journeys also become a belated doubling or ‘tracing over’ of journeys that came before.

Both the temporal journey toward the ‘source’ as well as the notion of retracing become very literal in *Crosscurrent*, in which a captain of a small cargo ship called Chun makes a journey upstream of the Yangtze river all the way to its origins in the Tibetan plateau. Chun inherited the ship from his recently passed father, and finds inside the engine room a handwritten poetry book that is at the same time a journal and a map, titled simply Map of the Yangtze (which doubles as the film’s Chinese title). Although the film is sparse with its narrative exposition, the suggestion is that the father made a similar journey up the

river twenty years ago. Chun finds the book while working on a broken engine and reads the first poem aloud, but his voice is completely drowned out by the low vibrations coming from the ship's other engines. He also lacks light to make out the poem, and walks to a light bulb – now, the almost inaudible words also appear on the screen as he reads (fig. 1.11). After finishing the poem, Chun is startled by the engine behind him which suddenly sputters to a start – suggesting a connection between the capricious boat and the father's spirit which is still passing on, mediated through this record of a journey. The inscription on the screen, which returns at every station, superimposes this spectral temporality onto the journey in the present.

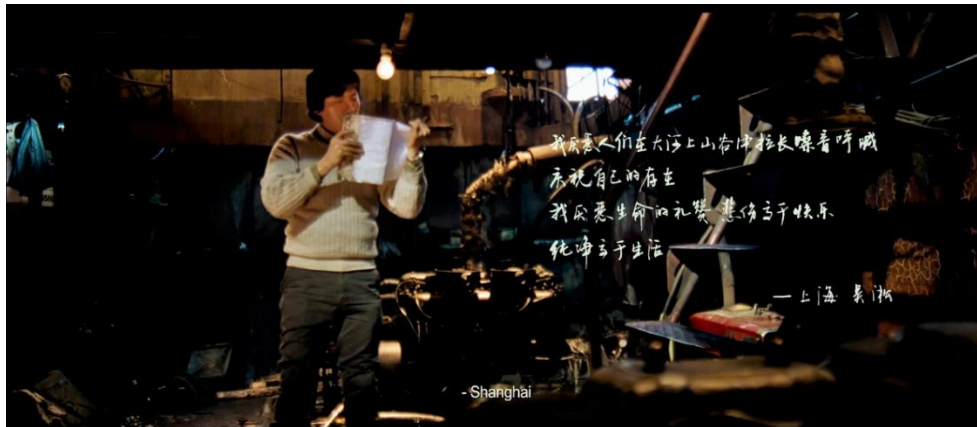


Fig. 1.11 The first station, at the mouth of the river – Shanghai – also contains the first poem which serves as a journal entry



Fig. 1.12, 13 Chun annotates and amends the map, recording the changes of the river



Fig. 1.14 Promotional poster for *Crosscurrent*

Chun's retracing of the father's journey is at first accidental: the task of collecting and shipping a special cargo upriver happens to bring him and his shipmates to the same ports as marked on the map and in the journal. However, when a woman who he sees in the harbour of Shanghai later also shows up at the following stops, Chun begins to slowly connect the dots between her and the locations of the journal. He starts to deliberately follow this route and this mysterious woman, a prostitute named Anlu, who appears younger and younger each time they meet. The double act of temporal retracing comes up against a blockage around the time the ship reaches the Three Gorges Dam. Chun fails to find Anlu for several days, and begins to amend the map, at first marking An (安) at all the locations where they have met, and then question marks where she was not to be found (fig. 1.12). The river itself has changed, as Chun also marks down, recording the dam – which was constructed between 1994-2009 and which displaced more than a million people by flooding cities and villages near the river's banks (Byrnes 167) – with a scratch of the pen so intense that it breaks through the surface of the paper (fig. 1.13). The ephemeral, changing, capricious nature of both the river and the woman are here countered by an attempt to fix them through inscription, through which Chun enters into a long history of tracing and inscribing the landscape of the Three Gorges. The history of these inscriptions lays bare the relationship of

local people, as well as the (representatives of) the nation to the land, as documented by

Corey Byrnes:

Through their displacement, a region inscribed by its inhabitants past and present was transformed into a surface for the realization of a national myth born out of Sun Yat-sen's vision of a modern China, rendered lyrical by Mao, and finally made material by Jiang Zemin and his fellow technocrats. (Byrnes 167)

A sense of forced mobility here results out of a series of generations of national imagination, creating a palimpsest of traces to produce what Byrnes calls a “techno-poetic landscape—the ultimate expression of a conception of landscape as an inscribable and trace-bearing surface combined with the modern view of the world as an inexhaustible natural resource” (21).

Chun's increasingly frantic relationship to the film's eponymous map – from accidental discovery, to obsessive tracing, amending, and ultimately ripping it apart – reveals once again sense of betrayed investment into the promises of a masculine control over the flow of time, which is also again metonymically linked with the woman. It becomes clear that when the boat travels up the Yangtze river, Chun is not only travelling back in time to meet a woman from the past, but also reversing through decades of national development centred around this logistical corridor, as well as returning to the roots of Chinese civilization centred around the river as the source of fertility, as suggested by the film's imagery (fig. 1.14). This aerial shot metonymically connects Chun and Anlu's sexual encounters with the upstream journey, equating the body of the woman with the body of the river. “The Yangtze has changed, I thought I would never find you... You changed too” declares Chun, cementing this bond when they are eventually reunited (notably in the haunted temple complex that is “Fengdu Ghost City”).

While train tracks and rivers work quite differently as metaphors for the passage of time (empty, segmented, linear, scheduled, teleological as opposed to full, ephemeral, meandering, seasonal...) there is a resemblance here to *Peppermint Candy*, where the train's path leads back to an imagined feminine source that is closely linked to the spectre of death (the dark tunnel from which we emerge at the beginning of the film) and intertwined with the question of national progress. This uneven passiveness of the woman's body, closely linked to

the relationship between inscription and mobility sketched before, is however more clearly acknowledged in *Crosscurrent*. A story told by Chun earlier in the film (at Heyuezhou, near Tongling) even explicitly subverts this gender dynamic:

In the early years of the Republic, Heyuezhou was a trade centre, and many ships visited. This place was called “Little Shanghai.” A Sichuan merchant once stopped for the night, staying in a loft on the main street where he spent the night with a local girl. When he awoke he discovered that he had become the girl, while the girl had already occupied his body. The girl left him behind, taking his boat to Shanghai. The merchant was powerless to stop her. He could only wait in the loft for the next patron.

The substitution of gendered, localized (“Sichuan”, “local”) bodies here opens up a possibility of mobility that is at the same time a control over time – the woman “had already occupied” the male body and goes to Shanghai, the man “could only wait.” This flipped relationship haunts the journey of Chun (the seafarer) and Anlu (the prostitute), although the latter’s spectral mobility seems to work differently than in this tale of possession (we never really find out). In the end, the upside-down narrative resonates with the failures of inscription that lead to the shredding of the Yangtze River Map to contest the transformation of the river and landscape as a passive, inscribable surface – even if the linking of locality and femininity to a static, original temporality can be read as problematic.

From the future to the past: substitution without history

The last film in this comparative reading brings us from the inland river across the Taiwan Strait and into the future, with its opening sequence starting in the year 2049 (perhaps a reference to the *Blade Runner* film of the same title, but also notably two years shy of that other famous year of Sinophone science fiction). Although this context seems like something of a jump from the layered inscriptions of the ancient Yangtze, the analysis here will attempt to show how these reverse-chronological journeys keep converging on the same points of failure and misrecognition. The surface of inscription is here not the paper of a forgotten map

but the expired Fuji film stock⁶ on which the film was shot, which produces a grainy, emphatically film-like image of the future world of *Cities of Last Things* (hereafter *Cities*). The image already produces a double anachronism: the use of this medium to imagine the future at a time when analogue cinematography is already non-standard, mirrors the expiration of the material which further amplifies the visual texture of this ephemeral medium and echoes a sense of belatedness.

The use of a decaying medium also accompanies a sense of social decay at the level of the story, which once again spans a time of promise and progress. Much more directly than in *Crosscurrent*, the narrative of *Cities* is clearly inspired by *Peppermint Candy*: it follows an episodic structure whereby the first (of three) sections ends with the protagonist's violent suicide, after which we go back over the decades of his life to trace the causes for his wretched situation. The man we get to know this time is Zhang, also a policeman, and some of the key traumatic moments in the run-up to his death are once again related to this function. Zhang is also forced to choose between morality and the law by his peers, although the questionable practices here involve a corruption scheme rather than torture. Just as Yong-ho, he ultimately separates from his wife after learning of her infidelity – shockingly finding her one night with his superior officer. He nearly elopes with a French girl, who represents an alternative path of happiness that was not to be – and he misrecognizes another woman for her in his old age in the first chapter of the film. *Cities* also finishes with a short epilogue that ends on a freeze frame. This image shows a smile rather than *Peppermint Candy*'s tear, yet it similarly signifies an ambiguous start to our journey: it is the smile of his mother, who followed a life of crime and abandoned the young Zhang, and who refuses to recognize him at a coincidental reunion in the traumatic penultimate scene.

With all these echoing plot details chronicling a similar journey toward a traumatic past and the search of an innocent beginning, we find a conspicuous absence when

⁶ Wong, Silvia. "Busan interview: Ho Wi Ding on 'Cities Of Last Things.'" *Screen Daily*. 4 October 2018. < <https://www.screendaily.com/features/busan-interview-ho-wi-ding-on-cities-of-last-things/5133287.article>>.

juxtaposing the two films. While *Peppermint Candy* is firmly grounded in the shared national history of suppression and democratization, as we have seen through both narrative elements and in promotional materials, and *Crosscurrent* anchors itself in the layered history of the Yangtze, *Cities* refuses to pin itself to a particular place and seems to sidestep history altogether. Although the film references Hou Hsiao-hsien's seminal "City of Sadness" as mentioned, the non-place produced in *Cities* (significantly spelled in a strange plural in the English title) produces something of a generic non-time, in which the present and past are mostly distinguished through futuristic technology and aesthetics rather than the changing dynamics of a place or (national) community.



Fig. 1.15 The moment before impact in *Cities of Last Things*

Instead, the film imagines something like a general Sinophone dystopia, as is especially emphasized in the opening scene. The film opens with an upward-looking tracking shot of an apartment block, from which suddenly a man falls downward (fig. 1.15) and smashes onto the camera lens. The resemblance to a similar scene in Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013) as well as to the phenomenon of factory worker suicides at Foxconn and other companies in mainland China to which the film refers, seems to make a cross-border connection of hopelessness in an age of high technological development. When the retired policeman Zhang leaves his building shortly after the suicide (which turns out to be another man – Zhang's own death will follow later), ambulance personnel and social workers are afoot to pacify the situation – he rebuffs a man who wants to "talk about his feelings," setting up his character as a shielded and repressed ex-cop. A loudspeaker repeatedly broadcasts a message to the

surrounding area, which eerily seems to anticipate similarly tone-deaf messages broadcast by drones to citizens under lockdown in Chinese cities during the Covid-19 pandemic:

There is no problem that doesn't have a solution.
It is wrong to kill yourself [...]
We should be positive all the time.
Once you have a negative thought, you have to erase and get rid of it immediately [...]
Committing suicide is an act of degeneration.

The message, understood ironically from Zhang's tough-guy perspective, doubles in irony for viewers familiar with what is to come: we will definitely encounter problems that cannot easily be solved, traumas that will impact lives irreversibly and that even traveling in time cannot fix. When this act of suicide is labelled as a sign of degeneration, i.e. having fallen (墮落), it could be said that this is a shared condition between our protagonists, and in Zhang's case as in Yong-ho's, acts more depraved than suicide will come to pass.

While Zhang in this post-retirement chapter ends up killing his wife, her current lover, and his old boss before ending his life (acting out that what for Yong-ho remained only a fantasy), the most insightful encounter in this sci-fi dystopia is that with a prostitute who reminds him of Ara, the French girl he once spent a night with. Zhang finds himself in a red light district to buy a gun, but when a pestering pimp shows him images of girls to choose from, he freezes upon seeing what seems to be Ara's image, and he insists to meet the girl. In her hotel room, she asks Zhang what kind of service he wants, but he is instead obsessed with her history and identity. He requests to scan her identity but finds that it lacks any information, and asks whether she looks like her mother, to which she replies that she doesn't have parents. Zhang's distrust and quest for authenticity only gives way to his sexual desire when the girl takes his gun, puts it in her mouth, and moves it across her body. This intersecting motion of sex and violence seems to trigger Zhang's memory in such a way that it allows him to see the girl *as* Ara, and they end up having sex after all.

The retired Zhang in this early part of the film is often sceptical of technology and shows his attachment to physical authenticity (as seen here in the obsession with the girl's

identity), which resonates with the solid yet decaying film stock that stands in opposition to the seemingly immaterial and eternal digital realm. At the same time however, his ‘successful’ misrecognition of Ara ultimately embraces a logic of timeless substitution, as we can see in the unchanging and plural body of the French girl. When Zhang leaves the hotel, he has a glimpse of the make-up room where he discovers multiple versions of this same girl (fig. 1.16). This confirms that she is indeed a duplicate, a forged identity without parents – a ‘replicant’ in the language of *Blade Runner*, the film to which the girl’s plastic coat pays homage. In that film, the artificially created humans also have no history: they are born as adults and have prefabricated memories implanted into their consciousness to mimic a sense of human identity.

Although *Cities* doesn’t dive as deeply into the question of these clones’ being-in-time, the French girl’s timelessness is mirrored through her remarkable unchanged repetition across eras. Notably, the character Zhang is played by four different actors over the course of the film, establishing his backwardly advancing age. Two of the central women in the film however (Ara and Zhang’s mother) are portrayed by the same actress throughout, even if they don’t appear in every chapter. This reverse of the aging disparity of *Crosscurrent* (where it is the prostitute who ages backwards while the man moves only in space) emphasizes the woman as object from Zhang’s perspective, rather than as an independent and developing agency. In this context, the film’s reference to *In the Mood for Love*’s taxi scene (fig. 1.17) makes a lot of sense. In that film’s sequel *2046* (as discussed in chapter four), this moment is referenced as a signifier for a happiness that could-have-been, and the woman serves as a blueprint for a series of affairs that serve as unsatisfying substitutions for this loss.



Fig. 1.16 Copies of Ara

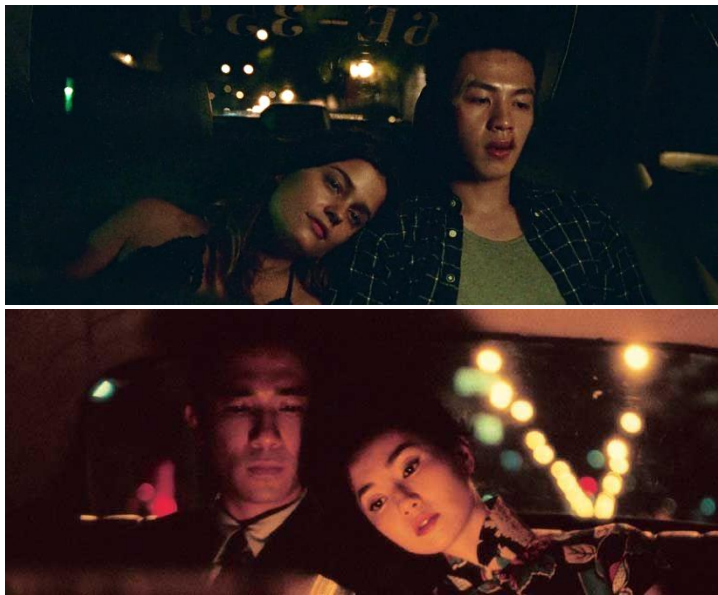


Fig. 1.17 Zhang and Ara (top image) mirror the perfect moment of the lovers who are not to be in Wong Kar-wai's *In the Mood for Love* (2000)

Even though in some ways producing the inverse of *Crosscurrent*, the body of the prostitute that is offered in exchange here once again serves to stand for the complexities of recognition and substitution in the passage of time. From this, we can see that even though the films under discussion here may not solve the predicament of failed progress or even produce a substantive critique, they are able to *make literal* some of the temporal contradictions arising from their historical conditions. Where in *Peppermint Candy* the question of violent progress is traced in reverse through the smooth yet deadly movement of the train, and in *Crosscurrent* the retracing and inscription of a temporal map attempts to engage with the complexity of history, in *Cities of Last Things* it is the logic of substitution and timelessness of the lost object which is literalized in Ara's body. This theme will continue to gain relevance in the

next chapter's analysis of *Kaili Blues*, where characters embodying 'other times' enter into the frame which becomes a shared space in which different temporalities become 'miscible' (in Bliss Cua Lim's terms discussed before). The juxtaposition of the reverse-chronological films in this chapter reveals that even if their engagements with history are at times flawed or missing, the speculative temporalities produced by their what-if mode of temporal exploration still work to recognize the complexities that arise from living in times of simultaneous suspension and rapid change. The human body re-emerges in each case as the primary locus of the real meanings of temporal inscription, even when it is overwhelmed by greater forces of history, technology, and technologically moulded 'nature.'

2. Navigating the time of the Other: Guizhou as temporal environment in *Kaili Blues*

The past mind cannot be attained
The present mind cannot be attained
The future mind cannot be attained

- *The Diamond Sutra*, cited in *Kaili Blues*⁷

Kaili Blues is a film about time, or rather, its inaccessibility, or the inaccessibility of the world through its mediation. This quote from the Mahayana Buddhist *Diamond Sutra* which appears right after the opening shot, long before the title of the film even shows, provides a frame through which to see the images unfolding thereafter on screen. It is an indication that the key issue of the film is that of the availability of reality to inner experience or thought. This can be understood as a specifically temporal issue: in a review of the film, Shelly Kraicer posits the problem as such: “That we experience mind, feeling, and the world through time ... is what perhaps makes it unattainable” (2016). The experience of a “world” becomes relevant in the geographical and political environment in which the film is situated.

The narrative of *Kaili Blues* (2015) takes the form of a journey in which both space and time are traversed. As indicated by the English-language title of the film, the geographical location is Kaili; as well as the surrounding area of Qiandongnan in Guizhou province, home to the Miao and Dong people, and also the birthplace of director Bi Gan. Kaili is primarily a Miao area, and their position within different Chinese states over the centuries has seen continuous tensions and negotiations of cultural identity vis-à-vis the Chinese Han majority, around which these states have long consolidated (Diamond 1995, Schein 2000). In the present day, these negotiations are formed in the context of expanding infrastructure in the Chinese countryside such as the national high-speed rail project, as well as the increased country-wide flows of migration and tourism that these infrastructures facilitate. While the

⁷ This translation by Shelly Kraicer (2016). The subtitles in the film read “It is impossible to retain a past thought, to seize a future thought, and even to hold onto a present thought.”

film does not directly address these issues or position itself as a political text, I will argue in this chapter that the temporal experimentations of *Kaili Blues* engage with these histories and interrogate the binary conception between Han and Miao as well as the temporalities imposed by this conception. This reading of the film does not intend to foreclose its lyric poeticism or its metaphysical thinking about time by reducing it to a historical context, rather, the goal is to understand how the historical weight of Guizhou as a place ‘temporalized’ by different actors provides a ground from which the imagination of the film’s eccentric temporalities becomes possible.

The narrative of the film revolves around Chen Sheng (played by the director’s uncle Chen Yongzhong), a village doctor in Kaili, who also turns out to be a poet: his poetry (written by Bi Gan, read by Chen) appears in voice-overs interspersed throughout the film. The film shows Chen spending time with his colleague, an elderly doctor called Guanglian, and with his nephew Weiwei, who is neglected by his father (Chen’s half-brother). When Weiwei disappears, Chen suspects his brother of selling the boy, which sets up the main quest of the film. Through occasional dialogues between the characters, we slowly find out more about the past: Chen has been in prison for 9 years before becoming a doctor, during which time both his wife and his mother passed away, and his absence created tensions between himself and his brother. Chen leaves Kaili for Zhenyuan, where he plans to find the disappeared Weiwei. His colleague asks him to find her old lover there with whom she has lost touch for decades, and to whom she wants to return a few items which she hands to Chen. While on his way, Chen finds himself traveling through a fictional mystical place called Dangmai, where he encounters characters from both the past and the future, and where his seemingly straightforward journey becomes entangled with the stuff of dreams. Remarkably, this entire 41-minute sequence that traverses a village by foot, motorcycle, car, and even boat is filmed in one continuous handheld shot. After this impressive *plan-séquence*, Chen eventually does end up in Zhenyuan, where he finds that Weiwei is in the safe hands of an old friend who is a watchmaker – a fitting conclusion, since Weiwei’s obsession with clocks is a recurring theme throughout the film. The last scene ends with Chen’s return by train – asleep,

seeding doubt into the veracity of many of the time-twisting manoeuvres in the scenes before. Was it all a dream?

This continuous existential doubt throughout the film is one way in which *Kaili Blues* engages in the construction of a ‘world’, which, as we will see, is always a temporal endeavour. Many critics have marvelled at the film’s ambiguous shuffling between its local environment and its poetic and philosophical explorations which seem to be unbounded to this context. In the first section of this chapter, I will read these responses to the film within the discourses around poetics and politics in Chinese cinema studies and film criticism. As *Kaili Blues* is read by many as a (refreshingly) non-political film, it is helpful to critically go through some of the thinking which tries to complicate the analysis of contemporary Chinese cinema as ‘art’ and ‘politics.’ The section following thereafter is dedicated to the history of the visual representation of Guizhou, especially in the era of photography. The discussions around photographing ‘alterity’ brought up there will find resonance in the analysis in the final section, which looks in-depth at the long take sequence of the film. It is in this ‘journeying’ part of the film that a lot of the themes around temporality find resonance in relation to the geographical environment, and in which the mechanisms of the clocks, trains, as well as that of the camera itself are mobilized to produce an ambivalent temporal perspective. While the next few pages will interrogate some of the *auteur*-centred interpretations of the film, the final part of this chapter will also return to the issue of *Kaili Blues* as a film that moves from personal experience, look at Bi Gan’s position as a filmmaker in China, and think about the meaning of the film within the contemporary horizons of Chinese cinema.

Poetry, poetics, and the political

Kaili Blues premiered in Locarno, Switzerland, on 11 August 2015 during the 68th Locarno Film Festival, where director Bi Gan took home the “Best Emerging Director” prize for the film. The time and place for this event are important to understand not only the film’s initial

audience, but also in what context it was made and who the film addresses. In an article in *The New York Times* published a few days later, Locarno is called a “natural outlet” for films like Bi Gan’s and other independent Chinese directors, in the context of “the broadest crackdown on free expression since 1989” exemplified by the shutting down of the Beijing Independent Film Festival in 2014, in the face of which “affirmation from foreign industry insiders has become more crucial” (Wong 2015). Furthermore, in his home country, Bi’s “art house techniques and narrative style guarantee a minuscule Chinese audience” - a sentiment echoed by the director himself, who is quoted saying “I don’t really expect too many Chinese viewers to watch [*Kaili Blues*]” (Wong 2015). Locarno emerges in this narrative as a place of escape and recognition outside of a repressive Chinese regime, but also a place where little-known Chinese (and other Asian) directors are discovered - with the world premiere of *Chungking Express* (1997) at Locarno given as example. When it comes to *Kaili Blues*, Locarno artistic director Carlo Chatrian is quoted saying it was “one of the first films we selected ... It’s a new way of looking at inner China” (ibid.).

It is interesting to note that in most English-language writing on the film, there is a near-universal praise of the film’s narrative and stylistic achievements (the 41-minute mobile long take, the fluidity of temporal layers, the “new way of looking”), while interpretations of the film’s political significance are somewhat ambivalent. A vague sense of subversion is conjured, with frequent references to the climate around free expression as explanation for the work’s circulation outside China; yet there is a reluctance to analyse the film in a ‘political’ way. In one of the earliest more in-depth analyses of the film, Shelly Kraicer positions *Kaili Blues* in a longer context of Chinese artists who, over the course of millennia, have found themselves set against “various oppressive ruling ideologies that have burdened Chinese society” (2016). However, he critiques the trend of predictable, ready-made critiques produced for non-Chinese audiences that have come out in recent decades. Although no specific examples are mentioned, the marketing of films and other works as “banned in China” immediately comes to mind here. With this understanding of the contemporary political significance of Chinese art in global circulation, Kraicer writes about *Kaili Blues*:

Bi Gan's art is something completely different. While it is clearly deeply embedded in contemporary culture, its poetry—not its politics—makes meaning. There is something uncanny, something quietly, modestly rapturous about Bi's world: it's seemingly grounded in a specific location, circumstance, and personality, while at the same time freely roaming, and not delimited by space, time, and character. We're in one place—an obscure little corner of small-town China today—and we're everywhere, unbounded, set free to wander in a single shot, in a dream without limits. (Kraicer 2016)

This dialectic between groundedness and fluidity, with a distinct tilt towards the latter in terms of the main interest of film critics, is a convincing one, and seems to resonate among film critics and scholars. It is worthwhile here to cite another essay on the film at length, since Xiao Jiwei and Dudley Andrew arrive at a similar ambivalent conclusion when it comes to the film's significance between its dreamlike world and its more immediate material contexts:

Thousands of miles away from Guizhou, both authors of this article, like many who saw *Kaili Blues* at festivals or in art theaters in the West, have fallen under its charm, experiencing it as an extended cinematic dream. This does not mean that the film retreats from the social reality of China ... Governmental policies surely affect the people of this region but cannot dominate their dreams and memories, their fears and fantasies. (Xiao and Andrew 2019)

The film's poetic style, its wealth of intertextual references, its innovative temporality, and Bi Gan's comments on these aspects of the film clearly offer a resistance to any straightforward political (allegorical) reading. However, the two passages above leave open a few possibilities and questions at the interstice of poetics and politics. Firstly, following Kraicer, how is this "free roaming" within Bi's world possible? If we are "set free" and "without limits", what has been done (spatially as well as temporally) to make this possible? Are we only temporarily free - for 41 minutes? Who are "we", considering that not many Guizhou people are expected to see the film, which has found audiences at "festivals or in art theaters in the West"? What are the conditions under which the "small-town China" of Kaili city or Guizhou is rendered "obscure", both in the national and the globalisation context? And does "poetry" exclude "politics" as locus of meaning (Kraicer) or do the "dreams and memories" conjured by the film offer some sort of subversive escape (Xiao and Andrew)? And how does this escape differ from the familiar escapism which has been essential to the popular appeal of the cinema

in most of the medium's history, and which has been an easy target of political critiques of the cinema?

A carefulness not to reduce films to a straightforward response to a socio-political situation has been a point of attention in recent Chinese cinema studies, with the Bordwellian 'poetics' approach to cinema of example being explored as a counterweight in publications such as *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema* (2016). In the introduction of the book, editor Gary Bettinson contrasts this approach to a "culturalist" one, which is there considered the dominant paradigm in contemporary Chinese cinema studies. While not pointing to specific instances of culturalism, Bettinson convincingly argues against Orientalist and essentialist paradigms that have been around in the field, which assume a coherent "Chinese" film style or which all too easily read films as a social reflection of some political anxiety or upheaval (such as the Handover of Hong Kong, or the lifting of martial law in Taiwan). To avoid such essentialist readings (a 1997 Hong Kong film *must* be about the Handover...), the poetician must advance more provable arguments, which in Bettinson's proposal revolve mostly around the "norms" and "style" of a specific filmmaker or group of films that share an industrial context. Through such a focus, the poetics approach claims the ability to establish the patterns and causes to which the techniques and style seen on-screen can be attributed. The claim here is then, that through such systematic investigation, "the poetician can qualify (or disqualify) the cultural essentialism that underlies widely held assumptions about Chinese storytelling and spectatorship" (Bettinson 4). Rather than doing away with Chinese cinema essentialisms then, the project here seems to be 'testing' these essentialisms empirically while not necessarily addressing why such essentialisms are worth holding on to or qualifying in the first place.

The poetics approach is mainly focused on popular cinema, since it stems from David Bordwell's work on the study of postclassical Hollywood studio production (which indeed has many commonalities with other contemporary modes of film production across the world). However, the claims of "poetics" here clearly cover the entirety of "Chinese cinema studies" as the book title suggests. Bettinson writes that the "broad principles" (uncovered by

the poetics approach) underlying the filmmaking modes of Chinese cinema “constitute a ground of conventions against which the exceptional or maverick case—for instance, the aleatory work habits of Wong Kar-wai—stand out as legitimately distinctive” (ibid.). We are then still stuck in this qualifying mechanism – determining whether or not a certain film, filmmaker, or technique belongs to the norm; and letting this norm dominate even our understanding of the films that fall outside it.

In the conclusion to her book on Inter-Asian independent cinema, Ma Ran addresses this same issue of how to read films within debates of political subversion, while avoiding reducing films to politics or succumbing to essentialisms (which is a central task in such an undertaking as large as speaking on “Asian” cinema). Ma writes that her “case studies have not aimed to provide an easy checklist to determine whether a film title or artwork is ‘qualified’ to be considered the art of the dissensual” (Ma 230). Building on Rancière’s work on dissensus, she writes that “the subversive art under examination is not enframed by sets of existing criteria or standards but is underpinned by the very dynamics of an unsettled ‘permanent guerrilla war’ regarding how the mode of appearance may be constantly re/configured” (ibid.).

This understanding of the boundary between normal and subversive as something that is actively configured and negotiated can help us understand a film like *Kaili Blues*. It is uncontroversial to state that Bi Gan’s style differs substantially from most other contemporary Chinese (even independent) cinema, which makes it unsurprising that it gets positioned quite differently depending on a critic’s frame of reference. If the elevation of the film into the realm of ‘art’ cinema resists readings pinning it to a more regionally specific issue or within the context of a historical event, this tendency is reminiscent of directors such as Andrei Tarkovsky - who Bi Gan often cites as an inspiration. While a closer examination of Tarkovsky’s work in connection with *Kaili Blues* will follow later, it is interesting to note here that, as John A. Riley writes, critical and scholarly interpretations of Tarkovsky’s works have often been “guided, overshadowed, and often limited by Tarkovsky’s own words and the traditional aesthetic values he upheld” (18). Bi Gan is only a first-time director at the release

of *Kaili Blues* and has not had the chance to build up the status of veteran arthouse director that Tarkovsky enjoyed later in his career, but many responses to the film follow in this legacy of the art cinema *auteur*, which Tarkovsky's own books such as *Sculpting in Time* (1985) have cemented, a work in which film style is defended on its own merits with strong transcendental and religious connotations that shy away from vulgar historical rootedness. A film like Tarkovsky's *Stalker* (1979) for example can however also be read in a 'hauntological' way that pays attention to the ghosts of a glorious Stalinist imagination of the 1930s, these imaginations' failings in the 1970s, as well as the ongoing relevance of 'borders' in those contexts. Such readings can open up the film to relevance to our current times where borders are of continued significance, and in which the 'ghosts' of Cold War policies and rhetoric are felt the world over (Riley 24). Neither Bi Gan nor his interviewers and critics would usually draw this kind of connection when summoning the spirit of Tarkovsky.

Interestingly however, when asked about the influence of Tarkovsky (and David Lynch here), the director distances himself from such a comparison, saying that they are not very similar "in terms of the cinematic language," because those filmmakers come from environments that are not his: "I have my own way of thinking about films, it's a sort of innate sense that I cultivated because of my environment and upbringing."⁸ This "environment", more specifically Bi Gan's growing up around Kaili City, in a Miao community and later leaving Guizhou to pursue his studies. His ethnic identity is generally assumed to be Miao (as in the aforementioned interview), although he does not speak the language, and Luo et al. write that "[significantly,] his identity does not appear to be widely known or queried among enthusiasts" (281). Bi Gan's identity seems to be an important marker for the film's authenticity for audiences and critics however. Xiao and Andrew⁹ write:

⁸ "'Kaili Blues' Q&A | Bi Gan | New Directors/New Films 2016" by the Film Society of Lincoln Center and the Museum of Modern Art, 20 April 2016. Timestamp: 23:00. Cited after the live translation by Dr. Vincent Tzu-Wen Cheng. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=gKS7vDNEcMM>>. The only similarity between himself, Tarkovsky, and Lynch he admits here is that they "all like to drink."

⁹ The citations of Bi Gan in this excerpt are from an interview by Aaron Stewart, "Director Bi Gan talks 'Kaili Blues,'" *The Playlist*. 27 May 2016.

Kaili Blues moved into the center of international art cinema partly because it follows, with a local accent, the director's imaginative journey to his own cultural roots. Being a Miao and a Guizhou native accords Bi Gan a moral advantage as well as a distinctive point of view. He explicitly wants to avoid any return to a "cosmopolitan exotic." "There is Miao identity in my blood, so I have an unforgettable feeling for it, and it exists in my film indistinctly. But I don't want it to be the theme of my film, so I am always trying to avoid making my film to be a fake folkways culture thing." (Xiao and Andrew 2019)

While the exact ethnographic origins of the director are not necessarily that important for understanding the film, it is interesting to note how this type of discourse of "blood" related to cultural identity seems to easily fit into auteur-oriented film discourses. The mention of a local "accent" is also striking as it routes the film's relation to cultural identity through a more linguistic metaphor, one that has roots in Hamid Naficy's notion of "accented cinema" (2001). The avoidance of *Kaili Blues*' engagement with Miao identity as a "theme" however sits alongside its mobilization of Miao imagery that interrogates a longer history of ethnic representation. Specifically, the film engages with the ways how the "ethnic" and "remote" border region of Guizhou is temporally mapped in the age of increasing connectivity and tourism, facilitated by infrastructures such as a national high speed rail network, and increasing migrant labour and other internal migration (which Bi Gan himself embodies, having left Guizhou for studies in Shanxi).

The film interweaves symbols of national synchronisation and modernity (train, clock) with Miao cultural elements that have been historically used to visualize temporal difference from the Han majority perspective, as well as with Buddhist thinking on the illusion of time. By doing so, it seems to blur the rigid boundaries between these different conceptions of time, forcing them in conversation with each other on a non-hierarchical plane. Through the dream logic which brings all these elements together, the mechanisms of modern temporality are revealed to be just as haunted, fluid, mythical, and embodied as the ritual practices of festivals, weaving, *lusheng* (芦笙) playing and communicating with deceased loved ones. At the same time, this temporal fluidity can easily be relegated to a realm of contemplation and poetry, away from the histories of temporal (non-)coevalness in Southwest China. The prominent quotation of the *Diamond Sutra* in the beginning of the film seems to

position the film as a contemplation on a deeper, universal truth about the human experience of time, establishing itself into a legacy of thousands of years of philosophical thinking across the Asian continent. The focus of our discussion here is however on the contribution of *Kaili Blues* within a more limited historical scope, which the following section will outline in more detail.



Fig. 2.1

Photographing the ‘Other’ in Guizhou

As if going back to the era when photography was misunderstood,
You captured my soul in a photo

- Chen Sheng, in *Kaili Blues* (poem from Bi Gan’s *Roadside Picnic*)

The voice of Chen, acoustically distorted by what seems to be a tape recorder or radio, is heard reading these lines while we see him go to sleep. The image cuts to a dark and cloudy wide shot of Kaili (fig. 2.1), and more dreamily rendered poetry is accompanied by the sounds of thunder. This line, at first glance an innocent gesture of romantic longing, can be brought into dialogue with other elements of the film around the ghostly qualities of the photographic image. In the Chinese context, these qualities are inextricably linked with photography’s perception as a foreign technology and its use as an imperialist apparatus for documenting and mapping the Other. The suggestion that taking one’s picture will take away

something of spiritual significance is one of the ways in which photography was brought into connection with spirituality (or “misunderstood” 誤解, in Bi’s words) in many contexts where the camera entered as a new technology. The trick photography popular in late 19th and early 20th century Shanghai and other urban centres on the east coast comes to mind here, such as “separate body photographs” (分身像) which allowed costumers to pose with one or several ‘ghosts’ of themselves through multiple exposures. According to Zhang Zhen, this moment in Chinese photography “called attention to an at once fragmented and recomposed subject caught between separate yet superimposed worlds, or, in Homi Bhabha’s phraseology, on the ‘split screen of the self and its doubling’ in a colonial setting” (164). This is one example of how the arrival of photography in China “generated a double-edged knowledge that linked a modern medium with certain superstitious beliefs about appearance and soul, body and selfhood” (ibid.). The spatial doubling in these photographs mirrors the temporal split that occurs in any photograph (trick or not, and both in still photography and cinema).

Decades later, the controversial documentary *Chung Kuo, Cina* (1972) by Italian filmmaker Michelangelo Antonioni would similarly spark debates at the intersection of photography and subjectivity. Rey Chow positions this film within a debate on the coming-together of the “foreign” and the “native” in photography and cinema, which resonates to this day (as we have seen in the earlier excerpts of film criticism). Antonioni’s intentions for the film were to capture an ethnographic reality of the Chinese working class, while in the eyes of the Chinese, “a Western filmmaker who knows little about China’s history and its people has presented China in a distorting, callously cold manner” (Chow 18). This discrepancy is partly due to a difference in appreciation for the rural countryside, which Antonioni saw as a “potential utopia” away from the “frenetic, neurotic West” (ctd. in Chow 18). The clash at the centre of this controversy can however also be read as a difference in the perception of photography. This is the direction Susan Sontag follows in her essay on the film a few years after its release. Chow critically points out that, while Sontag shifts the discussion of the film to photography as an ethnographic encounter, she reads the Chinese mistrust of Antonioni’s

cameras as backward, within a Western Enlightenment framework of cultural development in which Chinese are “at the first stage of camera culture , when the image is defined as something that can be stolen from its owner; thus, Antonioni was reproached for ‘forcibly taking shots against people’s wishes’, like ‘a thief’” (Sontag 89). This conception of an “era when photography was misunderstood” as echoed by Bi Gan here, seems to assume both a Eurocentric understanding of development, and a current “stage of camera culture” in which one’s image is not “owned” by oneself.

In the end, Antonioni’s film relies on a denial of temporal coevalness between the filmmakers and the people on screen, who are “rendered abject, in the shapes of creatures moving about in their own time, a time that is segregated from ours” (Chow 24). Chow compares Antonioni to the work of Jia Zhangke in order to talk about the subject-object dynamic in Chinese documentary practice today, which will have implications for our understanding of *Kaili Blues* as well. Jia’s focus is, not unlike Antonioni, on the underbelly of Chinese society, with characters often turning to crime or roaming around unemployed, dislocated and marginalised by their socio-economic environment. The direct comparison between these two filmmakers could easily lead to a reading in which Jia becomes a “native informant”, who can show the “real” that a foreign observer like Antonioni failed to capture (Chow 26). Instead, Jia’s films adopt the documentary *style* for a filmmaking project that has a much different conception of photographic realism: “[Jia’s documentary style] presents the past not as a bygone reality, already well understood, but rather as a (re) collection, one that curates materials in fragmented form from different media” (Chow 27). Jia breaks open the documentary form, mixing actors in with ‘real’ interview subjects, and using local residents as non-professional actors in his fiction films. In so doing, he interrogates this temporal boundary dynamic between the filmmaker and the subject in more ‘old-fashioned documentary realism’ projects such as Antonioni’s.

Jia is one of several filmmakers in Chinese cinema whose films have focused on the ‘hometown’ to which they have a personal connection. His first films were all firmly located in Shanxi, more specifically around the city of Fenyang. While he is not from one of China’s

minority populations, Jia's approach within the 'ethnographic' impulse of (documentary) filmmaking resonates with other directors working in regional settings. One of the most important examples would be Pema Tseden, the Tibetan filmmaker who has similarly garnered critical acclaim in film festival circuits both in East Asia and Europe. Chris Berry compares his work to the earlier genre of the "minority nationality film," a type of film which is usually made by Han directors, and which produces narratives and representations that tie into the policies and national interests of the People's Republic of China. These films emerged in the Maoist era, and it is partly because of the 'opening up' of the Chinese film industry that now other voices can be heard in Chinese 'minority' cinema. Today's Chinese independent cinema, however, still often carries the legacy of the minority nationality film, as seen in a "tourist gaze" found in some minority films today (Berry 91).

This context of ethnic (auto-)representation can help us to understand the importance of *Kaili Blues*' temporal juxtapositions. Luo et al. make an argument about the film that reads somewhat similar to Berry's on Pema Tseden: namely, that *Kaili Blues* signals the possibility of a 'post-alteric imagery' of areas such as Guizhou, which have traditionally been portrayed through Han-centred Orientalist imagery that served the interests of several empires: the Qing, Republican China, and finally the PRC (Luo et al. 282). Visual representations of the Miao and other non-Han ethnic groups were instrumental to the colonial expansion into southwest China in the late imperial period, mostly in the form of 'Miao albums' (百苗圖). These illustrated albums were made and traded as a commercial product, and depict everyday activities, rituals, dress, of the 'exotic' or 'barbaric' peoples of the frontier of the empire. As a product, they reflect more on Han Chinese culture itself than the ethnic minority subjects they depict: we can understand them as images "defining, ordering, celebrating and imagining imperial possessions, and ... expressing and articulating ideologies of imperialism" (Zhu 2). The discourses produced through such images produce a functional temporalization of space for the purposes of empire. As Luo et al. argue, the representations of these peoples as *remote*, "implied transformation, with raw groups in distant places framed temporally as

having ‘not yet’ been subdued or civilized” (272). The ‘not yet’ of this framing accompanies the denial of temporal coevalness also implied by the framing of Miao as barbaric or backward. Furthermore, as Hostetler (2001), Harrell (2001) and others have demonstrated, ‘representation’ in the imperial contexts of the Qing and after is not only temporally located ‘after the fact’, since these illustrations served alongside other ethnographies and cartographies as tools of understanding and control in the present and the future.

Representations of the Miao in the era of photography largely built on these legacies of ‘alteric’ visual representation. For example, the periodical *The Young Companion* (良友) which was published in Shanghai from 1926 until 1945 printed many collages of photographs from the Chinese “frontier” or “border regions”. With a modern cosmopolitan (colonial) readership in mind, as evidenced by the often bilingual titles and descriptions, the pictures offer landscape views from Guizhou, as an attractive far-flung region (e.g. fig. 2.5); collections of different types of minorities and their sartorial fashion such as headdresses, including the Miao (fig. 2.3); as well as showing the everyday habits of Miao people (fig. 2.2). The commentaries accompanying these images describe the Miao as a “border tribe” (fig. 2.7), and Guizhou as “the most secluded land of China”, where the tribal people are “almost shut away from the outside world”, and of whom only “some ... are civilized, having adopted Chinese customs and culture” (fig. 2.2). Consistent connections are made between the lack of modern technologies and infrastructure in the region, and the region’s remoteness and inaccessibility: “The province is very little known to outsiders, as it does not possess an inch of railway, nor navigable river” (fig. 2.5). Furthermore, these observations are set within a developmental time-frame, as the commentary under Figure E laments: “Human-labour [is] still employed in transportation.”

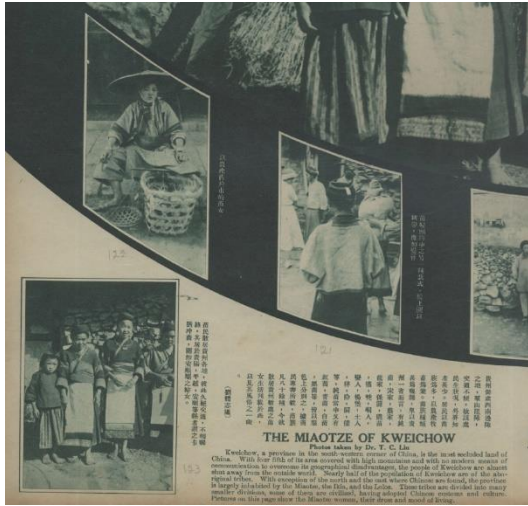


Fig. 2.2



Fig. 2.3

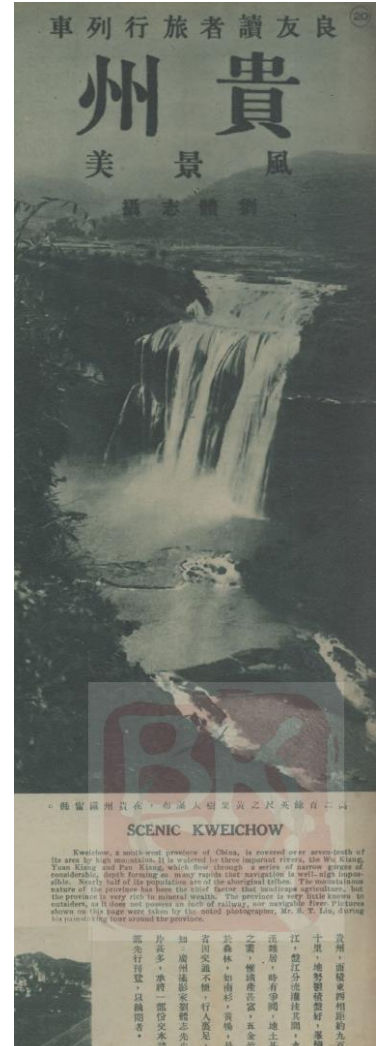


Fig. 2.5



Fig. 2.4



Fig. 2.6



Fig. 2.7

- 2.2 “The Miaotze of Kweichow.” *The Young Companion* 《良友》 Iss. 103 (1935): 18.
- 2.3 “Headdress of women in Chinese frontier provinces.” *The Young Companion* 《良友》 Iss. 153 (1940): 16.
- 2.4 “Miaotze (or Aborigines) in Kwangsi Province Receives Modern Education and Military Training.” *The Young Companion* 《良友》 Iss. 131 (1937): 22.
- 2.5 “Scenic Kweichow.” *The Young Companion* 《良友》 Iss. 102 (1935): 20.
- 2.6/7 “From Haiphong to Chongqing.” *The Young Companion* 《良友》 Iss. 143 (1939): 17.

The observation that Guizhou “does not possess an inch of railway, nor navigable river” is certainly no longer true today, as can clearly be seen in *Kaili Blues*, where the camera follows along characters’ journeys by train, car, motorbike, and boat. In recent decades, the province has been a major site for infrastructure development along with other rural areas of China. Projects such as the national high-speed rail network have cut down journey times to Guizhou from urban centres across the country. These developments however do not spell the end of the discourses that spatially and temporally ‘distance’ the province. A dialectic of connectivity and remoteness characterizes contemporary Guizhou, where “compression of geographical space and the ease of spatial mobility is accompanied by the proactive reproduction of remoteness and otherness” (Luo et al. 271). This production of remoteness is specifically visible when it comes to the development of Guizhou as a tourist destination. Many villages and natural areas that were for a long time not easily accessible, are now being recast as something of a ‘living fossil.’ The ‘authentic’ way of life in these places is repackaged as a commercial product for tourists from elsewhere in the country. The language surrounding these policies of ‘village packaging’, the promotion of a ‘Beautiful Countryside’ (美麗鄉村), as well as the advertisements for tourism in Guizhou then operate on a logic of traveling ‘back in time’ (cf. Oakes 2016, Lau 1998).

It is within this context that Luo et. al. examine contemporary representations of Guizhou and the Miao people, in which they recognize a shifting relationship between remoteness and Otherness. For them, *Kaili Blues* embodies a possible ‘post-alteric’ imaginary, because it avoids prevalent tropes of exoticization, includes modern urban high rises instead of solely showing village architecture, revolves around themes beyond ethnicity itself. Many Chinese viewers, they note, perceived it as a film representing Guizhou, but did not notice any specific ‘Miao’ elements at all (Luo et. al. 282). These conclusions produce an interesting contrast with those drawn by the film critics mentioned earlier, for whom the “obscure” or arguably “alteric” location and cultural references (for the international art cinema audience) worked to produce the poetic dream world that makes the film so appealing.

Within the argument of Luo et. al. on the ‘post-alteric’ moment in the 21st century Chinese social imaginary, *Kaili Blues* fits well to demonstrate this trend, and provide a hopeful temporal horizon when it comes to the representation of (and by) minorities. However, as suggested by other commentaries on the film, this contextualisation may leave out some of the nuances of the film’s positioning within the history of Miao representation. *Kaili Blues* certainly avoids outright Orientalist imagery, yet a closer look at the film will reveal how it simultaneously mobilizes some elements of these Othering structures to interrogate their temporal dynamics.

Dangmai: the long take as time travel

In the previous section, I have discussed different types of ‘alteric imaginations’, of photo- and cinematographic representations in which a boundary or split between subjects is generated. In this history of visual representation of the Chinese countryside (more specifically Guizhou Miao), *Kaili Blues* inhabits an ambiguous position. The camera, rather than being a boundary between the observer and the observed (as in Antonioni), becomes part of the scene. Some crew members, including Bi Gan himself, even have small roles on-screen. The protagonist Chen seems to stand in for the director’s own dreamy consciousness, and the boundaries between Chen’s dreams, Bi Gan’s poetry read by him, and the other characters in the Guizhou environment, seem at times to be dissolved. While he is not a foreign observer, Chen could however be read as something of a tourist.

Like Bi Gan himself, he needs translation to understand the Miao language, and in his meandering search for *lusheng* players in Dangmai, he is in constant need of guides and transportation. Chen arrives by train, just as those tourists who have flocked to Guizhou in recent years - in a way, to ‘travel back in time.’ However, Dangmai does not exist in the past, and Chen is ultimately not a tourist who, separated from the object of the imperialist desire, tries to map or consume a ‘different’ way of life. His engagement with the other characters in Dangmai is something more akin to a shared dream. The in-between Miao and Han seems to

produce a split colonial subject (not unlike that appearing in the ‘separate body photograph’), echoed by the ‘doubling’ of characters in the film.

Nowhere in *Kaili Blues* are these operations more apparent than in the 41-minute mobile long take in the middle of the film, in which Chen travels through ‘Dangmai’, a fictional village, on his way from Kaili to Zhenyuan where both his nephew and his colleague’s old lover are located. The name for this village came about when Bi Gan asked a Miao speaker how to say “secret location”, although “later on, I found out that it’s not Dangmai in the Miao language for a secret location, but I still used it” (Bi Gan, ctd. in Snyder 2016). The name fascinated Bi Gan so much that he later named his production studio “Dangmai Films.” The director’s willingness to use references that he does not himself understand can be read as another possible parallel to the film’s protagonist, who some critics have interpreted as a shaman figure who serves as a medium between different worlds and consciousnesses, while not standing above them in the sense of a rational subject. Furthermore, this long take is intertwined with Bi’s auteur status: his second film *Long Day’s Journey Into Night* (2018) includes an even longer mobile take that was also shot in 3-D, solidifying it as something of an authorial signature. For both films, it can be argued that these highly technical sequences contributed to the popularity of the films on the film festival circuit.

It is mostly in the Dangmai sequence that *Kaili Blues* becomes temporally interesting: the viewing experience creates something along the lines of Tarkovsky’s concept of “time pressure.” How long will this shot continue, will there be a cut? Will the actors or crew make a mistake in this highly choreographed performance? How did they pull it off? These questions on the technical level are mirrored by the narrative, which may produce feelings of confusion or astonishment: many timelines intersect in Dangmai, as the camera seems to freely move between characters who inhabit different times. While flashbacks and dreams are dispersed throughout the film, it is in the Dangmai sequence that memories and ghosts are fully integrated into the present, without any demarcation such as a cut. With the limited human-like movement of a Steadicam-operated camera traversing terrain by foot, car, and

boat, we are tethered to a single time and area within which temporal explorations have to be imagined through other means than editing.

“Dangmai” then, as a place as well as a time, may remind us of several other cinematic and literary dream-space-times, most prominently that of the Zone in Tarkovsky’s *Stalker* (1979) and in the novel *Roadside Picnic* (Strugatsky brothers, 1972) after which Bi Gan named the film in Chinese. As I will discuss later in this section, both “zones” seem to work according to a different logic of space-time than the world outside, and they both seem to offer a place where certain desires become reality, yet they are not “dreams” in the sense of being restricted to a single unconscious mind. The space-time of *2046* produces a similarly ambivalent world-within-a-world of desire and longing (see Chapter 4), as does the sequence in *Mind Game* when the protagonists are trapped inside a while in a seemingly timeless place cut-off from the outside world (Chapter 3). The parallels between these places speak to the fact that different temporalities necessarily produce different worlds, and it is the interstices between these worlds that produce tensions (which can possibly help us understand tensions in the contexts to which they refer).

In *Kaili Blues*, these tensions intersect with a mobilization of the road movie genre as well as the visualisation of the Miao introduced earlier. When understanding Pema Tseden’s films as road movies (a term mostly rooted in American cinema), Chris Berry asks several critical questions, some of which are useful here:

Where does the travel happen? What sort of physical topography does it traverse? What sort of human social geography is explored? ... What is the mode of transport? ... Who travels? And, where the mode of travel requires driving, who drives the vehicle? (Berry 94)

The road movie structure, especially within the Dangmai sequence, can be read as something of a foray into the afterlife, where both goodbyes and reunions are possible through (dis)appearances that enabled through an unusual trajectory through time. To these questions above then, I would like to add: what kinds of “in-between” (other than between Han and Miao, connected and remote) are generated in this journey between Kaili and Zhenyuan? And

lastly, through the camera, and the different modes of transport it tethers to: whose gaze, whose temporality, and whose mobility is activated in this sequence?

To understand how this journey is positioned within the film then, and ultimately how Dangmai can be read as something of a “Zone” whose borders create tension, we have to look at its temporal boundaries, i.e. what happens before and after the two cuts that separate the long take from the rest of the film. Leading up to the Dangmai sequence, Chen has learned of his nephew Weiwei’s location (Zhenyuan), and has collected the objects from his colleague to bring to her old lover. We see the start of his journey as he waits inside a crowded train station, but the following shots are of him nodding off in a completely empty carriage (fig. 2.8/9) which suggests a disconnect between realities: why did none of these people go on the train?

Another poem read by Chen’s meditative voice serves as a sound bridge between these shots and the next sequence, which starts with Chen exiting a gate with his suitcase (fig. 2.10). While this smooth sonic transition seems to indicate temporal continuity, what we are seeing instead is Chen leaving the gate of a prison: a flashback to the end of his jailtime, nine years before the start of the film’s events.



Fig. 2.8 Chen inside a crowded Kaili railway station



Fig. 2.9 A seemingly empty train reveals a lone Chen in the next compartment, as it twists through a turn



Fig. 2.10 The next shot seems at first a continuation of the journey, but Chen's different clothes and the characters (監管重地) painted on the wall indicate that the following is a flashback to the end of his jail time, 9 years ago

Fig. 2.11 Chen wakes up, suddenly in the back(!) of a train

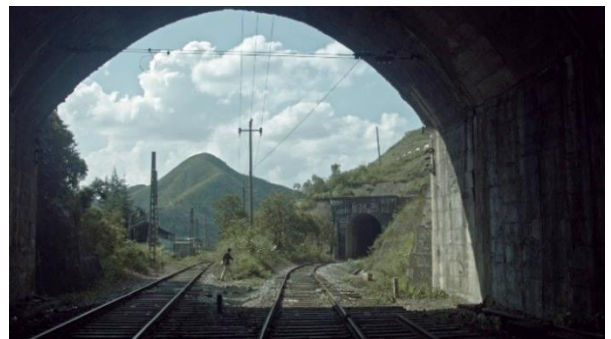


Fig. 2.12 A suggested POV shot from Chen, of men (elderly *lusheng* players) disappearing into the darkness of a tunnel

Fig. 2.13 Long shot of Chen crossing the tracks and following the men into the dark tunnel, marking his entrance into a different world



Fig. 2.14 Extreme close-up tracking along an embroidered fabric that depicts *lusheng* players

Fig. 2.15 Detail from a Miao Album. Page 39 from 《苗瑶族生活圖》 Princeton University East Asian Library. Origin between 1736 and 1926. <<http://pucl.princeton.edu/objects/wm117q35h>>.



Fig. 2.16 The opening of the 41-minute ‘Dangmai’ shot shows Weiwei (or rather, a teenager who turns out to be Chen’s nephew at the end of the shot) waiting around before Chen arrives

The shots that transition from the flashback to the eventual long take again play with continuity. Chen wakes up, seemingly in the train we saw him ride before, as he spots some men walking on the train tracks into a tunnel. Chen is wearing the same clothes as in the scene before the flashback, suggesting that this was simply a dream interrupting the otherwise continuous sequence. However, he is in a different seat (compare figs. 2.9, 2.11), and the following cut to Chen’s perspective (fig. 2.12) does not line up with the location and angle of the ‘waking up’ shot, as the camera shifts lower to the ground and the station platform disappears from the scene¹⁰. In the following long shot (fig. 2.13), he is no longer carrying his suitcase. This cinematographic discontinuity lines up with a narrative diversion: Chen leaves the train to follow the group of *lusheng* players rather than having Zhenyuan (and Weiwei) as primary focus of his journey.

The carceral visual motifs are striking here: the vertical bars in figs. 2.8 and 2.11, the tight framing in fig. 2.9, and the tunnel perspectives in figs. 2.12 and 2.13 all connect to the prison flashback. This thematic continuity (prison) across a sequence that is spatially and temporally discontinuous produces something of a poetic grammar, in the sense that sentences in a poem can freely jump between contexts while speaking to the same theme. This logic seems almost the opposite of that of the mobile long take, in which any change in location, perspective, and temporality has to be performed through physical movement rather than a

¹⁰ Later in the ‘Dangmai’ sequence, Weiwei confirms that Dangmai doesn’t have a train station, when Chen asks him to bring him there in order to get to Zhenyuan. This seems to indicate that Chen never really got off the train.

cut. These shots seem to work as a transition towards that long take, in which the prison flashback and the tunnel work as a threshold that we have to pass through to arrive in Dangmai.

The last shot before we enter the “other side of the tunnel” presents us with something of a physical “screen” between worlds, in the form of a Miao batik fabric depicting *lusheng* players (fig. 2.14). The embroidery is filmed so closely that it takes a few seconds of tracking along the fabric before we can make sense of what we are seeing. The macro lens seems to transform the camera into a haptic machine, running its fingers along the fabric’s fibres, which come in and out of focus as the camera continues its slow, lateral movement until coming to rest on an image of birds flying above the musicians, after which the cut finally arrives.

On the one hand, this extreme close-up provides a transition between the more static shots of the previous sequence (figs. 2.8-13) and the handheld camera employed in the Dangmai long take (fig. 2.14). On the other, if we look more closely at how the batik fabric is here transformed into a screen, this shot can be read as an engagement with a broader politics of visual representation. As with any screen (whether in cinema, theatre, or architecture), this piece of fabric works to demarcate space, through which some things are hidden and others rendered visible. In this case, while it hides the way in which Chen ends up in Dangmai from the train tracks, it brings into vision these *lusheng* players. This fits into the narrative arc of Chen looking for these musicians to, as it turns out later, honour his colleague’s old lover, who is on his deathbed. However, the extreme close-up distorts and cuts up these images. Earlier, the camera offered us only a glimpse of the Miao musicians from Chen’s perspective, as they disappear into darkness (fig. 2.12). Now, we move through distorted illustrations of these performers, as the camera brushes along the surface of the batik, only ever revealing parts of the image. The *lusheng* players remain mysterious and elusive, for Chen as well as the audience. The visual relationship to the Other produced by this shot is reminiscent of earlier representations of the Miao such as those appearing in the “Miao albums” discussed before, to which the colour schemes in this shot has some visual resemblance as well

(compare figs. 2.14/15). The layers of representation and mediation suggested by this batik-as-screen work alongside the narrative diversion of Chen searching for *lusheng* players, to produce a perspective which is neither that of the foreign, nor the native – suggesting Bi Gan’s ambivalent position as a filmmaker. It introduces the dream-logic of Dangmai, in which new questions and mysterious connections are often conjured up, which fail to make sense within any discursive mode that relies on representation or the knowledge of native informants to demarcate what is definitively Miao or Han, indigenous or modern.

The ambiguous perspective in the Dangmai sequence is most clearly felt in the literal audio-visual perspective: a handheld wide-angle lens, stabilized but at times wobbly, follows Chen around as he walks and rides his way through the village environment. While the camera’s movements are mostly dictated by Chen’s journey through the village, at several points its perspective strikingly decouples from the protagonist. Once, while Chen is being driven around on motorcycle, the following camera suddenly turns away into an alley and then joins up with Chen and his driver again on the other side. As our perspective glides through the stairs of the alley, all sounds momentarily fade away, and the low rumble of a faraway thunderstorm resonates on the soundtrack, suggesting a different sonic ‘point of view’ as well. Later in the scene, as will be discussed further below, the camera turns away from Chen to follow another character for an extended period of time, to join up with Chen again afterwards. These movements establish Dangmai as a coherent world in which the characters continue to move, even when they are not in frame. The movements of the camera draw attention to themselves, and the camera becomes another character in the scene, as a ghost with its own temporality – as it draws together characters from different timelines.

The first person Chen encounters is a teenager (fig. 2.16), who he hires to drive him around. We don’t learn much about the boy during the sequence, except that he gets bullied by a few other boys who drive around on motorbikes, and that he is interested in Yangyang, a local girl who becomes important later in the scene. Only at the very end of the long take, as they are driving out of Dangmai, does Chen ask for his name. It turns out to be Weiwei - the same as the nephew Chen is looking for. The credits at the end of the film indeed confirm that

we have been travelling in time, as it lists these characters as “小\卫\卫 Weiwei (child)” and “青年\卫\卫 Weiwei (teenager)”. In this last conversation of the sequence Weiwei reveals not only his name, but also his plan to paint clocks on the side of a train in such a way that when they flash by in succession, he will be able to turn back time. The outcome of this plan will come to light later, but for now this obsession with the (backward) movement of clocks further cements the continuity of the Weiwei character, who has already been drawing clocks throughout the film.

Although we thus seem to find a ‘future’ character in the teenage Weiwei, the world of Dangmai is not simply situated in the future. Chen also encounters a hairdresser who, he remarks, looks exactly like his late wife. She passed away during his time in prison, before the start of the film’s plot, and we’ve only seen glimpses of her in short flashbacks early in the film. The hairdresser’s name happens to be Zhang Xi, like his late wife, and their interaction in the barbershop reveals several details about the history of their marriage without unequivocally acknowledging Zhang Xi’s identity. Seated in the barber chair, Chen tells the story of an imprisoned man, after which the hairdresser’s movements become noticeably rigid. A few moments later, they attend a roadside concert where Chen takes over the microphone to sing “Little Jasmine” (小茉莉), which he earlier mentioned he promised to sing to his wife after getting out of prison. The mirroring of the hairdresser character with Chen’s late wife is complemented by a physical mirroring: Chen tells his story of prison and marriage in the third person, about a “friend he once knew”, and this monologue is filmed from behind his shoulder through the barbershop mirror (fig. 2.17). The association of two seemingly disparate times and characters (in the figure of Zhang Xi) thus comes about through a dissociation or split within the character of Chen.



Fig. 2.17 Chen Sheng and Zhang Xi



Fig. 2.18 Yangyang, with Weiwei in the

background

The production of ‘doubles’ and their corresponding intersection of temporalities make sense within the larger narrative arcs of the film, when read alongside the Diamond Sutra quote in which the past, present and future “cannot be attained” (不可得). This is expressed in the love stories between three generations of couples which follow a repetitive pattern of unfulfillment: the elderly doctor and her lover; Chen Sheng and Zhang Xi; Weiwei and Yangyang. Their stories are told in different temporalities: respectively through reminiscence and physical items that carry memory; flashbacks and a seemingly spectral reunion of the married couple; and in a real-time sequence with a suggested temporal return (Weiwei). Each of these generations of lovers experience a separation through a limited mobility. The elderly doctor once recalls how she and her lover drifted apart in the time of the Cultural Revolution, which was the time we can assume she ended up as a “barefoot doctor” in Kaili. Chen was separated from his wife through imprisonment. Weiwei is chasing Yangyang during the long take sequence, but he laments that she will leave to work as a tour guide in Kaili, which motivates him to turn back time so that they can be together. The mobilities of these characters are very much shaped by not just the mountainous and ‘inaccessible’ environment, but also the ways this environment is transformed, rendered accessible, or restricted through institutions and processes of institutional change (the Cultural Revolution, the prison, the boom in Guizhou tourism).

This interactive production of the Kaili environment can even at times be seen as a performance, most prominently a scene where Yangyang crosses the river in Dangmai (fig. 2.18). The camera has just left Chen at the hair salon, and is now escorting her as she announces she wants to “cross the river.” She boards a sampan which takes some time to turn around and get underway, through which the camera meanwhile reveals that there is a bridge that covers the same route. In the background, we can even see Weiwei and his motorbike crossing the bridge to beat her to the other side. The reason for Yangyang’s short trip never becomes clear – after disembarking, she only buys a little paper pinwheel from a roadside vendor and has a chat with Weiwei before again returning to the salon over the bridge. However, as with many seemingly unusual diversions in the film, trying to untangle the motivation of this scene within the narrative arc of the character may not be the most productive approach, with the underlying temporal logic of the film as fluid as it is. Yangyang and Weiwei’s separate journeys and reunion on the other side can surely be read as having clear thematic resonances with the reunion of Chen Sheng and Zhang Xi concurrently happening at the hair salon. Perhaps the inclusion of the boat crossing is also simply a visually attractive addition to the journey of the Dangmai long take as a “tour de force”, as many critics have hailed it.

What happens sonically during this excursion is however quite striking: as she waits in the boat to be ferried across, Yangyang starts citing, by heart, a list of facts about the Kaili region which she is rehearsing in preparation for her job as a tour guide:

Kaili borders Taijiang and Leishan to the east, Majiang and Danzhai to the south ... Kaili's coordinates are between 107°40'58" and 108°12'09" east longitude. ... The terrain is hilly with elevations of low to medium height. Kaili is in the mid-subtropical warm and humid climatic zone. ... The warmest month is July, with a mean temperature of 23.2 to 25.8 degrees Celsius. The climate is moderate with four distinct seasons, and the average annual rainfall is 1240.1 mm. This makes the region suited for the development of agriculture, forestry and animal husbandry.

The performance of this overwhelming string of quantitatively rendered geographic knowledge comes across as strange yet familiar: it is a purely abstract knowledge of the environment that is embodied only through repetitive learning. This kind of performance

would not seem unusual coming from the mouth of any tour guide in the Chinese countryside. A tour guide has to perform a kind of localness in order to fulfil tourist desires and expectations while at the same time rendering the land legible in a common vocabulary. In this case, the latter concern is emphasized in a somewhat absurd empirical objectivity that is reminiscent of the outside observers' gaze discussed before, whose mapping of these regions worked in conjunction with imaginations of how the region is "suited for development" (適宜…發展), in other words, how the land could be transformed.

Between some of the lines of her guidebook rehearsal, Yangyang doubts and has to look at her notes, when the off-screen voice of Weiwei chimes in to echo her words but also to continue the script further – he seems to know it even better than she does. These echoing sonic representations of the landscape add another layer to the realms of quantitative mapping and visual representation. The sonic landscape of the Chinese countryside has been for a long time filled with reverberations of a particularly widespread technology: the loudspeaker. In the decades after the Communist Revolution, more than 100 million loudspeakers were installed throughout the country, which became part of a new media infrastructure that was used for propaganda as well as reporting on local news or production quota, and which "staged a media revolution in China not only by amplifying the 'throat and tongue' of the state but also by extending the ears of the populace," as Jie Li writes (44). Regardless of the exact content transmitted by these loudspeakers, the affective experience of its voices brings it into the question of embodiment. Jie Li aptly brings up Michel Chion's concept of *acousmêtre* to understand this experience. She writes, citing Chion:

Acousmatic voices have 'the ability to be everywhere, to see all, to know all, and to have complete power. In other words: ubiquity, panopticism, omniscience, and omnipotence.' Though it was hardly an intended effect, reverberation through loudspeakers may well have contributed to a sense of sanctity deriving from the omnipresence of disembodied voices. (Li 40)

The chiming in of Weiwei as a disembodied voice then, adds on this thematic play between embodied and disembodied knowledge in conjunction with histories of mediation and representation of Guizhou as well as the wider Chinese countryside.



Fig. 2.19 Weiwei and Yangyang turn their gaze to find the distant source of unexpected train sounds

Another acousmatic sound occurs a few minutes later, as Yangyang and Weiwei are both on the other side of the river. The camera tracks Yangyang walking from the side, and moves to a close-up as she suddenly stops and turns her head, when we hear the sound of a train horn. Her astonishment (“There’s a train?”) and the temporary pause in which both Yangyang and Weiwei stare into the distance (fig. 2.19) may help to remind us of the earlier inexplicable (dis)appearances of trains in the film. Shortly after arriving in Dangmai, Chen asks Weiwei the whereabouts of the train station to bring him to Zhenyuan, and he appears somewhat confused when Weiwei answers him that the town has no train station: he will have to take a boat. This piece of local knowledge is then subverted by this surprising echo of a faraway train, as well as by the dialogue at the very end of the Dangmai sequence, with Chen sitting on the back of Weiwei’s scooter, about to be dropped off at the edge of town:

Weiwei:	Yangyang says she'll only come back from Kaili if I can turn back time.
Chen Sheng:	So what are you going to do?
Weiwei:	I am going to do exactly that. The train that transports coal from Kaili stops at Dangmai. I'm going to draw a clock on each train. And the clocks will all be connected.

The train station has suddenly appeared again, which at this stage is no longer as unexpected. The dream logic of the Dangmai sequence bends the modern technologies of the clock and the train in ways that privilege lyrical association over narrative consistency. Any attempt to

untangle the entire narrative adhering to a linear causal logic of character development will have to invariably conclude that most of the film is simply a dream inside Chen's head, after which we may interpret all 'inconsistencies' as permutations of reality inside an unconscious brain.¹¹

At the very end of the long take, after hearing from the boy on whose motorcycle he's sitting is called Weiwei, he does whisper that it's "like a dream" – his voice sounds deep and close by, acousmatic; the sounds of the motorbike have made way for Lim Giong's meditative score. This kind of atmosphere between sleep and waking, as well as shots of Chen really waking up, happen repeatedly in the film. Asked about this question of the status of the Dangmai sequence in the film, Bi Gan responds:

The long take in *Kaili Blues* is not really a dream ... [it] presents a surrealistic experience. Maybe it happened and maybe it didn't. At the end of *Kaili Blues*, the cassette tape is lost. It is left in the Dangmai episode. I meant to tell viewers that it is not a dream. Chen Sheng might not have met all these people. But he must have been there and spent lots of time there. (Bi Gan, in Xiao 19)

The cassette tape referred to here is one of the items given to Chen by the elderly doctor to bring to her lover, but Chen gives it to the hairdresser instead. It is one of many items that establish a continuity between Dangmai and the other locations in the film.

This discussion of Chen's consciousness has only so much relevance to the understanding of environment and temporality that are central here. There is another consciousness involved in this scene, which is our own. The long take presented here surpasses the abilities of the human sensorium: as film theorist Nicholas Rombes writes, we never actually 'see' any long take, "only fragments of a long take uninterrupted by the act of blinking, just as sleeping interrupts or pauses our conscious absorption and processing of real-time reality" (Rombes 40). He continues by citing Bergson, who writes: "Pure perception, in

¹¹ Possibly the most ambitious attempt to make sense of the entirety of *Kaili Blues* and chase all the visual cues in the film can be found in a blog post on *Douban* titled *Kaili's Time Labyrinth: Memories and Dreams Intertwined in "Kaili Blues."* 凯里的时间迷宫: 回忆与梦境交织在《路边野餐》 by user 钱德勒慢腾腾地: <<https://www.douban.com/note/573854214/>>. This analysis comes to a similar conclusion, arguing that many of the inconsistencies are motivated by Chen's use of medicine in the beginning of the film, when he reports to his colleague to have a cough.

fact, however rapid we suppose it to be, occupies a certain depth of duration, so that our successive perceptions are never real moments of things [...] but are moments of our consciousness” (Bergson, in Rombes 40). Such moments are presented here through the technique of the long take in a way that addresses two themes that I have discussed here: one of continuity and consistency (of time, of the dream-logic), and one of perspective (of the “local” or the outsider). The handheld camera, constantly following characters around and sometimes unexpectedly lingering, never jumping through space by a cut, leaves us guessing about its perspective, yet offers us a strange continuity.

It is a ‘strange continuity’ that is precisely at stake in the very last shot of *Kaili Blues*, which plays out the promise made by Weiwei: to turn back time. After completing his journey in Zhenyuan, Chen takes the train back home and yet again, falls asleep. A medium close-up from beside Chen shows us the window view that he seems to be missing while dozing off. A train whizzes by on the opposite track, and on its blurred surface, Weiwei’s hand-painted clock appears, turning backwards frame-by-frame (fig. 2.20). The linear, measured temporality of the clock is here inverted through animation: the individual clock drawings function as film frames, harnessing the power of cinema to travel in time. This also recalls an earlier surreal shot, where a clock drawn on the wall by the ‘little’ Weiwei is animated through an off-screen moving light source (fig. 2.21). In both cases, the animating capacity of cinematography is mobilized to subvert the rigidity of clock-time. The long take with its haunting perspective, the clock animations, and the continuous (dis)appearance of the train become part of a Kaili environment which does not abide to the logic of any of these technologies.



Fig. 2.20 The clock turns back in *Kaili Blues*' last shot



Fig. 2.21 Shot of a clock that was drawn earlier by Weiwei; the quickly moving hands of the clock are shadows from an unknown light source

In several interviews, Bi Gan calls *Kaili Blues* a “very personal film”, and he suggests that both Chen Sheng and Weiwei are in some ways autobiographical characters (see Xiao 18-19). This journey through the environmental temporalities of Guizhou can indeed be read as a personal engagement of Bi with the experience of past/present/future of growing up, leaving, and returning to Kaili. When asked about the recent explorations of dreams and temporality in Chinese cinema, through filmmakers such as Pema Tsenden and himself, Bi responds:

Our attention to the oneiric experience might indicate that cinema is reaching another stage in China. For some of the earlier generation directors, cinema is an art form but it also has other functions. It may have even played into the ideology of the time. Now and perhaps in the future, we filmmakers might turn to the experience of the self more and focus on dream and time.” (Bi Gan, in Xiao 21).

While the cinema is of course always at once “art form” and “ideology” as well as an “experience of the self,” these comments strike something of a chord with the broader turn of Chinese (and beyond Bi’s view here, East Asian) cinema indeed to “dream and time.” As in the other films discussed in this dissertation, *Kaili Blues* inhabits the temporal logics at the intersection of national and regional infrastructures, straddling a somewhat ambiguous position that at times reproduces the developmental temporal perspective from an unexpected place. Within a fluid intersection of history and the “self”, the film engages with different modes of temporalization of Guizhou as a “border region,” and the Miao as a “backward” people. The mantra taken on by the film that neither the “past mind” nor the “present mind” or “future mind” can be attained, excavates an ancient understanding of time that reads against the developmental temporality imposed on Kaili today, as it similarly was in the Republican era as well as the era of Qing colonial expansion. Within these discourses, *Kaili Blues* presents a somewhat eccentric temporal perspective that certainly speaks to “art cinema” audiences outside of China, but also complicates the temporal position of the “native” in the context of contemporary Chinese connectivity and migration. Chen Sheng’s journey through the Qiangdongnan countryside is a thorough engagement with the “now” of Kaili – which consists of all the personal and collective memories, as well as future imaginations embodied there and projected from the outside. As the countryside undergoes more and more projects of “modernisation” and “revitalization,” *Kaili Blues* may acquire even more layers of meaning in the years from now, as the march of progress continues.

3. Animating explosive temporalities: Fantasies of reversal/escape and the disappearance of history in *Mind Game*

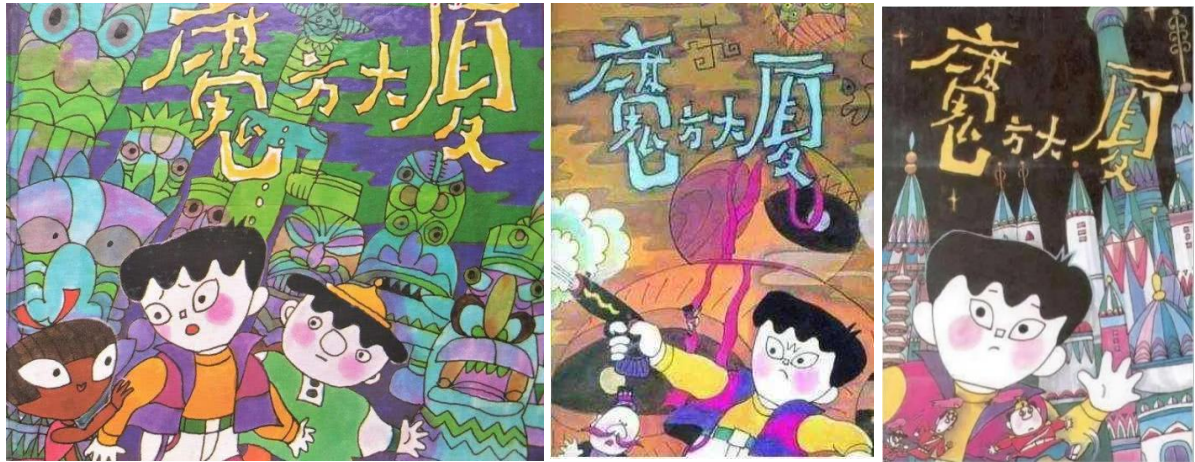


Fig. 3.1 The protagonist of *Rubik's Cube Building* in different worlds explored in the comics and animation series

Commenting on the influences on *Kaili Blues* in an interview, Bi Gan mentions an animation series called 魔方大厦 (*Rubik's Cube Building* 1990-1994), in which a boy's Rubik's Cube expands into a world where he has several adventures, specifically one recalled by Bi Gan in which he "has a gun with him, which shot out wine instead of bullets, and the wine made people drunk." Bi's poetic style seems to be a world away from the frantic postmodern formalisms produced by much of contemporary animation, yet this story of a "magic cube" somehow connects into the creative process behind the film, as Bi continues: "In my childhood, I always heard about the stories which are full of magic, but when I grew up, I found out life is full of realism. When I was writing the script for *Kaili Blues*, I was thinking about how to shoot a real story in a dreamy way."¹² The connections made here between childhood or adolescence, magic, dreams, and animation come with a sense of potential but also mistrust. The formal capabilities of the animation medium signify a certain potential – to

¹² The interview with *Indiewire*:

<https://www.indiewire.com/2016/05/kaili-blues-filmmaker-bi-gan-explains-how-magic-and-his-own-family-made-his-first-feature-a-reality-springboard-290126/>.

A note on film style: *Kaili Blues* does include some animation, in the form of fast-forwarding and reversing clock, actually similar to a motif in *Mind Game*.

transform physical realities and generate worlds, and to intoxicate (similarly noted by critic Imamura Taihei in his 1938 essay on cartoon films, where he famously describes how “the life force bubbling up on the screen courses through us like wine” (109)). However, the magic of animation/childhood is resisted by a sense of “realism”, especially on the level of story: in order to circumvent the problem of being outside the realm of “life”, formal experimentation inspired by animation (shot in a “dreamy way”) must be grounded in a “real story.”

Can the playful adolescence of animation and the ‘realities’ spawned by this flexible medium be recuperated in their generative potential? What kind of times can be *animated* (brought to life), and can these real or virtual temporalities produce any potentiality beyond intoxication and escapism? Can animation “only” bring to life what was previously inanimate, or can animation also offer a critical perspective on how already-living bodies are temporalized? Such questions have been becoming more actively foregrounded in contemporary Japanese animation, especially in the works of directors such as Kon Satoshi (*Paprika*, *Perfect Blue*) and Yuasa Masaaki, whose signature style revolves around intricate narrative world-building in which different realities co-exist. Directed by Yuasa, the film *Mind Game* (2004) presents something of an inverse of *Kaili Blues*’ oneiric “real story”: its temporality is described by one reviewer as “formal experimentation paired with a popular narrative” (Jackson 264). Based on the manga of the same name (Robin Nishi 1995), this animation overwhelms the viewer with a barrage of possible pasts and futures surrounding a small cast of central characters. The temporal experiment here takes the form of a (video)game in which different times diverge – as opposed to *Kaili Blues*’ poetic form in which times converge onto a single plane. Both films present us then with a world of temporalities, whose mutual incommensurability produces the central tension – but this incommensurability is charted in opposite directions.

Whereas the key technique of *Kaili Blues* is the mobile long take, *Mind Game* offers us something of a ‘supercut’: rapid montages consisting of slices of life, where we see many of the possible pasts and futures that the characters of the film inhabit. These possible times (or worlds) appear in rapid succession, only a few seconds at a time, often too fast to

completely parse. One such possible worlds montage even appears just one minute into the film, at which point we are not familiar with the characters to even realize that these seemingly random images of life in 20th and 21st century Japan are connected through any narrative strand at all. It overwhelms us and presents itself as seemingly simultaneous. There is no order (in the double sense of *sequence/succession* and *system/hierarchy*) between the scenes we see flashing by. While these scenes are either simultaneous or out-of-time, they are not spatialized through split-screen editing, and presented instead through the continuity editing logic of cross-cutting. This logic is however accelerated to its limit – the limit of human perception. It confronts us with the impossibility of perceiving simultaneously existing realities, the impossibility of visualizing the infinite branching-off of timelines that results from the decisions and contingencies of everyday life.

Where the limit in *Kaili Blues* presents itself in the need to blink, which refrains us from perceiving the long take in its entirety, here we are presented with what Thomas Lamarre calls the “stuff of blink”, the coming together of animation, screens, and brains through the haptic (“the eye is touched”) and other sensorial elements that are interweaved into a sort of fabric (Lamarre 90). In this work on what he terms the “anime ecology”, Lamarre thinks along William James to describe these interactions between animation/screen/brain “not in terms of interactions between individuals but in terms of intra-active infra-individual actions ... Dispensing with the form–matter distinction, James invites us to think of intra-actions in terms of the cutting and sewing of fabric stuff.” (91). Approaching contemporary animation through this intermediary concept of the stuff of blink, and its associated sartorial metaphors of cutting and sewing, helps to understand not just the visceral and haptic connection with animated bodies on screen but can also help us focus on how animation is always a patchwork of differently temporalized cultural and aesthetic elements that emerge from different regimes of labour.

Yuasa’s animations draw direct attention to these out-of-joint temporalities on several levels. Thematically, *Mind Game* emphasizes the contingent times of everyday lives in contemporary Japan as they intersect in different unpredictable constellations (as expressed in

these montage sequences, as well as in the main storyline which will be discussed later). The ‘connecting tissue’ that makes this otherwise seemingly random assemblage cohere is the animation medium, or the ‘stuff of blink’, out of which the storylines as well as different animation styles are cut and sewn together. Unlike animation studios such as Studio Ghibli which adhere to a consistent and smooth style throughout, or even TV series such as *Pokémon* which rely heavily on limited animation which a much more jagged and rough style, Yuasa’s work is known for its idiosyncratic form which shifts between mediums and styles depending on individual animators’ drawing techniques as well as the demands of the scene at hand, often combining detailed drawings with still photography, rough sketches, 3-D animation and video game machinima. Asked about this formal inconsistency (often called “art shifting”) in an interview, Yuasa explains his approach by describing how the “world in which we live is filled with multiple facets,” which he does not “want to put through a filter to squeeze into a single image” (Yuasa 2018). The elaborate use of art shifting does not just reflect the multifacetedness of contemporary lived experience, it also draws attention to the heterogeneous temporalities that go into animation production. Animated characters often seem to move seamlessly between frames as well as between different media within the broader ‘anime ecology’ (Lamarre) or more conventionally the ‘media mix’, which is the dominant model in contemporary Japanese popular culture that bridges manga, TV animation, cinema, video games, light novels and dozens of other iterations spawning out of a specific franchise. These seamless movements, however, hide the mechanisms of production and the intensities of labour behind each frame and each iteration of the character or world.

The multiplicity of sources behind any iteration of the media mix (elements within a single frame or soundtrack are often the combined work of a transnational and highly laborious production process) is at the same time matched by the proliferation of worlds and narrative strands of these characters emanating from a single franchise. Critics such as Otsuka Eiji have compared this tendency of anime to produce a proliferation of worlds from the centre that is the ‘character’ to the logic of a video game, wherein “[e]ach individual ‘play’ using the same video game will offer up a different development depending on the player and

the game” (Otsuka 2010: 108). While the particular intermediary connection with video games will be explored later, it is important to bring up this notion here of narrative iterations that spawn from a more stable character-centred world within this media mix logic. It is precisely this logic that Marc Steinberg reads as the central concern in Yuasa’s anime series *The Tatami Galaxy* (2010), one of the director’s only works to receive significant attention in anglophone animation studies. Steinberg argues (along with Lamarre) that contemporary theorizations of transmedia narratives (such as Henry Jenkins’ “convergence culture”) are often hampered by a focus on animation, video games, manga, etc. as separate media, an understanding which stems primarily from North American media studies with their focus on Hollywood media productions (and their specific industrial conventions and production strategies, which differ significantly from the ‘media mix’ model). Steinberg takes *Tatami* as an allegory of the production of worlds in the contemporary Japanese media mix, noting it as an example of how “stories of multiple possible worlds proliferate in a world of proliferating media forms” (71), an observation which resonates well with *Mind Game* and several other works of animation discussed later.

Tatami’s unnamed young male protagonist starts off every one of the first nine episodes of the series by arriving at university and joining one of the extracurricular clubs in order to achieve his ideal of a ‘rose-coloured’ campus life. The protagonist’s efforts are however repeatedly in vain: he does not gain the respect of his peers as he expects to, and fails to get the attention of his love interest. As his dreams come crashing down towards the end of each episode, the narrative closes off with a big clock that rewinds time (as in a VHS tape) and leaves us with the end credits, after which the protagonist’s struggles start over again at a different club in the next episode. The last two of *Tatami*’s eleven episodes however upend this seemingly circular temporality. Here, the protagonist has given up on campus life and decides to retreat to his room to live as a *hikikomori*¹³. He subsequently finds himself in a ‘tatami world’ which combines all of the alternative paths (of which we have

¹³ Individual who lives in self-imposed isolation, an established social phenomenon in contemporary Japan.

seen some in the previous episodes) which he has navigated towards his goal of social and romantic success at university. These timelines are rendered spatially in a network of 4.5 tatami mat rooms (to which the title of the series refers¹⁴): the doors and windows of his room no longer reach the outside world, but instead lead to other versions of this same room from the alternative worlds in which he took a different path. As we will also see in *Mind Game*, the entry into a world of multiple worlds is here triggered by the protagonist's *inaction*. His retreat from the social world triggers the convergence of all these possible social worlds, which he is able to explore *ad infinitum*, until they eventually serve a revelatory therapeutic function to the protagonist: he realizes the value of the people he came across in his university life, and his desires for both heterosexual and homosocial bonding are fulfilled by seeing the people close to him in a new light.



Fig. 3.2 End credits of *The Tatami Galaxy*, in which the 4.5 tatami mat room opens up to many adjoining rooms spawning around, offering an architectural view of the series' temporal maze

The revelation that the protagonist's cyclical movement through time is instead a branching movement that splits off into different paths, mirrors for Steinberg the temporality of characters in the 'media mix', who take on different lives in different media forms (and by different hands, including fan productions). These narratives diverge to the point of incommensurability – the multiple worlds spawned out of this logic mutually conflict, and

¹⁴ The Japanese title is 四畳半神話大系 or "The Mythical System of the 4.5 Tatami Mat Room" in Steinberg's (71) translation.

somehow incorporating all of them on one plane (as happens in the finale of *Tatami*) would then lead to some kind of ontological crisis (as happens in *Tatami*). While *Mind Game* similarly engages with these divergent worlds from the perspective of an indecisive young male protagonist, its ending does not close down into one temporal plane in the same way. Instead of closing in on all these divergent times through spatialization (into a labyrinth of rooms, see fig. 3.2), the potential paths of *Mind Game*'s characters remain open ended: the film closes with a tagline of "this story has never ended." Instead of spatializing the rhizomatic temporality of contemporary Japanese popular culture then, the film accelerates it into something of an 'explosive' model of time – imagining the consequences of a world where each decision or chance encounter spawns a divergent world, in an ongoing chain reaction that branches into infinity. Through this temporal mode, we encounter characters whose lives are imagined to extend beyond the manga/film itself – a sort of experiment in free will. This experiment engages with one of the central tensions around character animation, that between characters' relative 'self-sameness', formal stability or recognizability on the one hand, and their fluidity and plasticity on the other.

Within contemporary capitalist mediascapes, animated characters are foremostly commodities, and their appearance needs to retain a certain recognizability for them to valorise their exchange value. Characters are 'deathless' in a double sense: they may live on as long as they generate value and their copyrights don't expire (which industry lobbying sees to) unlike human actors; and similarly unlike any humans on-screen, they may survive and 'bounce back' from normally fatal injuries due to their plasticity and the flexibility of cartoon physics.¹⁵ Aside from this stable and enduring appearance however, animated characters also inherit the potential to physically and narratively bend themselves to the situation at hand. As discussed earlier, they may be free to live many different lives – which could be along different axes of gender and sexuality (e.g. Yaoi / Boy's Love fan fiction) as well as

¹⁵ Otsuka Eiji traces this "deathless physicality" back to American cartoons which were inspired by film comedians such as Buster Keaton and Charlie Chaplin, as well as other Hollywood action genres in which the hero always escapes injury (2008: 118).

geopolitics (e.g. the happy cartoon animals and the mythical peach boy *Momotaro* fighting for the Imperial Japanese Army in 1940s animated films) and technology (e.g. Atom Boy and other cybernetic reconfigurations of the machine/human). The following section will explore how these deathless characters, seemingly freed from the temporal control imposed on mere mortals, comes to inevitably intersect with the timeliness of history. The historical context of an ongoing “post-war” condition will then be juxtaposed to the film’s temporal games by returning to its main narrative and the temporal logics of video games it employs.

Possible worlds: between history and fantasy

If we recall how, in Imamura’s account, the vital energy of animation’s movements “courses through us like wine”, many describe *Mind Game*’s intoxicating effects in much more intense terms, as something of a ‘psychedelic trip.’¹⁶ Similarly superlative in scope is the potential of the film’s characters to open up new times and reconfigurations of identity. When slowing down the film’s lightning-speed images, and parsing its worlds with the help of the ‘pause’ and ‘rewind’ buttons only available on home viewing, we do get to see more clearly the different possible lives of the central characters (figs. 3.3-6).



Fig. 3.3 Some examples from the ‘possible worlds’: Yan as astronaut and as body builder

¹⁶ Variety for example describe the film as a “freewheeling juggernaut of a head-trip” (Scheib 2009), while The Village voice introduce it as a “hallucinogen-fueled shaggy-dog joke” (Abrams 2018).



Fig. 3.4 Jiisan as CEO and as explorer



Fig. 3.5 Nishi with unnamed 'wife' and children



Fig. 3.6 Myon as cook and author

Here, we can see the film's main characters in various configurations of gender, class, and family – all timelines which fall under the umbrella of “this story has never ended” – the motto that flashes on the screen before the end credits and indicates an ongoing multiplication of narrative worlds beyond the text. While the film then thinks about choice and agency in contexts of gender and sexuality through this explosive model of time, attempting to find a more open potentiality by working through the clichés and ossified conceptions of *otaku*¹⁷ culture, at the same time we will see that at the reverse of this multiplicity is perhaps a ‘retreat’ to individualism and fantasies of subjective agency.

Just as in the discussion of *Kaili Blues*, time here serves as a realm of control (the subject becomes temporalized, placed upon a standardized trajectory) which can be contested. The rigid temporal structure at stake in *Mind Game* is that of the gendered individual and the expectations that come with their trajectory through stages of life (heterosexual partnership, marriage, career success). Different characters who are at different points of life have frustrated the expectations of temporal progress. This raises two fantasies/desires: that of

¹⁷ Obsessive pop culture consumption and the media environment generated by this mode of consumption. Cf. Otsuka 2013.

escape (from societal expectations) to a different time; and that of reversal of time (to make different decisions, avoid failure, and fulfil the laid out temporal trajectory). As we will see, the fantasy of escape is explored through the genres of the yakuza narrative and James Bond-like action film, *Fantasia*-style musical animation, *Takarazuka* musical theatre, and deserted island narrative in a Jonah-like whale scene. The fantasy of reversal of time then is explored through adopting temporal logics of VHS and video games and through references to an Atom Boy-like TV character which has control over time through a clock-belt gadget.

These temporal fantasies of escape and reversal are continually at odds with each other, as they are incommensurable: escape means a retreat to a radically different time, an impossible world, while reversal of time entails a commitment to a linear, subject-centred temporality (as the reversal is experienced from a singular perspective). This tension comes to a climax at the end of the aforementioned whale scene. After a hectic first act in which our protagonists are chased by a gang of yakuza, they are swallowed up by what they deduce to be a giant whale – we never see it throughout the film, except for its dark insides. This mysterious and timeless dark space seems to function akin to the Zone or ‘Dangmai’ place discussed in the last chapter, fulfilling the protagonists’ desires in a time-space that is cut off from the normal flow of time. The main hero, Nishi, makes up stories and drawings that make the others laugh (rekindling his dream of being a manga artist) as well as bonding romantically with the love interest he has been chasing for the whole film, Myon. She meanwhile returns to her childhood dream of swimming, while her sister Yan, also stuck inside this place, takes on different gendered and artistic explorations that are foreclosed in her everyday life. However, there is only one ‘future’ inside the whale; the characters’ other imaginations are ‘merely’ virtual. Nishi eventually makes an impassioned plea to his friends to leave the whale and live a life full of potential, even if it means facing dangers and potential failure:

I want to get out! There is so much out there! So many different people, living different lives! Incredibly good guys, bad guys... Folks completely different from us! It's one huge melting pot! ... I realized that even if I have no connections, no talent,

even if I'm one big loser, I want to use my hands and feet to think and move, to shape my own life! We can just die here or we can try, see what we've got!

In this speech and in the overall structure of 'potential worlds' of the film, we can see an engagement with the question of imagined worlds – a question of what a world can do, and whether a certain temporality is merely virtual or connects to larger constellations of community and meaning-making. This question has some affinity with the issue of a 'retreat to virtual history', as polemically laid out by Otsuka Eiji (2017). He argues that Japanese popular culture since the 1980s, specifically the realm of culture considered *sabukaruchā* (subculture), appears to fit within a postmodern paradigm of an 'end of great narratives.' However, these works simultaneously embrace a new form of grand narrative in the form of the 'saga', which connects different story worlds together, but critically, "[do] not function as historical allegories" (Otsuka n.pag.). In his view then, while series such as *Gundam* (1979-) and films such as *Nausicäa* (1984) can still be read as "historical allegories", the saga functions as "a compensation for actual history", a retreat to the virtual, in the face of the defeat of various leftist movements in Japan. Movements in which many creatives who went on to produce these sagas (such as Yasuhiko Yoshikazu and Tomino Yoshiyuki who created *Gundam*) were involved. One of the main targets of Otsuka's critique is the work of Murakami Haruki, whose novels often reference intertextual events (thus creating an overarching 'saga') as well as extratextual events (thus seemingly locating the narrative in 'actual history'). However, the events referenced are often imagined, and when "very real facts appear such as the years that certain pinball machine models were produced, ... this holds no meaning whatsoever" – thus, this type of saga cuts off Japanese subculture from history, and produces a subculture that "consists only of structure", as he quotes Karatani Kojin (ibid.).

In tracing the history of popular culture from allegory to 'mere structure', Otsuka's argument is somewhat reminiscent of Baudrillard's theory of simulation, especially his argument on the four phases of the image. Looking again at Otsuka's argument first, he states:

while the “virtual saga” of the 1980s is a “compensation for actual history” on the basis of the defeat of the left, in the beginning the “virtual saga” existed as a “*reflection* of history” and it was possible to read the narratives as “historical allegories.” (Otsuka n.pag., emphasis added)

This rhymes closely with Baudrillard’s conception of the successive phases of the image that exist between the original and the simulacrum, in which he similarly traces a decoupling and movement toward a world of only signs. For Baudrillard, where an image of the first order *reflects* a profound reality, second-phase image *masks and denatures* it, the third image *masks its absence*, and finally the image “has no relation to any reality whatsoever, it is its own pure simulacrum” (Baudrillard 6).

Without going too far into these broader arguments on the nature of the image and narrative in popular culture since the 1980s, it is worth noting that this Baudrillardian polemic finds some resonance in the worlds of *Mind Game*. As discussed, the film’s time is *explosive* in the sense of an exponential expansion of temporalities, while it also *bombards* us with images of possible worlds whose ‘reality’ or ‘truth’ are neither traceable nor important, by virtue of their multitude (just as images in Baudrillard’s ‘hyperreality’). This ontological flattening of many realities (original, copy, fantasy, alternative reality) onto one structural plane in the film is mirrored by recurring appearances of ‘real’ (and virtual) bombings (figs. 3.7-11).



Fig. 3.7 Japanese WWII artillery (from ‘many worlds’ montage)



Fig. 3.8 Imagined bombing of contemporary Osaka



Fig. 3.9 TV footage (from 'many worlds' montage)

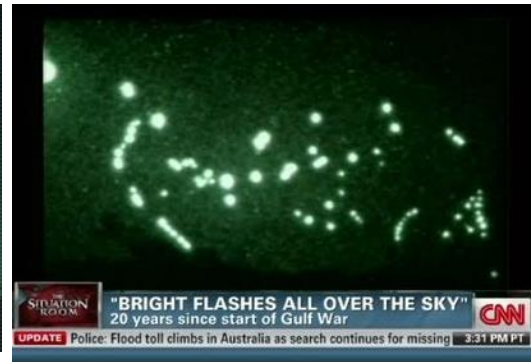


Fig. 3.10 Bombing of Baghdad in 1991 as seen on CNN (this still from a 2010 rerun)



Fig. 3.11 A wooden Japanese cityscape (from 'many worlds' montage), later followed by an image of the same city square with a bombed TV tower and other damaged wartime architecture

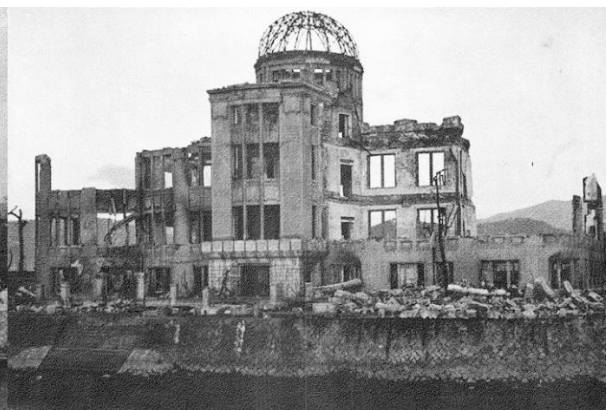
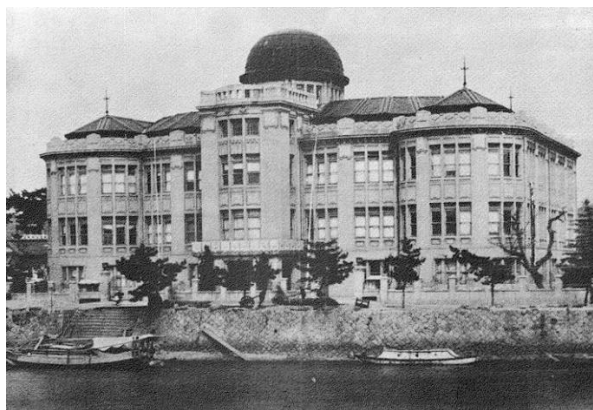


Fig. 3.12 Comparison photos of the Hiroshima Prefectural Industrial Promotion Hall before and after the atomic bombing on 6 August 1945, as appearing in *The Report Of The Joint Commission For The Investigation Of The Effects Of The Atomic Bomb In Japan* (Oughterson et. al. 1951: 130)

Baudrillard's famous book title *The Gulf War Did Not Take Place* comes to mind here, as one of the images (fig. 3.9) clearly references the visual experience of the Gulf War for foreign audiences through CNN (here bastardized to TNN, for comparison to the 'original' broadcast,

see fig. 3.10). We do not see the view from the ground, the experience of shock and death – instead, the footage is captured from a distant point of view through the military technology of night-vision devices, giving us an officially sanctioned imagery of the bombing of Baghdad. Anti-aircraft fire lights up the sky, producing a perversely beautiful image reminiscent of fireflies or a fireworks display (both often found in contemporary Japanese animation). These beautiful/terrible images of war, within a story of infinite potentiality and alternative histories, then bring up questions not only on the “logistics of perception” (Virilio), of how war imagery is managed with an outlook on public opinion, but also questions of ‘what could have happened’ (or what could have *not* happened). Images of a pristine and bombed cityscape juxtaposed (fig. 3.11), evoke the before-and-after photographs used in reports on the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki (e.g. fig. 3.12). Familiar images of Japan at war (fig. 3.7) are interspersed with fictional disasters in the present-day (fig. 3.8) – if these unthinkable atrocities once happened, ‘what if’ they would happen again? What would a world look like if they had never happened?

The fictional stories of individual agency and imagination are thus juxtaposed with images of ‘real’ and imagined history. On the one hand, these images could be read as intertextual anchor points which only contribute to the building of a ‘saga’, whose ultimate conclusion is detached from historical allegory (as in Otsuka’s reading of Murakami). On the other, perhaps these images contrast the celebratory fantasies of Nishi’s imagination enough to produce a real engagement with the reality and temporality of death, and the problem of the irreversibility of history. The stylized genre-violence as performed by the male hero and his adversaries (which we will see adapts from yakuza fiction, video games, and action films) clashes here with a larger violence beyond the control of the hero-subject. The celebratory ‘explosion’ of temporalities which seemed to signify an infinite freedom of choice rings as a dissonance with these physical explosions that still reverberate across history and leave behind rubble and death.

We may then approach *Mind Game*’s explosive time as binding together both the explosion of *times* produced by contemporary Japanese media industries and fan cultures, and

the somewhat hidden outcomes left within the wake and dust of this explosion: the paths and consequences which become buried underneath. In this second sense, it could be argued (somewhat speculatively) that this explosion functions similarly to the “storm blowing from Paradise” in the allegory of the Angel of History from Walter Benjamin’s ninth thesis on the “Concept of History.” This Angel, inspired by Paul Klee’s painting *Angelus Novus*, sees a perspective of history that “we”, who face the future and think of time in a future-oriented chain of events, fail to grasp. While the passage is perhaps so seminal to hardly need reproduction here, Benjamin’s meticulous choice of words in sketching this visual image of history (that extends beyond, and layers upon, the artwork he is ‘reading’) may help us to similarly grapple with a possible reflection of history that extends beyond the film *Mind Game* itself. He describes the Angel thus:

His face is turned toward the past. Where we perceive a chain of events, he sees one single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage and hurls it in front of his feet. The angel would like to stay, awaken the dead, and make whole what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from Paradise; it has got caught in his wings with such violence that the angel can no longer close them. This storm irresistibly propels him into the future to which his back is turned, while the pile of debris before him grows skyward. This storm is what we call progress. (Benjamin 257-8)

Since its posthumous publication, “On the Concept of History,” and specifically this passage, has produced many conflicting accounts, translations, and interpretations. Benjamin is widely understood to be responding here to the failures of historical materialism in the wake of the Molotov-Ribbentrop pact, and of social democratic notions of “progress,” in the face of a rising fascism which will lead to Benjamin’s death only months after the completion of the essay. However, the allegory of a being who seems to command a “true” or universal view of history simultaneously raises the question of the impossibility of such a view. Whereas the ‘storm of paradise’ and the central figure of the Angel seem to hint at the existence of a messianic time from which the entirety of the rubble or debris (*Trümmer*) could be grasped, in the end we are left with conflicting interpretations and images of this Angel, which according to Alexander Hope produce something of a “sublime” that calls into question the possibility of the (re)presentation of history. Hope notes the incommensurable scales at work in this

allegory: the relatively small Klee painting which adorned Benjamin's living room for years until his flight from Germany, contrasts the unfathomable Angel of History, who appears almost greater than history itself, as the "wreckage" of progress lands only "at his feet." The tensions between these scales, and the contrasting readings they invite, "[call] into question the notion of representation" (Hope 1014). The impossibility of any unified exegesis of this passage (or of the Klee painting) then performs Benjamin's larger argument against a teleological, unified view of history, and this figure of the Angel of History "produces something akin to the Kantian sublime by requiring the intervention of the imagination to compensate for the failure of the presentation to remain equal to the concept presented" (Hope 1008).

It would be quite a stretch to suggest too much of an equivalence between the context of Benjamin's allegory and that of the film *Mind Game*. However, Terry Eagleton argues – from his own historical position (1981) that is characterized by a "deadlock of Stalinism and imperialism" and a "global crisis of capitalism that places the threat of fascism once more on the agenda" – that that we must "blast Benjamin's work out of its historical continuum, so that it may fertilize the present" (179). Coming back to our "present" (the nearly two decades since the production of *Mind Game*), we should also avoid reading the film too directly as a response to the contemporary "threat of fascism" in the form of recent Japanese right-wing nationalism and historical revisionisms (such as the controversies around the recounting of Imperial Japanese history in high school textbooks). While the film is not politically engaged in such an overt way, it does deal with the same complexities of history at the root of these movements in the shadow of what Harry Harootunian calls the "long postwar." This condition emerged when the American Occupation after the Second World War destined Japan "to live in the space rather than the time of a defeated nation, oppressed by an alien force, groaning in the shadows of an imposed colonialism that had thrown the country and its people outside history" (101). In the decades after, this condition created a "crisis of the future":

Above all, it is a crisis of the future that modern capitalist societies such as Japan know incites a constant recycling in a memorial object. If the regime of instantaneity sustaining modern technological media has for effect a sentiment of inexorable loss

that restores to the present what seems to escape it, this valorization blocks a real apprehension of the past, of duration, of time that has passed, to weigh heavily on our capacity to envisage the future. (Harootunian 119)

Mind Game's wild narrative jumps, seemingly impossible to domesticate into a sensible engagement with history, do seem obsessively engaged with these (sometimes paralyzing, as we will see) questions of the future. And it is exactly the "real apprehension of the past" that is foreclosed here. The film's time games can be understood within a larger tendency of Japanese cinema and popular culture to produce "trace expressions" (Deamer 10) of such ungraspable traumas as the atomic bombings of Hiroshima and Nagasaki, the discussion of which has been hampered by successive waves of suppression and historical revisionisms. With both the past and future (partially) blocked off, it is indeed the "regime of instantaneity" in which the film's video-game logic decides to invest. We may approach the film, working with Eagleton's explosive, somewhat geological metaphor (akin to Reinhart Koselleck's conception of historical time as layers of sediment) of Benjamin, as a blowing-up of history, as an explosive response to the impossibilities of (re)presenting it. We cannot fully present a world in which every decision-point leads to an infinite number of different worlds – the presentation can never be "equal to the concept" – just as we cannot convincingly present a world in which the atrocities of the Pacific War never took place or the atomic bombs never detonated over Hiroshima and Nagasaki. *Mind Game*'s response then foregrounds imagination as a compensation for this failure (in Hope's words), which perhaps also produces something of a "sublime."

While there are no angels in *Mind Game*, still an invisible-yet-present atomic sublime haunts the film's glimpses of bombings. Similarly sublime is the figure of the whale who swallows up the protagonists and confines their story-world to its dark insides. The sea creature remains out of grasp and never becomes visible from the outside, as waves of near-infinite scale block the view both in the scene where it swallows the protagonists, and in the scene of their escape. On the one hand, it is clearly reminiscent of the large fish in the tale of Jonah from the Hebrew bible, who also swallows a protagonist that chases individual choice

and freedom of will; an event that also invites contemplation and a change of course. The creature in that story also remains unknown: while the Hebrew text written down from oral tradition simply talks of a “big fish” (*dag gadol*), it became more connoted with mythological sea monsters in later Greek translation (*ketos*), which was then followed by *cetus* in Latin – a term that became synonymous with whales (Limburg 61).

Mind Game taps into this otherworldly, mythical quality of the whale as a fantasy creature – a kind of borrowing which is common in anime films such as those by Studio Ghibli, where mystical creatures frequently play a central role. These beings are often contrasted against the human protagonists, with whom they have a variously friendly or hostile relation, depending on the actions of humans towards them. Seemingly inspired by various Shinto myths, the creatures appear to belong to different times and worlds, yet they are always part of the natural environment – suggesting an incommensurability between the experience of modernity and the deeper temporalities from which it is disenchanted. Some mythical beings however appear exactly as a result of some kind of modernity, such as the “god-warriors” in *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), biomechanical beings who were created by humans ages before the time of the film’s plot, and who caused a catastrophic end to industrial civilization. Only their giant skulls remain as relics in the post-apocalyptic landscape. Otsuka argues that these warriors “can be understood as part of an ‘allegory of the nuclear’ of postwar Japan” (2017: n.pg.) in his discussion on the disappearance of such more serious engagements with history. Such texts indeed hint at the longer traditions of monster films (*kaiju eiga*) such as *Godzilla* (1954), in which an ancient monster awakens through nuclear weapons testing.

While *Mind Game* conjures up such religious themes and deep times (the protagonists even encounter a Loch Ness-like monster reminiscent of the Jurassic-period plesiosaurus inside the whale), any feeling of awe in the face of these sublime temporalities is persistently subverted by elements of ridicule and play. The sense of an ungraspable totality or higher power is repeatedly brought up by the film’s multiple times as well as such figures as the whale or the God encountered by Nishi upon death, but rather than leading to an

“intervention” by Nature or God (as in many Studio Ghibli films or in the story of Jonah), any higher power (and time) is light-heartedly desecrated and subsumed under a playful game-logic. As will be discussed later, Nishi dies early in the film and meets “God,” who turns out to be not so much a transcendent being of another order but rather just another *character*, or really an amalgamation of types. He appears before us (and Nishi) in a different guise every half-second or so (fig. 3.13), transforming the narrative trope of a higher being who eludes representation into an embodiment of the database logic of character variation in the media mix.



Fig. 3.13 God (the changing colourful figure) talks to the flabbergasted Nishi, who has yet to come to terms with his own death

While the specificities of ‘character variation’ in anime this refers to will be discussed further in the next section, it is interesting to note here that this God may as well stand for the engagement of anime with history as a whole. It is an extremely multi-faced and distracted God, who simply turns to a mirror while Nishi is still confronting the end of his existence, and then hurries him to “get going” and disappear into the void, because he/she “has a date.” This God only performs the necessary rituals of sending the dead off in their final moments, and is otherwise disconnected from everyday Earthly temporality, let alone the fate of generations. Perhaps we can imagine to be watching from a similar God’s eye view perspective in the film’s supercuts which show us so many different times and realities: confronted with such a plurality of worlds, our gaze becomes disinterested, and in these images, history is reduced to a mere trace....

Only to return again in the next moment of the film, ridiculous or not. This back-and-forth then between historical time, individual will, and the sublime (as they are mediated by

the video-game logic) comes to a head in the last scene to discuss here: Nishi's escape from the whale. The carceral time of waiting inside the whale builds up to an explosion of activity, as the protagonists have to row, swim, and run their way up seemingly infinite waves and obstacles, breaking all the laws of physics, and all the while supported by a hectic drum solo on the soundtrack. These obstacles take on extremely differing scales, as shown below (figs. 3.14/15).



Fig. 3.14 Nishi encounters enormous 3-D-rendered infrastructures of transportation, industry, and war

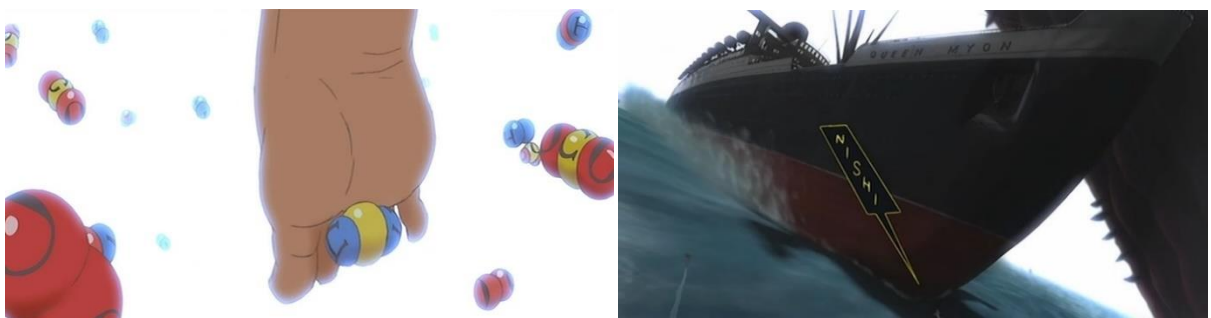


Fig. 3.15 Contrasting scales: with his boat gone, Nishi has to run on water (down to the individual H₂O molecule), while also having to climb over gigantic objects that dwarf him to the point that a text balloon and arrow are inserted to help us identify the tiny protagonist on-screen

As in many moments in the film, we encounter a clash of animation styles here: the gigantic objects are all 3-D computer-generated images, while the character animation and most other elements on-screen are two-dimensional. Combinations of cel animation and digital

renderings are extremely common in contemporary anime, yet Mark Steinberg argues that 3-D rendered animation, with its photorealist treatment of space, may often appear as jarring or out-of-context in anime with its historically more antirealist aesthetic. This draws attention to the different viewing expectations (and spectator positions) between anime and live-action cinema, to which digitally rendered images are much closer aligned: the singular perspective of the camera-eye (which was critiqued as providing an ideological illusion of control in the ‘apparatus theory’ of writers such as Jean-Louis Baudry) is emulated by 3-D CGI, which is also why it is such a commonly used tool in contemporary film production. Anime spectatorship, Steinberg suggests (building on Lamarre), is more concerned with “the scanning of the image for informational detail” rather than offering a total, singular perspective image (Steinberg 6). Anime such as *Metropolis* (2001), he argues, work with this clash of spaces by “[aligning] the 3-D perspectival image with structures of domination in a manner that strongly recalls the arguments of Baudry and [Stephen] Heath” (Steinberg 7). This seems to be a common occurrence in anime, where 3-D rendering is often used to depict colossal architecture or machines of war – not unlike its use in contemporary Hollywood blockbusters. However, Steinberg’s example proves that the 2-D elements in anime, and its ‘flat’ character animation may work to critique this scopic regime (to borrow Martin Jay’s term). There is “something” about these hand-drawn images that sticks out against the “more uniform photorealism” of digital 3-D animation when they go together, Steinberg argues (10).

The rendered objects that Nishi has to scale in this scene are also representative of oppressive institutions of capital and war: a skyscraper with offices he has to climb and run through, a tank, jet airliner, train, ship and even some rockets that explode behind him (fig. 3.14). Their immense contrast of scale compared to the 2-D character is compounded by a ‘close-up’ of Nishi running on molecules of water (fig. 3.15). The scene could almost be read to suggest that one must break the laws of physics and time itself to overcome these insurmountable institutions, and that to choose one’s own path and “decisions” requires being a superhero in the first place. However, it also offers hope through the realm of imagination: with the time-traveling antics of its protagonist, *Mind Game* opens up the possibility of a

world outside of these predestined temporal regimes – or in fact an infinity of worlds. The following pages will focus on how this multiplying temporality is produced out of the logic of video games and other media within the “media mix” by revisiting the death and rebirth of Nishi.

Decisions make diverging worlds: *Mind Game*’s video-game temporality

“Your life is the result of your own decisions.” “This story has never ended.” “The story has never been to the end.” These sentences punctuate important moments in both the original manga volumes as well as the animation of *Mind Game* (figs. 3.16-18). Rendered in English among otherwise Japanese dialogue and narration, they appear on full-screen title cards, or as a message on cell phones, billboards, or other media within the frame/page. These wide-reaching statements on the nature of the film/manga world (‘this story’) as well as other worlds outside it (‘your life’) serve as a kind of motto that attempts to explain the jumbled narrative as well as implying a relevance of the story beyond the limits of the fictional text itself. The ending title card of the film (“this story never ended”) asserts that the world(s) of *Mind Game* exist (infinitely) beyond the text that is *Mind Game*. This declaration extends the temporalities generated by the diegesis infinitely into the past and the future, mirroring the boundary-blurring temporalities of the media mix model.

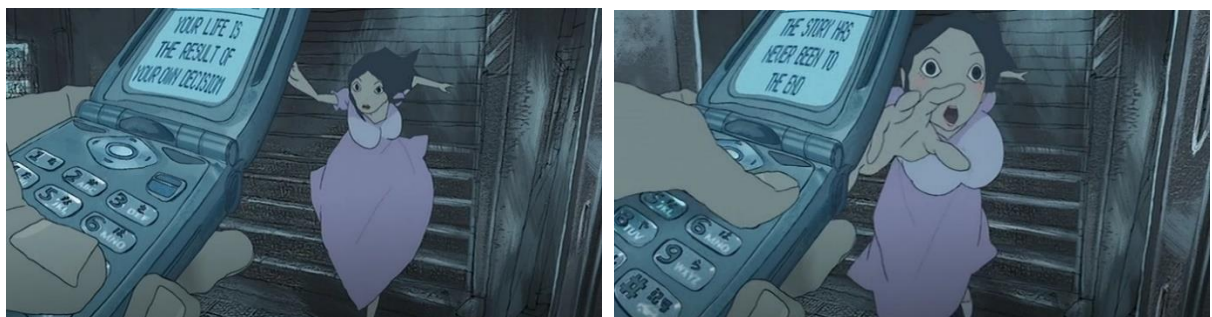


Fig. 3.16 Two alternative moments in the film (at the 1st and the 96th minute of runtime) where Myon rushes to catch a subway train, while a stranger sends different text messages in the foreground

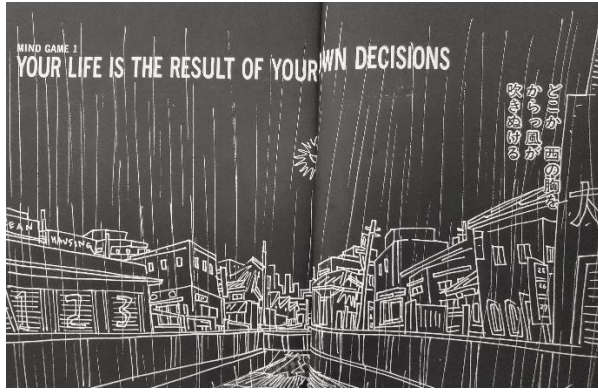


Fig. 3.17 Opening page of the manga's first chapter

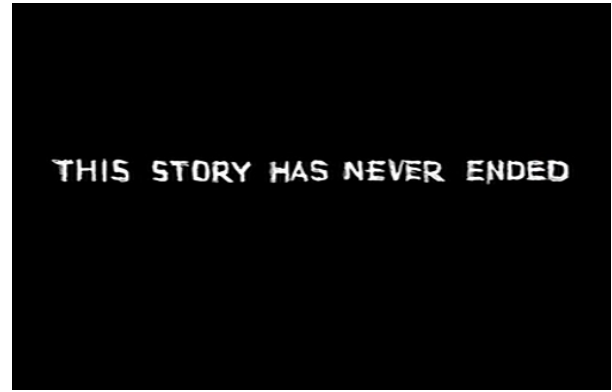


Fig. 3.18 Closing title of the film

The film arrives at this extension of narrative temporality beyond the medium's limits on the one hand through the aforementioned 'supercut' which blitzes through the characters' many possible lives, but also through a central narrative that revolves around unlocking the potential of life and taking one's fate by the horns – "Your life is the result of your own decisions." As in *The Tatami Galaxy*, the protagonist navigating these questions of agency and (temporal) control is a young man caught in a hyper-mediated postmodern environment. Nishi (an eponym of *Mind Game*'s author) is an unsuccessful manga artist, who one day runs into Myon, a high-school crush to whom he never dared to confess his feelings. In the first full scene of the film, Myon tells him she is engaged and will soon marry, to which Nishi reacts by finally breaking through his perpetual inability to act, declaring his love to her at the top of his lungs. Myon bursts out in tears, confesses to share his feelings, and promises him not to marry the other man. Fireworks go off in the distance... as we fade to Nishi's jaw-dropped expression, and Myon's puzzled reaction ("Nishi? Nishi?") which reveals that this scene of heroic confession and romantic conquest was a mere fantasy inside Nishi's petrified head.

This 'mind game' of subjective narration and the unexpected narrative return – to an earlier point within their conversation that reveals a different path – develops into the main theme of the film, as well as its central narrative strategy. As we will see, the temporal logic of the 'reset', through which different narrative paths are repeatedly branched off, borrows from the narrative workings of 'visual novels' (interactive decision-making video games) and

other forms of narrative play within the intermedial ecology of contemporary Japanese popular culture. It is through *Mind Game*'s explicit engagement with intermediality that we can understand how the logic of choice "... the result of your own decisions" leads to the film's expansive temporality in which the story will "never have ended".

This is all encapsulated in the allegory of Nishi's decision paralysis: an endless postponement of action to shape his future, which comes to a head in the scene following the 'non-confession'. Here, a pair of yakuza enter the restaurant where Nishi and Myon are eating. One of the gangsters starts assaulting Myon to provoke Nishi, who whimpers away in a corner instead of standing up and resisting. The yakuza taunts him by pressing a gun against the buttocks of the cowered Nishi, which accidentally goes off and launches a bullet through Nishi's body, exiting his skull. This demasculinizing act of penetration seems to spell the end for Nishi, who ends up in an elaborate post-mortem sequence where he is confronted with his final moments and humiliated by a seemingly conscious computer system that manifests itself as a set of larger-than life media technologies within a dark void (figs. 3.19/20).



Fig. 3.19 Nishi (bottom) and the massive screen that comments on his life and death, and shows countless VHS replays of his final moments



Fig. 3.20 Screens enclose Nishi, after which he is confronted by a giant polygonal 3-D rendering of his death

The moment of dying is here imagined along the lines of video games such as visual novels and role-playing games (RPGs), where a player's death is often followed by a humiliating message and/or a recap of the moment of failure, after which there is usually the possibility to 'respawn' to a point before defeat to try a different strategy. This option to 'respawn' does not appear at first for Nishi, who after being subjected to countless replays, reaches into the darkness and touches the edge of the dark void, which he finds he can pull away as if it were a curtain. As in *The Wizard of Oz*, there is a figure behind the curtain who orchestrates everything: the shape-shifting character discussed before, who introduces themselves to Nishi as "God" (*kamisama*). God confirms to Nishi that he is indeed dead, and points him towards a red portal, which he is instructed to enter in order to disappear. At this point, Nishi notices a blue portal on the opposite side, which he assumes will bring him back to life instead. Nishi defies the instructions and makes a run for it, and his sheer will to live (and to live determinedly this time) impresses God enough to indeed grant him a return to the moment just before his death. This initiates the second act of the film, where Nishi is able to take hold of the gun and indeed of his own destiny, as he kills his assailant and takes Myon and her sister on a heroic, against-all-odds car chase to escape from a horde of pursuing yakuza and then to be miraculously swallowed up by the whale.

This kind of moment in contemporary anime where the limits of the fictional world are breached by a hero character, who can rewrite physical laws (the finality of death and the unidirectionality of time in this case) to meet a moment of emergency through sheer force of will, is analysed by Selen Çalik Bedir as part of what she calls "gamelike narratives" (after Azuma Hiroki's *Gêmuteki Riarizumu*, gamelike realism). She notes how in contemporary *shōnen* anime (aimed at an adolescent male audience), especially series like *Dragon Ball Z*, the physical limits of the animated world are frequently breached for excessive effect. In fight scenes for example, certain attacks or actions are often assigned numerical values, and the characters regularly reach beyond the supposedly maximum value of these boundaries (as in the exclamation "it's over 9000!" which became a widespread meme on Anglophone image

boards¹⁸). Çalik Bedir observes that this type of “erratic occurrence is often explained as a triumph of the will or emotions, which presents narrative inconsistencies as manifestations of the incalculable human potential and renders them plot-wise acceptable” (56). Such a ‘play’ of flexible laws of the world has a long history in animation, as early Disney films for example already revolve around the idea of setting up rules in the world (e.g. the characters correspond to gravity and appear humanoid) which are then breached for a surprise effect (e.g. when a character remains suspended in mid-air after running off a cliff, or when seemingly humanoid characters can stretch their limbs). The latter example of animation’s potentiality to stretch the limits of the world was famously praised by Sergei Eisenstein under the concept of “plasticity” in his writings on Disney (Eisenstein 21). Scott Bukatman discusses these workings under the concept of “cartoon physics”. Focusing on Hollywood cartoons, he analyses the surprising effects and creative potentiality emerging from animation’s potential to play with realities. In order to achieve this, he argues that cartoons “do not give us an entirely disordered universe of chaos and entropy. They give us a world that is ordered, but ordered differently: hence, *cartoon physics* (Bukatman 302; emphasis in original).

Both Bukatman and Çalik Bedir notice the close alignment between these functions of animation and notions of ‘play’, especially related to contemporary video games which share many technological processes related to 3-D rendering with digital animation. Their main focus on respectively Hollywood digital animation and Japanese hybrid limited animation (combining cel and 3-D technologies) makes for an interesting difference in their

¹⁸ The value ‘over 9000’ here refers to one character’s “battle power”, in the 21st episode of the *Sayan Saga of Dragon Ball Z* aired on April 19th, 1997. The value of 9000 is a mistranslation in the English dubbed version, with the original line mentioning a value of “over 8000”. One commentator writes that “The switch from 8000 to 9000 does imply that Goku is a little stronger than he should be, but with Dragon Ball power levels soon to rocket into the millions, the difference ends up being inconsequential” (Craig Elvy in *ScreenRant*, 27/6/2019. Accessed 5/2/2021. <https://screenrant.com/dragon-ball-z-its-over-9000-line-origin-mistranslation/>). The excessive expansion of the limits of the world here entangle with the workings of translation and transmedia as the exclamation finds its way onto online forums and social media, where it comes to signify the potential for excess in popular culture more broadly through appropriation and remixing by users.

conclusion on the current state of 'play'. Bukatman sees video game logics in animation as a limit of play in favour of a more consistent, realistic rendering of the world, writing that the

great achievements [of digital animation in Hollywood] can come at the expense of what truly characterized the Hollywood cartoon in its seven-minute heyday—its playful remaking of the world ... Meanwhile, in the real world, creative, unstructured, exploratory play has been supplanted by the deeply goal-oriented telos of computer gaming, which is more limiting even in its most “open world” iteration. (Bukatman 315)

Bukatman's critique of the “goal-oriented” logic of computer games runs quite opposite to the reading of Çalik Bedir. She notices a motif of ‘restart and repeat’ in contemporary anime, where “dead characters can be resurrected easily and their fates can be redrawn or ‘replayed,’ which brings to mind the experience of playing games” (45). The weakening of causality in these ‘gamelike narratives’ then allows characters to be imagined in different contexts, times, and worlds – worlds whose limits can be breached while the overall ‘gamelike’ logic of the world endures.

This seems to be the game that *Mind Game* is also playing, and the tension between the building of a consistent world and the breaking of this world's rules becomes an explicit theme through Nishi's death and the scenes that follow it. Nishi's resurrection is explicitly videogame-like – contrary to the messianic temporality of rebirth in Abrahamic religions, the cyclical temporality of *samsara* in Buddhism, or the undead time of *zombi* folklore (and all the popular culture imagined through these concepts), Nishi is not so much reborn as the world around him is reset to an earlier time. As in a video game, the world seems to exist in service of the player. But Nishi is not the only player in the world of *Mind Game* – he is no God, as his encounter with the god-like character reveals. The limits of the world then need to be negotiated vis-à-vis other characters, whose power of will or determination might also spawn off possible timelines or worlds, as the “result of [their] own decisions”. It is the consequences of Nishi's rule-breaking time travel through which the film explores this question of agency when inhabiting a multitude of worlds.

The car chase scene following Nishi's return from the dead explicitly plays with the ‘rules of the game’ and can help us to understand how actions and consequences work in a

world of unreliable causality. As Nishi is chased by a pack of yakuza drivers, he gets a threatening call from their boss over the car-mounted telephone. The boss delivers a monologue to him about how “you young people” treat life as if it is a “game” (ゲーム感覚, game feeling) where there is always a “reset button”; an attitude which leaves them “numb” (無感覚, no feeling) because they never experience any consequence. He ends his rant by mixing the metaphor of the game with that of a roller coaster (reproducing a common critique of how certain video game narratives are structured ‘on rails’ – limiting free choice): “You’re a roller coaster with no brakes! ... Nobody is on your side ... make it a good game!” Nishi latches onto these metaphors as he mocks the boss’s speech by suggesting it was read from a teleprompter (another suggestion of scriptedness and predetermination) and responds that their rollercoaster is an “Angel Express” that will “spread its wings and disappear into the sky” – thus starting a series of exchanges which negotiate the rules of the world through a language of play and games.

After their verbal exchange, Nishi and his pursuers indeed “make it a good game”, as they repeatedly revise the limits of play by bringing in rules and techniques from elsewhere – including sports, video games, cartoon physics and action film genres. When Nishi’s car is swarmed by armed yakuza on all sides and his fate seems sealed, he yells “offside!” referencing a rule in football where players have to retreat in a line behind an opposing player. This shout is accompanied by a referee whistle on the soundtrack, and all the pursuing drivers comply by instantaneously braking, to the dismay of the leading gangster who almost gets thrown off the hood as he chastises them: “this isn’t football!” When this yakuza subsequently gets launched from the car, he finds himself suspended directly over the tarmac at highway speed. It takes him a few seconds to open his eyes and realize his legs are somehow still propelling him at the same pace, in classic ‘cartoon physics’ fashion (fig. 3.21). Nishi responds a few moments later with a similar ‘discovery’ of a previously impossible action unlocked through intertextual references: when he encounters a blockade in the form of two trucks, the screen flips to a flashback of him watching an action movie reminiscent of the

James Bond series (fig. 3.23), where a sports car performs a two-wheel stunt to make its way between two double decker London buses.¹⁹ Nishi is then able to perform this same stunt through the power of cinematic recollection, to his own amazement. The flashback works here to retroactively transform the film scene, through the sensory-motor logic of the video game, into a visual ‘instruction’ of how to act upon the given environment. The intertextuality and intermediality between anime, the action film car chase scene, and the road racing video game (Nishi’s pursuer’s cars are also painted in numbered racing liveries) move beyond mere reference to borrow logics of acting upon the world. The city is transformed into a racetrack, objects into obstacles, the environment into a playground – for both ‘sides’ of the game, as the yakuza track the chase on a GPS interface (fig. 3.22) which displays football-related terms such as “goal keeper” and “penalty area.”

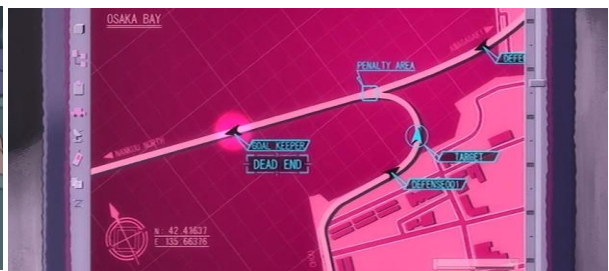


Fig. 3.21 To everyone’s surprise, the yakuza can keep up running

Fig. 3.22 GPS overview of the chase



Fig. 3.23 Nishi’s encounter with an obstacle is intercut with a flashback to an earlier (cinematic) experience, which holds the answer to his overcoming of the obstacle

¹⁹ While this scene is not taken directly from a *James Bond* film, there is a similar stunt in *Diamonds Are Forever* (1971) where Bond flips his Ford Mustang on two wheels to navigate through a narrow gap and similarly escape a pack of chasing vehicles. The world of Bond is also one whose physical limits are constantly tested – but the ability for impossible action is vested mostly in the hero alone, whose emotional distance from the action guarantees the credibility of the world. Critic Roger Ebert commented on Sean Connery’s acting throughout the excessive stunts in that film: “There’s something about his detachment from danger that props up the whole Bond apparatus, insulating it from the total ridiculousness only an inch away.” (*Chicago Sun-Times* 1971, <https://www.rogerebert.com/reviews/diamonds-are-forever-1971>).

The playful intermediality in this chase scene serves very immediate ends, and has very immediate if unpredictable consequences. While it plays some games with audience expectations of what the characters can do, it doesn't seem to directly complicate the film's temporal structure. However, when tracing this game logic (which is here at its most explicit, but also at its least threatening to narrative causality) throughout the whole film in relation to other works within this recent phenomenon of 'gamelike narratives,' the film's ways of rethinking temporal experience in the contemporary worlds of the media mix will become apparent.

One anime series that can serve as important grounds for comparison here is *Puella Magi Madoka Magica* (2011), a 'magical girl' series in which the character called Madoka and her middle school friends enter a magical world to fight 'witches' who endanger the everyday world in which they live. The alternative world produced within *Madoka Magica* has found much scholarly interest, with one observer describing it as a "time inside time" – its aesthetic difference from the everyday world in terms of backgrounds, shapes and colours is such that "we spectators cannot but distance ourselves from the action... the barriers between the narrative and the act itself of watching an anime product are momentarily broken" (Torrents 47). The existence of this world within a world thus calls attention to the building of narrative itself – which we shall see has important temporal implications within the context of the diversified anime media landscape. The series' narrative traverses these two worlds in a cyclical pattern, where the character Homura travels back in time over and over again to prevent Madoka from being recruited as a magical girl, which would lead to her death. Homura's time travels repeatedly fail, until a final fight in which these repeated failures add up to a 'karmic destiny' through which Madoka can rewrite the laws and produce a new world without witches, where there is no need for magical girls to suffer and die.

Madoka Magica offers an unusual take on the magical girl subgenre, which according to Forrest Greenwood, adopts the temporal logic of branching narratives from the novel game in order to open up new potentialities for participatory culture. He compares Homura's

repeated temporal reset and failed strategies to save Madoka to two different gamic temporalities:

Each narrative thread extends into the current timeline, impacting Madoka with equal authority. In her naïveté, Homura assumes that she is playing a conventional real-time game with a save/load function, recursive at the microlevel but teleological at the macrolevel, when in truth she finds herself navigating the temporal architecture of a branching narrative. (Greenwood 202)

The argument responds here to the temporal question of ‘saving’ and ‘reloading’ in video games: whereas this kind of function is often read as a temporal return in the face of failure (towards a single end goal – the teleological game structure criticized by Bukatman), the ‘save game’ works quite differently in a novel game where many different outcomes are possible. Players will often finish one narrative branch of the game, saving it at several key decision points to later return to and from which to explore alternative endings. This approach is even encouraged within many novel games, which may feature a ‘CG gallery’, which consists of images that can be unlocked by finding all the different narrative routes in the game (Greenwood 199). The narrative strands which then diverge from the many decision points in the game, all have equal weight and validity. Rather than producing a cyclical-linear temporality with a singular *telos* (winning the game), the ‘reset button’ in these games creates a branching or ‘architectural’ temporality – time branches out into a ‘map’ whose routes and boundaries can be explored by the player, just as architecture unfolds itself through navigation by an observer rather than being grasped at once in its totality (Greenwood 197).

The analysis here shows close resemblance to the earlier-mentioned *Tatami Galaxy*: in both series, a seemingly circular temporality turns out, in the final episodes, to be a set of iterations of a branching narrative – and as in *Tatami*’s unfolding network of tatami mat rooms, here too architecture can serve as a spatial metaphor for this temporal logic. *Madoka*’s intervention into the magical girl genre similarly interrogates the workings of the media mix: within the confines of the text itself, it addresses the multiple incommensurable lives of its characters, and raises the question of their consequence. What happens when characters (and viewers) become aware of their position in a “hypermediated present,” the kind of temporality

in which a novel-game player finds themselves “perpetually oscillating between narrative future and narrative past, aware that every juncture represents ... one possibility in a constellation of choices” (Greenwood 200)? How do all these potential futures of its characters materialize, and do they together accrue a certain narrative weight (as is the case in Madoka and Homura’s story, where the repetitive action ultimately transforms the world)? And what happens to the dark stories of suffering and death of the magical girls, which are hidden from the cheerfully cute imagery of these characters in merchandise, posters, and other ‘non-narrative’ permutations within the media mix?

Greenwood’s analysis shows a clear affinity between the branching narratives of the contemporary anime environment, and the temporal logic of the novel game. *Mind Game* seems to similarly engage in this intermedial exploration: the ‘reset’ and subsequent branching off of a new timeline is not only part of its central storyline, but we also see many images of potential pasts and futures of the characters flashing by at several points in the film. Furthermore, the routes taken by characters often seem to fall outside of the normal realm of possibilities – they would not be an option within the novel game’s ‘decision tree’, to extend the allegory. As we have seen in the yakuza chase scene, the rules of the world are often breached to accommodate for new, ‘impossible’ narrative directions. Thinking from the video game then, these actions conjure up the practices of ‘hacking’ and ‘modding’ – alternative engagements with video games that may open new potentials, even within a game that itself might operate on a teleological, linear trajectory. Bukatman, while critical of much video game influence on contemporary animation, does recognize within video games the potentiality of this kind of practice. To him, glitches, hacks, and speedruns (finding shortcuts in the game to complete levels in record time or break the game sequence) reintroduce a logic of play into these genres that may have lost it (Bukatman 314). These types of ‘gameplay’ are not necessarily the standard modus operandi for most players, in contrast to the time-branching of novel games where such play is encouraged by the game itself. However, their narrative potential is widely recognized: there are several multimedia franchises which explicitly revolve around hacking and modding, such as *.Hack* (2002-present) which in

Lamarre's analysis performs and displays the many tensions between different media ecologies that make up the 'game play complex' (287-310).

When *Mind Game* then plays games on both the level of allegory (when characters play off of their environment and each other) and form (when the text plays with its audience, as well inviting its viewers to become players by presenting itself as a puzzle.), it enters into such larger constellations as the 'game play complex' and opens up questions about agency and the limits of 'play' within a highly mediated world of memories and futures. While the film's playful adaptations of game temporalities strongly resonate with its individualist motto that "your life is the result of your decisions", these *carpe diem* overtones are simultaneously subverted by the various contingencies, supernatural beings, and traces of history that overdetermine the characters' lives. The explosion of temporalities offered by the film hardly fulfils the frustrated expectations of temporal progress lived by its male protagonist (which once again extends beyond the individual to be mirrored in a story of three generations, as in *Kaili Blues*).²⁰

This motto then may be reconfigured as a question: to whom apply these possessive determiners "your" – who is "you"? Whose life is at stake, and whose decisions determine it? How may this interpellation toward the viewer-as-player or viewer-as-individual work allegorically, when we are presented with a world where one's identity and past may be reconfigured through the workings of another's memory, or where one's fate may be decided by the temperament of a distracted god, where other futures and pasts may interject at any moment to displace one's position in the unstable present? As we have seen, the film recurringly, if somewhat latently, invites us to read these tensions between temporal agency and overdetermined time as an engagement with a history that remains beyond the grasp of any particular account: a history whose contrasting multiplicity and irreversibility seem to

²⁰ Just as in *Kaili Blues*, the temporal plane of the film intertwines the timelines of three generations of frustrated romance, from the male perspective. Through flashbacks, we learn that the old man in the whale (Jiisan) is the senior yakuza's (Aniki) father, and that Aniki took his path in life after losing his girlfriend to a man who then became the father of Myon, Nishi's love interest. Jiisan similarly had his love 'stolen' from him, as also happened to Nishi, completing the three-generation cycle.

infinitely delay a coming-to-terms. While these game-like texts then fit within the noted apolitical tendencies of Japanese popular culture and its avoidance of history, *Mind Game* shows at least a potential to mobilize the temporal tensions between “character” and “world” in the anime media mix to work through these historical questions that leak into popular culture, awaiting answers which have been left over from elsewhere.

4. The long shadow of Hong Kong's suspended time: a belated reading of *2046*

“I invite the audience to join me in starting afresh, as these are not the same films, and we are no longer the same audience.”

- Wong Kar Wai, in the HKIFF45 programme book, p. 78

Demand for Wong Kar Wai's newly restored films premiering at the 2021 Hong Kong International Film Festival was great as ever, despite (or because of) the near decade without new releases by the director. Tickets were sold out within minutes for the 4K restored versions, which have garnered some criticism from fans who remembered the original films differently – the colour grading on the re-release is notably different, and for some films, the aspect ratio or even narrative elements such as voice-overs were altered. Some went as far as saying that Wong's tinkering with the films, and the disappearance of the 'original' versions from screens and shelves in the future, “spoils [the cultural history of] pre-1997 Hong Kong,” because they are some of the “[rare] surviving traces of the city's pre-handover history [which] are constantly under threats of destruction” (Liu 2021).

The opening film for the same festival was the Hong Kong crime thriller *Where the Wind Blows* (2021), which addresses the sensitive issue of police corruption set against a backdrop of the 1960s, as a new incarnation of the classic Hong Kong police film. It was abruptly cancelled three days beforehand “due to technical reasons” (“Cancellation” 2021), in an announcement whose timing and phrasing reminded many of other recent last-minute festival pull-outs of films from the Chinese Mainland that similarly touch on sensitive issues. This time, however, it was the first time for such censorship to happen to a film from Hong Kong, at a Hong Kong festival.

These incidents can be seen in a larger context of Hong Kong cinema in an era of decline, thanks to efforts of increased integration of its film market with the mainland such as the 2003 Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement, the subsequent leaving of filmmakers and other creatives to work in the Mainland as well as overseas, and most recently the 2019-

2020 protests which were met by the imposition of a national security law on Hong Kong in 2020. As the earlier comment toward Hong Kong history attests, the controversy over Wong's restorations thus points not just at the nostalgia and hard-headedness of art house cinephiles, but to broader temporal anxieties about memory, identity, preservation, and most importantly, the future. Both incidents sparked controversy because of a perceived loss – a loss of Hong Kong cinema (the classics of Wong, printed in a collective nostalgia, in their original colours; the classic Hong Kong police thriller, with its ambiguity over morality and identity), which comes to stand for an erasure of history.

If we take Wong's comment that "these are not the same films" seriously, beyond the technical and aesthetic tweaks on which he is commenting, we could indeed say that the films have taken on new meanings in the wake of Hong Kong's drastic changes. Especially a film such as *2046*, which within Wong's oeuvre is arguably the most prominently engaged with the question of the future of Hong Kong, cannot be watched the same way as one might have in the cinema in 2004. In today's Hong Kong, a film such as *2046* could never be made. Firstly, its political allegory is far too conspicuous. The film's title, and the presence of the numbers 2046/2047 throughout its narrative, refer to the 'expiry date' of Hong Kong's maintenance of its "capitalist system and way of life" which the city's Basic Law stipulates to "remain unchanged for 50 years" (Article 5) as previously promised in the negotiations between Britain and China on the Handover of Hong Kong. With this date functioning as a stand-in for the anxiety over Hong Kong's future in the hands of China, works of art explicitly referencing it have come under increased scrutiny. A high-profile example was the art work *Our 60-Second Friendship Begins Now* by Jason Lam and Sampson Wong (2016), which involved a projection of numbers counting down on the side of the International Finance Centre in Kowloon. It was taken down within days after its premiere, after the artists revealed the numbers were counting down to July 1st 2047. While some have noted that it was the curators, representing the funding body (Hong Kong Arts Development Council), that pulled the trigger rather than any direct government censorship, the work's political message was still the direct reason for its subsequent removal (Tam 2018, Wan 2019). With the

increased focus on film censorship under the national security law (Pang 2021), any such reference would surely catch the attention of the Film Censorship Authority. More importantly than such issues of restriction however, “2047” as a political allegory is in some ways already out-of-date. This number retains little currency in recent years after the political landscape and with it the city’s temporal horizon has quickly shifted: from the perspective of the national government, the 50-year deadline may as well be extended forever if the conditions stay as they are, while for many in the city’s pro-democracy camp, 2047 is ‘already here’ – the changes feared for so long have come prematurely.²¹

If indeed the promised “fifty years of unchangedness exists in name only” (Tam 83), then how can *2046* still mean something today? Is there anything to regain from this film, seen from a perspective of those who (think they) have already seen what 2047 looks like? If it functions as a cultural document, does it merely testify to a once-held, but since lost, hope for a different future? Since any document is always a performance, in the sense that an artefact must be mobilized as evidence or example to contest or convince (*documentum* from Latin *docere*, to teach/show), how could the mobilizations of *2046*-as-document within different contexts over the years teach us a belated understanding of the tensions within Hong Kong culture over this future deadline, as well as the workings of film and of the city itself as palimpsestic media?

²¹ Zhang Xiaoming, deputy director of China’s Hong Kong and Macau Affairs Office, suggested in a webinar on 8 June 2020 that the mandate for Hong Kong as a semi-autonomous region could be renewed beyond 2047 (“National security law for Hong Kong to boost ‘one country, two systems’ and ensure freedoms beyond 2047: top official in most candid comments yet from Beijing” *South China Morning Post* <<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3088031/deng-xiaoping-always-believed-mainland-could-step-if>>). Shen Chunyao, chairman of Legislative Affairs Commission of National People’s Congress Standing Committee, has further confirmed this in May 2022 (“Beijing offers reassurances Hong Kong’s ‘one country, two systems’ principle will not change after 2047.” *South China Morning Post* <<https://www.scmp.com/news/hong-kong/politics/article/3179376/hong-kongs-one-country-two-systems-principle-will-not>>). Meanwhile, many voiced opinions such as “Now the knife has come down, there is no need to wait until 2047. We’re turning into China for real this time.” (Jennifer Tsui, quoted in “The ‘real’ handover: Hong Kong fears looming laws will end ‘one country, two systems’” *The Guardian*. 27 June 2020. <<https://www.theguardian.com/world/2020/jun/27/hong-kong-fears-freedoms-will-end-as-new-law-looms>>).

The already-here-ness of 2047 can be thought within a context of various ‘alreadies’ through which Hong Kong culture has been conceptualized, starting with Ackbar Abbas’ notion of a feeling of *déjà disparu* (already disappeared). He argues that Hong Kong has suffered from a ‘negative hallucination’, a not-seeing of the Hong Kong culture and identity that is already there but which remains for a long time buried under notions of the city as a ‘cultural desert.’ Only with the 1980s Handover negotiations, when the imminent change of national alignment produces anxieties over an anticipated loss of the Hong Kong that is/was, does a (belated) understanding of Hong Kong culture emerge. This new recognition, in Abbas’ argument, produces however a new spectre of disappearance and invisibility – this time not for a lack of attention (‘cultural desert’) but because much of the ‘new’ attention reproduces the city in the “same old binarisms” such as East meets West. These binarisms, he writes:

give us not so much a sense of *déjà vu*, as the even more uncanny feeling of what we might call the *déjà disparu*: the feeling that what is new and unique about the situation is always already gone, and we are left holding a handful of clichés, or a cluster of memories of what has never been. (Abbas 25)

Abbas’ culture of disappearance has for a long time been a key lens through which the field of Hong Kong studies understands how the city’s cultural developments interrelate with the changing political landscape. Although it is not uncontested and cannot speak for the entirety of Hong Kong’s cultural production, it is clear to see why it has continued to resonate. At many points in the two decades since the Handover have spectres of loss returned to the centre of the cultural zeitgeist – especially in such moments as the perceived failure of the 2014 Umbrella Movement and that of the 2019-20 protests. The post-mortems of the latter are still being written today, as has happened in the wake of every post-Handover social movement.

However, some of the remembrance and archiving efforts that have sprung up since 2020 belie a changing relation to loss and disappearance, in which preservation of artifacts and negotiation over the story of Hong Kong’s past have become much more prominent in the

face of the increasing non-negotiability of its (political) future. For example, when the Hong Kong Museum of History was set to close its permanent exhibition “The Hong Kong Story” for a major renovation in October 2020, many, mostly young Hong Kongers gathered to view the exhibit for a final (and for some, first) time. Crowds gathered to take photos of items such as the costumes and portraits of colonial officials or the flag of British Hong Kong, with the expectation that the reopened exhibition slated for 2022 will present an ‘incomplete’ or ‘distorted’ version of history that shifts focus away from elements which do not fit with the narrative of a Chinese national future²². In the same month, a bar frequented by artists and activists named Club 71 (after the Handover date of July 1st, changing names from Club 64 before, which referenced Tiananmen Square) experienced a similar run on its last night. After several independent media outlets reported on its imminent closure due to financial troubles, many came to visit for one last time. On closing night, the adjoining Pak Tsz Lane park (which is itself dedicated to another revolutionary date of 1911, as Yeung Ku-wan’s Furen Society was founded there) filled up with a crowd of people who seemed unsure where to go next after the doors finally closed. Even the park itself was barricaded and declared off-limits soon after, when many used it as a nightly gathering spot to the dismay of authorities intent on enforcing Covid-19 gathering restrictions.

These final-day hurrahs, as well as the gatherings and online commemorations of political anniversaries (of 6.4, 7.1, or any of the dates relating to the 2019-’20 protest clashes) are supplemented by archiving and preservation efforts inspired by this same sense of urgency. After public broadcaster RTHK announced it would delete any audio-visual material older than one year from its online media channels in May 2021 (widely regarded as part of its new course after a management reshuffle, which saw many programmes and journalists critical of government policy removed), users of online forums and social media banded together to produce unofficial archives that could guarantee access regardless of the changing

²² Wong, Rachel. “In Pictures: Visitors flock to History Museum amid fears ‘Hong Kong Story’ exhibit may be censored in revamp.” *Hong Kong Free Press*. 19 October 2020. <<https://hongkongfp.com/2020/10/19/in-pictures-visitors-flock-to-history-museum-amid-fears-hong-kong-story-exhibit-may-be-censored-in-revamp/>>.

political conditions. A similar response occurred a month later when pro-democracy newspaper *Apple Daily* was forced to shut, and online archives of its past issues were set up on a decentralized blockchain platform.²³ A less overtly political example of the (re)centring of cultural conservation in popular discourse was unearthed on 28 December 2020, when a demolition project on Bishop Hill stumbled upon a 116-year-old water reservoir held up by galleries of Romanesque red brick arches. Photographs of the impressive and unexpected architectural find quickly spread online. The immediate backlash against the ongoing demolition and the lack of knowledge of the structure's history by both the Water Supplies Department and the Antiquities Office (which allowed this demolition to proceed in the first place) re-ignited some of the political energies muffled in the wake of the protests. One observer writes that "many have been waiting for an outlet to unleash their repressed energy and [to put their] pained frustrations to good use," praising the quick and strong civil society reaction as well as the grassroots researchers who scoured historical archives to determine the reservoir's age and history within a few hours, a feat of collective labour that is seen as an example of how in the current situation, the public may "turn their wits to issues of community concern that are perhaps safer and less political."²⁴

Whereas these examples may fall short of evidencing a radical rewiring of Hong Kong's postcolonial temporalities and could perhaps still be read within the framework of a culture of disappearance, they do indicate a shift in perspective where the question of history and its narration have become explicit everyday topics in popular discourse. Such instances of public engagement with heritage conservation are of course not particularly new, as the protests around the demolition of the Queen's Pier in 2007 for example engaged with colonial

²³ Yiu, Pak. "Hong Kong's Apple Daily to live on in blockchain, free of censors." *Reuters*. 25 June 2021. <<https://www.reuters.com/world/asia-pacific/hong-kongs-apple-daily-live-blockchain-free-censors-2021-06-24/>>.

²⁴ Ng, Neptune. "Bishop Hill reservoir discovery: 7 reasons for public storm." *Apple Daily*. 6 January 2021.

As mentioned earlier, Apple Daily's archives have been taken offline, but many of its articles (including this particular one) can still be accessed through the Internet Archive's "Way Back Machine": <<https://web.archive.org/web/20210106062359/https://hk.appledaily.com/opinion/20210106/LZJ66TMJ3REIFAZEC6FF7W237Y/>>.

history along similar lines. In recent times however, such flash points have become almost everyday circumstance rather than extraordinary events, and this escalation speaks to a more paranoid historicism that is hyper-aware of subtle changes and omissions found in official accounts of history. Where the generation before 1997 was perhaps seen as inhabiting a pragmatism or apoliticism that the spectres of loss gradually dislodged (whether accurate or not, similar observations have been made on the ‘awakening’ of a political spirit of a generation in the 2014 Umbrella Movement), perhaps a new generation growing up among the contested histories and incongruous storytelling of post-2019 Hong Kong will come to be considered as more considerate and sensitive to the political question of history. This would be far too early to tell, but the concept of *déjà disparu* will regardless need to be re-evaluated in light of these developments, to take into account the new configurations of time that arise from these shifting views toward history.

One more recent account which develops this state of *déjà disparu* in relation to its overlapping temporalities of anticipation and belatedness can be found in Carlos Rojas’ work, specifically two readings of respectively Dung Kai-cheung (2016) and Fruit Chan’s 2016 film *Kill Time* (2018). Works like Dung’s novel *Atlas: The Archaeology of an Imaginary City* (1996), where a future team of archaeologists find the remains of a lost city which stands in for contemporary Hong Kong, look at the present through a “hybrid of the future perfect and the past perfect tenses” (Rojas 849) to *produce* a present, rather than assuming a stable present from which the past and future are often extrapolated. Rojas reads this tension of ‘anticipatory nostalgia’ that characterizes the *déjà disparu* from a Freudian perspective as a combination of the fetish (since object of desire is substituted in the face of loss) and that of deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*), where a prior (traumatic) event acquires a belated understanding or response (both in Dung’s archaeologists and Abbas’ understanding of the ‘new’ self-recognition in 1980s Hong Kong popular culture).

However, while this temporal mode of anticipatory nostalgia is arguably still widespread, we could say that Hong Kong culture has now had a few decades to ‘catch up’ with its belated self-realization. 1997 has already been ‘history’ for a long enough time to lose

its threat or shock value. If we simply shift our focus to the next ‘deadline’ that is 2047, we may see many similar responses that express anxieties of loss and the drive to understand something at the cusp of disappearing. However, the new configurations of national alignment and the promises and disappointments from the post-Handover political framework produce a markedly different temporal horizon. Rojas works through Hong Kong cinema (as Abbas did to come up with his original concept), in the form of a Fruit Chan film, to find in addition to the sense of disappearance then also a “state of *déjà suspendu*—of seeing Hong Kong society and culture as being caught in a state of suspended animation marked by the post-Handover period of ‘fifty years without change’” (103) as well as a sense of “*déjà revenu*—or seeing the present as haunted by specters that have “returned” from the past and are unable to advance to the future” (114).

In the examples just discussed as well as in the pages to follow, we can distinguish many encounters with spectres which are (accidentally) unearthed or which may appear in the wake of a disappearance. But it is firstly the question of suspension (and of a certain *suspense*, in a narrative sense) that any reading of *2046* in light of the recent history of Hong Kong should address. Theorizing Hong Kong as a place where time is suspended seems like a path well-trodden: already in the 1960s, Richard Hughes wrote of the city as a “borrowed place” living on “borrowed time” in the eponymous book.²⁵ As in the colonial days, the current geopolitical situation requires a reckoning with a double temporality: a living in the now as well as the non-negotiable future. Going along with the fraught metaphor of borrowing however, we may now say that the place has been “returned,” and that the borrowed time is “overdue.” The new suspended time then is different: rather than the chaotically improvised ‘borrowed time’ of a “rambunctious, freebooting colony” which “asks only to be allowed to work and live” (Hughes 9-10), the contemporary policy of One Country, Two Systems is a much more calculated response to the intersection of conflicting

²⁵ A phrase that was itself borrowed (with acknowledgement) by Hughes from writer Han Suyin, who attributes it to a businessman named Tom Wu (Hughes 6).

geopolitical interests and everyday life in Hong Kong – even if the details are often open to (re-)interpretation.

This policy framework, proposed by Deng Xiaoping as a “scientific concept,” and which at the same time seems to promise the impossible, brings us to the realm of science fiction. In the present day, “Hong Kong is a science fiction,” writes Tammy Ho: an open question, or speculation of “what if... dictatorship and democracy can coexist?” (127-128). And we may add another promise which could be reframed into a question: what if... a place could be unchanged for 50 years? This speculative arrangement is but one in a series of ways in which Hong Kong has served as an experiment or testing ground, or as the ‘what-if’ of science fiction. Returning to the past once again, we may recall the *laissez faire* economics which neoliberal thinkers such as Milton Friedman dubbed the “Hong Kong Experiment”²⁶, a reading in which Hong Kong’s post-war economic prosperity revealed something about the nature of free market capitalism, through the claimed experimental method of ‘non-interventionism’. In this example, Hong Kong serves not only as a potential future (for other ‘free market’ economies to emulate), but also arrives at its methods anachronistically: the colony’s economic policy was described by some admirers as a “glorious [accident]” through which Financial Secretary John Cowperthwaite, “a man unversed in the 20th century’s fad for socialism, could apply his 18th century ideas in a territory unencumbered with democracy.”²⁷ In other words, what if... the 19th and 20th century labour movements and the European welfare state which grew in response to their demands, never took place? What kinds of speculation (both in a financial and an epistemological sense) does this open up?

The model of One Country, Two Systems under which Hong Kong transitioned to Mainland Chinese rule speaks to similar speculative temporalities, both in the sense of

²⁶ Friedman, Milton. “The Hong Kong Experiment.” *The Hoover Institution*. 30 July 1998. <<https://www.hoover.org/research/hong-kong-experiment>>.

²⁷ “Sir John Cowperthwaite.” *The Sunday Times*. 3 February 2006.

<<https://www.thetimes.co.uk/article/sir-john-cowperthwaite-gppq3vqtl7j>>.

In the book cited earlier, Richard Hughes paints a similar picture of an anachronistic Hong Kong economic policy (although he picks a different century): he describes Hong Kong as “politically neuter, dedicated to the *laissez faire* economics of the nineteenth century and employing the industrial technique of the twentieth century” (10).

working as a model for the ultimate goal of the reunification of Taiwan with the People's Republic, and in the impossible promise of "50 years of no change." This premise, which brings us to the year 2047, lies as the basis of the film *2046* as well, as Wong Kar-wai explains:

We want to emphasize Hong Kong will remain unchanged, but this is impossible because the world is changing. ... Therefore, I use this number to tell a love story. ... We make promises to our lovers, but we cannot guarantee we will not change at the end. ... Wouldn't it be interesting if the film starts from the question: will the lovers change or not? (Wong 109)

The questions of Hong Kong identity and political alignment are thus recast into a story of love – in an indirect allegory where characters don't directly represent the love or betrayal between geopolitical entities, but one where the feelings common between love and politics can be explored. Central to this equivalence is how these feelings (of promise, desire, and loss) project into time. Wong argues in the same interview that "political influence casts a long shadow on one's life. The real effect is not realized today. ... The influence will become clear after a considerable length of time" (ibid.).

Today then, seen from the 'long shadow' of *2046*, the film may function as a mirror through which suspensions are doubled: the time that has passed since the premiere of *2046* (2004) is now almost as long as the time between that film and the signing of the Sino-British Joint Declaration (1984). And the film was, much like the present writing, interrupted by a coronavirus epidemic (SARS-CoV-1 in 2003, followed by CoV-2 in 2020). Due to scheduling conflicts resulting from the SARS outbreak as well as other reasons, the production was drawn out over four years and resulted in the absence of Maggie Cheung from most of the film, who was in some descriptions 'replaced' by Faye Wong.²⁸ A quote from Wong on the predicaments around the film's production shows the intertwining of the temporalities of

²⁸ "'2046' opens in China amid global hype." *China Daily*. 28 September 2004. <https://www.chinadaily.com.cn/english/doc/2004-09/28/content_378456.htm>.

waiting and substitution which as we shall see are also key themes in the film (as well as the key qualities of Hong Kong's in-between temporality with which it engages):

80-90% of those four years were spent waiting ... We had to wait during the SARS epidemic, because many of the crew members had to go back to their home countries. We had to deal with revised actors' schedules, permits and locations ... Having nothing to do for so much of the time was a problem. It also gave me a lot of time to think about changes, so I did a lot of reshooting.²⁹

The scenes sketched here may seem familiar to the belated reader, from the context of (post-) Covid-19. Interestingly, the condition of suspended time (triggered by interruptions) leads not to stasis but to prolonged fermentation of ideas and repetitions with a difference (reshooting). The subsequent changes and substitutions may be too subtle to discern to the final work's audience, if they are not already knowledgeable of what has been substituted. With every replacement comes a haunting of the non-presence of that was substituted away: we can find a dynamic here in which interruption, waiting, substitution and disappearance are intertwined. Maggie Cheung's character So Laizan who served as the central counterpoint to protagonist Chow Mo-wan (Tony Leung) in *In the Mood for Love* (2000), all but completely disappears in *2046*, but the narrative of the latter simultaneously revolves completely around Chow's flings with several women who serve as So's stand-in but fail to make up for his lack – one of them even carries the same name (Gong Li's character Su Lizhen).

The film's production process thus mirrors the complications of delayed time that its speculative fiction tries to tease out. Just as its protagonist Chow fails to finish his melancholic science fiction story "2047", so was the film's finalization repeatedly delayed – it even screened at Cannes unfinished, when Wong arrived with such a last-minute cut that the time slot had to be postponed (in a repetition of *In the Mood for Love*, which saw a

²⁹ Fernstein, Howard. "It was like being in jail." *The Guardian*. 21 September 2004. <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2004/sep/21/londonfilmfestival2004.londonfilmfestival>>.

similarly hectic premiere four years earlier).³⁰ As a text, *2046* can therefore serve as a privileged site for exploring the abovementioned shifting temporal horizons of Hong Kong as they relate to identity, allegiance, and history. As a cultural document, it is self-aware of the palimpsestic and ephemeral nature of the production of identities, the forging of social bonds, and the imagination of futures. The film can be seen as a cinematic intervention which offers a space to disambiguate externally imposed temporal conditions of suspension. Akin to Dung Kai-cheung's work as read by Rojas, *2046* arrives (or struggles to arrive) at a present, through speculative times located before and after. In resonance with the other films discussed in this dissertation, its method is that of a temporal detour which tries to find new pathways that may circumvent the obstacles of an ossified spatio-temporal constellation.

Seen from the present day, the film may be approached through a two-pronged delayed reading. The following sections of this chapter will, on the one hand, try to tease out the implications of how *2046* and the larger body of Wong's work lives on in popular culture today, tracing the ghosts of its lost futures in domains outside of cinema, where a spectre of *2046-7* still haunts the present despite the impotence of its promise of "no change." The *60-Second Friendship* projection mentioned earlier is for example a clear reference to a famous Leslie Cheung scene in *Days of Being Wild* (1990) that deals with similar issues of fleeting temporalities. Quotes and images spawned from Wong's temporal imaginations further end up in unexpected places such as an artistic-technological movement (Sinofuturism) and Chinese online forums. On the other hand, as we will see, the film itself is full of anachronisms: its 1960s protagonist Chow projects his desires and anxieties into a science fiction tale that is at the same time a reworking of Liu Yichang's writings such as *The Drunkard* (1963) and *Intersection* (1972), and an engagement with the early-2000s post-Handover anxiety. The film invites us to mirror its anachronistic strategies, and to engage with it as one instance within an ongoing (re)telling of Hong Kong histories which carries

³⁰ Teo, Stephen. *Wong Kar-Wai*. P.135. The theatrical cut of *2046* appeared only months later and was substantially different. Teo's suggestion (136) that this might not even be the definitive version turns out correct, knowing of the newly remastered cut mentioned before.

over a multitude of conflicting temporalities that may be of use to understand our present. The question here is then how, in both the textual and intertextual field, *2046* extends into the future.



Fig. 4.1

A superimposition of unresolved times: the train to 2046

One prominent work that builds on the legacy of *2046* is the video essay *Sinofuturism (1839 - 2046 AD)* by Lawrence Lek (2016). This film, which is credited by many as being central to (or even reviving) the contemporary conception of ‘sinofuturism,’³¹ carries in its title two dates that are intimately connected to Hong Kong. 1839, which marked the start of the First Opium War; a war which began with skirmishes in Kowloon on present-day Hong Kong soil and ended with the cession of Hong Kong Island to the British Empire. And, of course, 2046. Despite these markers however, Hong Kong seems to completely disappear in *Sinofuturism*’s manifesto which mostly revolves around fantasies of a Greater Chinese world, space exploration, and artificial intelligence. How can *2046* and the temporalities of Hong Kong it inhabits be so easily borrowed to imagine new futures, while simultaneously being left behind? If Hong Kong only serves as a colonial relic of the past in these futurist discourses, then why does it constantly return as a site from which to imagine the future?

³¹ “Sino-Futurism: Popular Culture, Space-Time Politics and East-West Context — Round Table Discussion” (中华未来主义:大众文化、时空政治与东西语境 —— 圆桌讨论). *CVSZ* 60 (2020). <<https://www.conversazione.org/post/sinofuturism-discussion>>.

The video essay starts off with the exact opening shot of *2046*, in which the camera retreats from a black hole at the centre of a reflective golden apparatus (fig. 4.1), which functions as a kind of receptacle for whispered secrets in the film. The original shot is however superimposed with the bilingual title of *Sinofuturism* in capital letters and simplified Chinese. On the soundtrack, Zbigniew Preisner's orchestral opening is replaced with rhythmic electronic music, along with a robotic voice outlining the film's manifesto: "Sinofuturism is an invisible movement. A spectre already embedded into a trillion industrial products, a billion individuals, and a million veiled narratives." The robotic voice seems to mimic another one of *2046*'s tropes: the mechanical voices coming out of the mouths of the androids in Chow's science fiction story. But this voice is in English rather than Cantonese, and its robotic quality is a result of it being generated by text-to-speech software rather than the distortion of a human actor's voice in *2046*. It is a disembodied voice, or what Michel Chion calls *acousmètre*: it doesn't "occupy the removed position of commentator," but instead it has "if only slightly, ... *one foot in the image*, in the space of the film; [it] must haunt the borderlands that are neither the interior of the filmic stage nor the proscenium – a place that has no name, but which the cinema forever brings into play" (21). The acoustic connotations with voices such as that of HAL 9000 (*2001: A Space Odyssey*) lend a sinister quality to the manifesto's opening sequence, which also features the images of *2046*'s futuristic rail network. These visuals served as an end-credit sequence in the original film accompanied by snippets of radio broadcasts about the future of Hong Kong – including a remark by Thatcher in which she addresses the promise of "...remain unchanged for 50 years." The radio broadcasts make no appearance here. Instead, the robotic voice drones on: "Because Sinofuturism has arisen without conscious intention or authorship, it is often mistaken for contemporary China. But it is not. It is a science fiction that already exists."

How does this "existing science fiction" correspond to the Hong Kong-as-science fiction at the heart of *2046*? It is easy to read one as the inverse of the other (sinofuturism's utopia is Hong Kong's dystopia), but the absence of the one in the other, and the other in the one, prevents any easy conclusion. The Chinese Mainland also conspicuously disappears in

2046: except for serving as the vague background for several characters (notably the hotelkeeper with his thick Harbin accent), places on the Mainland are left unspoken and untravelled. The cosmopolitan mobilities of its characters instead extend to elsewhere: Singapore, Cambodia, Japan. Where *2046* (and much of Wong's oeuvre before it) seems to divest its desires away from Hong Kong and China, imagining futures elsewhere, *Sinofuturism* presents a universal and placeless movement, in which the skylines of Shanghai and Chongqing may be easily mixed with CGI renderings of future real estate developments, and *2046*'s abstract imageries fit in seamlessly.

Of course, the status of Wong Kar-wai as an established Chinese representative in the world of art cinema, the centrality of his cinematic imagery within a larger body of Sinophone aesthetics, as well as his propensity for poetic musings and open-ended questions, may partly explain the easy adaptation of these motifs and images. *2046*, after all, leaves us with mostly questions: its secrets seem to be constantly present, yet hidden away and left unspoken. If any answer is verbalized, it is invariably disappointing – often, the seemingly deep secret finally spills out as a straightforward and desperate “take me with you.” It seems then that *Sinofuturism* aims to pick up where *2046* left off, and to provide some answers about a future which was left frustrated in the original film (even if its answers really bring us even further into a realm of abstraction). Within this framework of adaptation, it is interesting to see how *Sinofuturism*'s mirroring of the three motifs mentioned above – the dark hole, the android's voice, and the train to the future – brings attention their function as *media* through which secrets and desires are temporally extended. By tapping into *2046*' secrets, the video essay adopts the temporal logics of superimposition (of different anachronistic layers) and ventriloquism (whereby a disembodied voice recounts a story whose origin is distanced through a chain of writing and speaking).

To understand these palimpsestic logics, we should return to *2046* itself: specifically, to two stories that are told and re-told by various characters in multiple languages throughout the film. These stories function akin to folkloric myths, acquiring layers of meaning with every repetition and retelling, through the techniques of superimposition and ventriloquism.

Their circulation (both textually and intertextually) probes the complexities of the “Hong Kong story” and the impossible condition of suspended time.

The first story appears at the opening of *2046*. It is the premise of the science fiction tale being written by the character Chow Mo-wan, which is first explained in a Japanese voice-over by the traveller protagonist of the story (Kimura Takuya’s unnamed character, credited as “Tak”):

In the year 2046, a vast rail network spans the globe. A mysterious train leaves for 2046 every once in a while. Every passenger going to 2046 has the same intention: they want to recapture lost memories. Because nothing ever changes in 2046. Nobody really knows if that's true, because nobody has ever come back... except me.

These introductory words, encountered in translated form as subtitles by most audiences both local and overseas, read like something of a play on popular sci-fi formulae as encountered in pulp fiction book blurbs and movie trailers: “in a world, where...” “the year is 2046...” At the same time, this premise and the protagonist’s doubts on its veracity (“nobody really knows...”) clearly resonate with the problematics of memory and “no change” as discussed earlier.

Fig. 4.2





The visuals accompanying this voice-over offer more hints at the metaphoric workings of this story within the layers of the film itself, Wong Kar-wai's oeuvre, and the broader Hong Kong story. In a shifting collage of digital architectural sketches, photography, and other computer-generated imagery, the train to 2046 cuts through a futuristic Hong Kong cityscape, at times abstracted to look almost like a strip of celluloid film whizzing past (fig. 4.2). Although this resemblance is a minor detail, it reinforces the train metaphor as a sequential time machine. In film recording and projection, the individual frames on a strip are snapshots of time (a duration short enough to be called an 'instant'), laid out vertically in a sequential order that may be translated back into time (through the interrupted movement of a sprocket in the film projector). Wong often draws attention to this mechanism in his films by using combinations of under-cranking and step printing, whereby single frames cover a longer duration. The resulting stuttered rhythm produces a blurred movement somewhere in-between still photography and cinema. This making-visible of the invisible function of the instant (as the central technique that allows cinema's reproduction of movement) challenges the paradox of time-space translation at its core, and the train to 2046 works similarly to make visible the invisible paradoxes that underpin the temporalities of desire at the centre of this historical condition of "no change."

The metaphorical function of this train as a space-time translation machine presents itself however much more ambiguously than that of the film strip. This becomes clear through a reading one of the 2046 story vignettes in the film, where details of a specific "zone 1224-1225" emerge. In a voice-over, author Chow mentions a warning from the "passengers guide" which states that this zone is especially cold and that passengers should embrace each other

because the train heating doesn't provide enough warmth. Later in the film, Chow confesses that actually, these numbers referred to the dates of Christmas Eve and Day, when people need a bit more warmth – his lack of which inspired him to write a story of the lonely passenger Tak who embraces a lifeless android-servant on the train. The implication for the time-space metaphor (converting calendar days into a 'zone') is so ambiguous that it has left the door open for different interpretations. In his reading of the film, Todd McGowan understands this story detail in light of the question of access to time/space:

The narration ... leaves implicit the transformation that the very existence of zones 1224 and 1225 suggests. Through these zones ... 2046 further translates what we ordinarily conceive of as temporal periods (Christmas Eve and Christmas Day) into spatial entities. In the process, these holidays become, like 2046 itself, readily accessible in a way that their temporal status made impossible. As days of the year, 12/24 and 12/25 come along only at a certain time and are quickly gone. One cannot live these days forever. As zones on the train, however, 1224 and 1225 are, despite their uncomfortable temperature, habitable for a much longer duration.

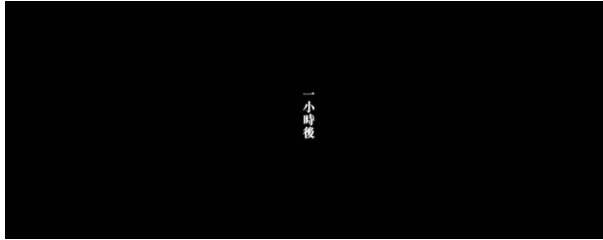
This understanding of the zones as compartments on the train is a tempting one, and it would translate nicely to a film strip metaphor whereby these numbered compartments are like film frames in the hand of an editor, brackets of time that are *removed from time* and can be inhabited and passed through. It also works with McGowan's argument that Wong treats time like space, opening up the possibility of accessing an eternity that is removed from the incessant flow of time (as in the hotel room '2046' which is just next door, rather than a world away). However, revisiting the words of Chow reveals a much more passive and melancholic agency vis-à-vis time in this story. The dialogue itself only talks of an 'area' (地區) which is cold, and where the train's heating facilities (車上嘅禦寒設施) don't provide enough warmth for its passengers. The cold is coming from outside, meaning that 1224-5 is thus a space *through which* the train moves – beyond the passenger's control. Rather than making accessible, this time travel through the writing pen of Chow is a recursive mode of processing loss and desire which reinforces the impossibilities of access and temporal agency.

The film strip detail works to reinforce this frame narrative and its ruminatory function: just as the train-as-metaphor functions as an attempt to work through Chow's temporal displacement from his object of desire, so does the film *2046* work to address such anxieties in a larger world, whose outlines remain hazy in the film (fig. 4.2). The futuristic city of '2046' consists of various superimpositions of Hong Kong cityscape: photography, digital architectural sketches, and other forms of CGI such as the train. The images of this city dissolve into each other (both in this short sequence and in the longer, aforementioned credit sequence) without ever clearly landing on one perspective. What we see here is a visual rendering of the somewhat vague logic of superimposition through which all kinds of (inter)textual elements (a hotel room, a legal promise, the name of a woman who left to Singapore, a destination, a cameo character in a film from years ago) can interconnect without ever resolving – the function of these metaphors is after all not to resolve the tensions at stake, but to articulate these feelings in ways that cannot be verbalized in other contexts.

The accompanying logic of ventriloquism activated by the frame narrative works to distance what is said from its direct context. What Wong cannot speak directly, he leaves to Chow, and what Chow cannot say, he writes through the mouth of his Japanese protagonist – who often keeps his secrets to himself. In this layering of acts of speaking and writing, time starts to move in strange ways, untethered from the familiar units of time such as hours and years. This defamiliarization is visualized most explicitly through a series of title cards in another of the film's science fiction subplot vignettes (fig. 4.3-4). In one sequence, an android servant on the train from 2046 (Faye Wong) walks through a train compartment and then stares out of the window for a long time (fig. 4.4). Shots of the android are alternated with title cards that indicate the time that has passed in-between: "10 hours later," "100 hours later," "1000 hours later." The repeated 10-fold increases suggest an escalation to infinity – an infinite stasis whereby the android will keep staring out of the window. A mirroring sequence appears a few minutes later, when Chow is rewriting this exact story of the android on the train that we have just seen. His love interest Wang Jingwen (also Faye Wong), who left Hong Kong to marry a Japanese man, has asked him to rewrite the story's ending, which she

Fig. 4.3A-G (chronological from top to bottom, 2046)

Fig. 4.4A-G (same, 2046)



deems too sad. Shaken by the news of her departure, Chow is unable to write. The title cards return (1..10...100 hours later) between shots of the writer's gaze, his slowly burning cigarette, and his pen hovering over sheets of paper under the changing light of days passing (fig. 4.3).

These suspended stares are part of the recurring motif where *2046*'s characters spend much of the film not-seeing, a kind of literal rendition of Abbas' argument on 'reverse hallucination.' The android looks out the window not to see what is there: she stares into the empty space-time of blurred colours that visually binds together Wong's oeuvre and its character histories. Her gaze returns a reflection which is itself a double image, a repetition of the famous shot of Faye Wong's character in the 1994 film *Chungking Express* (fig. 4.5). There, the glass panel reflecting her gaze belongs to the Mid-Levels escalator – another futuristic mode of transportation which had just opened at the time, transforming the steep market roads of Central into the world's longest outdoor escalator. While Wong's eyes there are wide-open, her neck turned back in a posture which expresses a spirit of curiosity, her android's gaze aboard the train is much more muted and introspective. Juxtaposed, these images almost reveal the decade between these films as a period of accelerated aging – the antithesis of unchangedness. This contrast somewhat mirrors Faye Wong's career, from her breakthrough in the early 1990s to her position as an established figure and subsequent retreat from the public eye at the height of her career in 2004-5.³² Her toned down gaze furthermore expresses the jadedness already found on the pages of Liu Yichang's *The Drunkard* and *Intersection*. In the 2047 story, the train captain explains that the androids' responses are delayed because their mechanism has worn out. Their affective capacities are literally eroded by time, expressing the perspective of writer Chow Mo-wan (as a reincarnation of *The Drunkard*'s protagonist) who, jaded and stuck, cannot imagine any alternative outcomes to his story.

³² This direct connection to her star persona is made explicit through the names of her characters in the two films: Wang Jing-wen in *2046* is the name (王靖雯) under which she released her debut album, and her character in *Chungking Express* is simply called "Faye" (阿菲 Ah-Fei).



Fig. 4.5

These mirroring moments of stasis between Chow and the android once again play with the meaning of suspended time – an impossibility that exists only *de jure*, on paper, or in (science) fiction. The unchangedness arises here in the act of (not) writing. Wang Jingwen in this moment of the film stands as Chow’s object of desire, as a replacement for the lost So Laizan – whose image flashes by while he reflects “I’d also like the story to have a happy ending, but I don’t know how to write it. Some years back, I had this opportunity in my grasp, but it has unfortunately passed.” Wang Jingwen, as a stand-in for this happy ending, ossifies in Chow’s mind and in his pen: he imagines her in a state of suspension, a stretched time (even the image of the android is horizontally stretched, fig. 4.4G). What we see is not the temporality of Wang Jingwen (who has moved on with her Japanese lover), but a time of endless rumination, as Chow further reflects: “Actually, love has a timeliness. Getting to know another too early or too late doesn’t work. If I had met her in another time or place... The ending could be different.” This is the flip side of the ‘chance encounter’ which has always been the basis for Wong’s cinema of spontaneity: the non-encounter, the encounter at the wrong time, or the thought of what could have been.

The resulting frozen time of missing the never-returning object is here channelled through the generic convention of cinematic title cards, which have a long history as a cheap narrative shorthand to indicate a passage of time (5 years later...). Peter Brunette even calls Wong’s use of these intertitles an “in-joke”, poking fun at the director’s trademark obsession with the passage of time (105). They also work as the uppermost surface within the layered logic of ventriloquism: the title card in cinema is, alongside the non-diegetic voice over, the closest we get to a ‘direct address’ from the *auteur* to the audience. It shows the writing of an

omniscient narrator, projected straight from the screenplay (or the director's mouth, as Wong's films are often largely improvised) onto the film print, in contrast to the words layered through the actor's performances and the frame narrative.

There is one more thread of suspension and counting where the unreliable narration produced out of the logic of ventriloquism reveals something about *2046*'s logic of time. Early in the film, Tak is sitting in the train from 2046, bored by the long duration of his journey and his lack of company. Looking out of the window, he counts down: "998, 997..." Later in the film, Tak is still on the train, this time counting in the other direction: "990, 991, 992..." This counting up and down seems to resonate with the question Tak asks himself: "If someone wants to leave 2046, how long will it take?" Forever, it seems. However, a set of contradictory lines from the Japanese traveller troubles the possibility of return and the question of infinity. Following the question of how long the journey will take, Tak reflects: "Some people get away fairly easily... others find that it takes them much longer." This clashes with the opening monologue cited earlier, where Tak states that "nobody has ever come back [from 2046] except me." The possibility of return is there narrowed down to a single person. Furthermore, this story premise is repeated in its entirety in Cantonese by Chow at the very end of the film – making up the last spoken words before the credit sequence:

In this place 2046
Everything never changes
Nobody really knows if that's true or not...
Because nobody has ever come back from there.

Here we find another repetition with one significant disappearance: the enticing "except me" which sowed the seeds for the whole science fiction plot and seemed to allude at some kind of coming reconciliation. This omission retroactively puts into question the legitimacy of Tak's story within the frame narrative. The "except me" which promised to close the temporal loop of desire and loss is revealed as an impossibility, and Tak is revealed as an unreliable narrator through this final 're-write' of the 2046/7 story. The broken cycle of repetition, substitution,

and disappearance however still leaves us with a suggestion, if not a promise. These superimpositions and poetic connections may not resolve the temporal anxieties at hand, but they do present a process where “some people get away fairly easily... others find that it takes them much longer.” Chow’s ‘2046’ fails to live up to the promise of returning what was lost, but it does seem to provide a process of getting to terms with this loss (or giving up the desire towards the unattainable object), a path that is walked through highly uneven and subjective temporalities.

The secret in a mode of repetitive storytelling: the ‘tree hole’

As we have just seen in the repetition of Faye Wong’s gaze, *2046* is keen to mobilize intertextuality as a time machine which ties together not just Wong’s oeuvre to that point, but also invites speculation in the form of further layers which may be projected onto the superimposition of temporalities. The second repeated story of *2046*, on which this section focuses, also moves as a thread through and beyond the text. This story originates in the previous film *In the Mood for Love* to which *2046* is something of a loose sequel. In the final scene of that film, Chow Mo-wan travels to Angkor Wat where, under the gaze of a Buddhist monk, he whispers something into a hole between the temple walls. He performs a ritual which he described earlier in the film as such:

In the old days, if someone had a secret they didn’t want to share... you know what they did? They went up a mountain, found a tree, carved a hole in it, and whispered the secret into the hole. Then they covered it with mud, and the secret will never be known to anyone.

This hole then serves as a medium that can satisfy one’s urge to tell a secret, but without the repercussions of another’s knowledge. The ritual is an act of speaking which is at the same time an act of concealment, a non-speaking which intends to remove the secret from the flow of time and places it in an unknown condition of suspended non-circulation.

The concept of this hole seems to adapt the Greek legend of King Midas, in which a secret is buried in a hole where reeds subsequently shoot up, who then betray the secret by whispering it into the wind (Ovid 172-193). At the same time, the ritual becomes placed in the centuries-old ruins of Angkor Wat, freely mixing up different ‘ancient’ stories and traditions. Another point of reference, as Stephen Teo identifies, is Dazai Osamu’s novel *The Setting Sun* (1947), in which a character leaves behind a suicide note for his sister, confessing a forbidden love. The sister has her own secret love affair, and Dazai’s ongoing theme of keeping secrets clearly resonates in Wong’s trilogy. As in the suicide note, the act of writing can also function as a whispering of secrets: Lau Yichang’s writer protagonist infuses his own experiences and longings into his work, as does Chow Mo-wan in the films. Genre fiction may then also function as a tree hole – although it may be read by many, the secrets enclosed are abstracted to a point where direct autobiographical linkages remain obscure. The sense of longing and loss are, however, palpable on the page and the screen.

As these diverse references indicate, the tree hole and the larger theme of (non)circulation of secrets seems to produce an imagination of a cosmopolitan temporality, extending from Hong Kong, but which operates separately from the integrated time of world capitalism, even if it develops alongside its flows. Wong’s cinema, starting with *Days of Being Wild*, constantly shifts along the migration connections of a larger Sinophone world, between Southeast Asia, California, and Argentina. These movements resonate not just with the question of Hong Kong’s “borrowed time, borrowed place” which is often defined negatively (through extraterritoriality, future and past, rather than what is presently here), but also with efforts by other transnational writers, artists, and filmmakers to locate Hong Kong in its cosmopolitanism and place it on a temporal trajectory towards the world rather than inwards (localism or nationalism).³³ The films resist straightforward allegory, or commentary

³³ In the present day, examples include the search for a ‘future tense’ in a shared vocabulary of liberalism and democracy towards London, Washington, Taiwan, Vancouver; as well as shared cosmopolitanisms of resistance towards Ukraine, Chile, Catalonia, and Thailand. At the same time, different mythical or cosmopolitan pasts are excavated or reinterpreted: Bruce Lee, Lo Ting 盧亭, or the aesthetics of neon lights.

on the material conditions of migration, but attempt to open up connections elsewhere and elsewhere. Their web of increasingly obscure linkages (*2046*'s narrative is for many Wong's most difficult to grasp), could be read as something of an insurance against the inevitable loss of a fragile present. Wong's Hong Kong appears as a lover who will certainly be lost, so emotions are invested elsewhere to pre-empt the pain of separation.

In this pathological reading, the films (as tree holes) work along the temporal logic of 'anticipatory nostalgia' as described by Rojas before. However, where nostalgia conjures images of a kind of passive affliction, these films (and particularly *2046*) mobilize such obsessions with memory and their consequences under the condition of suspended time (repetition and substitution) to open up temporalities which are right in front of us. If read as a contemplation on Hong Kong, the film finds the answers to its anxieties not in space but in time, locating the city not within a physical place or document which are constantly remade, redeveloped, and rewritten – but in these exact processes of storytelling and superimposition which produce Hong Kong-as-circulation, as-transition, as-translation.

The tree hole functions akin to the 2047 train as a story that gathers layers of meaning through the temporal logics of superimposition and ventriloquism. As with that story, it is repeated by different characters in different languages: the Japanese traveller shares it in voice-over at the beginning of the film, and later tells it to the android he falls in love with. Moments after that last retelling, one android (Carina Lau), in Cantonese, again shares this story to Faye Wong's android – although the complete desynchronization between the characters' lips and the roboticized voice makes the sound's source nearly impossible to identify. The android plays a cruel game with the traveller whereby she shapes her hand into a hole for him to whisper in – but she retracts every time he attempts to do so. Ultimately, he breaks down and reveals his secret to everyone on the train: he tells Wong's and Lau's androids as well as the train conductor: "leave with me." This compulsive confession repeats the longing for So Laizan in *In the Mood for Love* (where Chow, leaving to Singapore, asks "if I had one more ticket, would you go with me?") to the point where it has completely lost its value. *2046*'s tree hole, just as the reeds in the myth of King Midas, whispers its secret for

anyone to hear. The ritual, which at first seems to express an intention of hiding, ironically turns out to be one of storytelling, in order to process one's desires through externalization.

This repetition of the traveller's question of course mirrors Chow Mo-wan's repeated advances to the many women who stand in for So Laizan. The revealed secret is somewhat disappointing in the sense that it turns out to be simply a desperate proposal. If this central meaning of *2046* turns out to be vacuous, what does this mean if we once again think with the film as a document of Hong Kong history? Vivian Lee argues that, even though Wong's films have been praised for their careful and convincing reconstruction of 1960s Hong Kong, his trilogy set in this era presents a purposefully artificial image and narrative which emphasises an infidelity towards memory and history, critically mobilizing nostalgia to question its object:

Wong's films introduce a metatextual, "second order" nostalgia: as if in a play-within-the play, Wong skillfully evokes a tantalizing nostalgic "mood" that refers less to an actual past than an illusive/elusive "pastness" that history does not offer. The inter-referentiality and self-conscious artificiality of nostalgia, it follows, open up a space for a critique of the nostalgic itself. (Lee 379)

The nostalgic, and its associated quest for authenticity, fuels the repetitive cycles around *2046*'s protagonist. With the disappointing answer at the centre of this spiral, the film contradicts any historical truth claims that could be ascribed to it, and reveals that it is nothing more than what it is. Rather than closing in on a nihilistic stance toward history, this move is potentially liberating. The storyline of the 'tree hole' has indeed been recognized as such by contemporary Chinese internet cultures, where this term (樹洞) was adopted in the 2010s in both the Mainland and Hong Kong as a practice of externalizing anxieties through anonymous confession – users may look to online forums and dating sites to find a tree hole and spill their troubles.³⁴ The idea was also adapted during Hong Kong's 2019 protests, when one user started a project of collecting anonymous thoughts by those from the Mainland who are

³⁴ E.g. "树洞"微博备受网友追捧 代价最小的"泄密"方式 (2013)
<<http://media.people.com.cn/n/2013/0326/c40606-20912600.html>>.

sympathetic, but feel unable to share their thoughts openly.³⁵ The tree hole then becomes a site for cross-border solidarity, where a shared trouble of verbalizing anxieties in the face of uncertain futures can be opened up. As in *2046*, the secret here functions not as the answer to the socio-political issues to which it is tied, but merely voices unspeakable thoughts and impossible desires. The secret's author and its veracity are also unverifiable in these examples, shielded here not through layered performances of ventriloquism but through the anonymity afforded by these online media.

The tree hole, which in *In the Mood for Love* only appears in a drunken conversation and its mysterious ending, extends into a central theme of *2046*, where it is visualized as a science fiction device in line with the metallic 1960s aesthetic of the train and the android (as discussed earlier, see fig. 4.1). This pitch-black hole, while it may be easily read through a sexual or psychoanalytic lens (the opening shot of the film retracts from this darkness, while the film's ending thrusts back into it), also resembles something akin to a gramophone as Audrey Yue recognizes (167). This resemblance makes media-archaeological sense as it works alongside the other retro science fiction technologies in the film's train sequences, which establish the futuristic train as a specifically 1960s imagination. On the other hand, the recording and broadcasting function of such a device literally amplifies the paradox behind the function of the tree hole: it circulates what it is supposed to hide, and the secret is transformed into a kind of storytelling which involves not-speaking as much as speaking. This narrative mode of storytelling through the fluid repetition of secrets is what enables such creative adaptations as the online tree hole as well as the reimagined train to 2046 in *Sinofuturism*. The overlapping stories which tie together Wong's oeuvre up to *2046* follow a chain of repetition and substitution almost akin to the Ship of Theseus, the thought experiment in which elements of a structure are replaced in a continuous reconstruction that favours a continuity of form over authentic essence. If the circulation of stories here enables

³⁵ Tao, Anthony. (2019) "'Tree Hole': Where mainland Chinese confess their support for the Hong Kong protests." <<https://supchina.com/2019/12/05/tree-hole-mainland-chinese-confess-support-hong-kong-protesters/>>.

certain questions of identity (as a process of memory), then inauthentic repetition is found at the heart of identity rather than forming an external threat to it.

The repetition of stories in Wong produce a kind of mythology that could be read as a counter-history; although never in the sense of explicitly challenging ‘official’ historical narratives or providing conflicting accounts. Rather, this mythology works through the essentialisms, binaries and clichés that often overdetermine the discourses on Hong Kong’s historical situation. The too-often repeated languages of in-betweenness, disappearance, and suspended time – when examined through their affective temporality, provide creative openings and questions: how may waiting and suspension conversely produce changes and substitutions? Where do the traces of a disappearance end up?

To understand these stories in a framework of inauthentic repetition aimed at overcoming binaries, we return to Abbas, who writes of Wong’s work exactly as a “cinema of repetition.” In these films, he writes, “characters repeat stories – in all their inchoateness and with the lineaments of ungratified desire clinging to them – not because they do not want to give an explanation for them, but because they cannot do so” (Abbas 116). This repetition through inability (clearly seen in the unresolved stories which linger around in *2046*) reveals for Abbas a “crisis in experience,” one not directly caused by a historical trauma or violence, but by “minute and surreptitious changes in the everyday space of the city, together with correlative changes in the affective life of its inhabitants” (117). The delicate attachment to questions of history in Wong is described elegantly here by Abbas:

In film after film it is when a relation or a situation repeats itself that we catch a glimpse of how the historical grids and co-ordinates that underpin it have changed. In other words, it is by *not changing the text* but by repeating it that Wong introduces historical complexity and multiplicity of meaning into social and personal relationships. (Abbas 118, emphasis in original)

It is exactly this “not-changing” which becomes most significant in *2046*, as a film about the question of suspended time. This has become clear in the reading of the two stories of the tree hole and the train, as they repeat and circulate through different voices. Each repetition examined here produces changes and disappearances which, paradoxically, accumulate into a

superimposition of temporal layers in which progress beyond the condition of stasis seems impossible. *2046* thus reproduces a structure of feeling of suspended time where waiting produces change and vice versa. When these temporal directions can change course at any instant, what is left, at least, are stories, which may resonate to unexpected places and times. It is by self-reflectively reproducing these processes of storytelling, that *2046* can help us make sense of the temporal distortions which make the palimpsest that is the “Hong Kong story” so difficult to unravel.

From suspension to circulation

The analysis in this chapter has focused on the anachronistic re-telling of histories performed by *2046*, and enabled beyond the film text itself. We have seen that the film mobilizes stories and secrets as an open-ended structure of circulation, which allows textual elements from unexpected times and story-worlds to be woven together without being subsumed under a clear chain of cause and effect. The influence of Liu Yichang is palpable here – *2046* resonates with *The Drunkard* in its protagonist-focused time of stream-of-consciousness. The film produces what Hsiu-Chuang Deppman calls an “abstract adaptation” of Liu, in a reading of *In the Mood for Love* vis-à-vis *Intersection*, where she describes this as “a style that demotes the Aristotelian elements but creates a new theoretical dialogue about how film and literature can intersect to reproduce the aesthetic resonances and social preoccupations of specific historical contexts” (Deppman 101). The context of a 1960s Hong Kong novel and its techniques responding to the specific historical conditions of that moment clearly resonate in this early post-Handover film. *The Drunkard*’s reflections on genre writing – between literary, sensational, and erotic – further find their way into *2046*’s frame narrative and science fiction story, in which we have seen how a layered set of writing and speaking attempts to process unresolvable feelings through the abstracting possibilities of genre narratives. The feelings at stake here are undeniably concerned – in a sometimes tenuous way – with the future of Hong Kong (clearly attested by the appearance of Thatcher’s voice during

the credit sequence, promising “50 years of no change”). However, unlike other future-oriented texts such as *Ten Years* (2015) or in a way even Dung Kai-cheung’s *Atlas*, it does not attempt to give us any tangible images of what is to come. Its images of the future rail network shift around in vague superimpositions, and the voices telling its stories turn out to be unreliable.

2046 inhabits its genres only to explicitly turn away from them, making its temporal disjointedness stick out. This is what brings together the films examined in this dissertation, whose time travels are never ‘merely’ explained by magic (as in fantasy) or technology (science fiction), nor subsumed under a logic of psychological time and contained within the mind of a neurodivergent character. Yet they always work from such genres: *Kaili Blues* leans into a contemporary Chinese cinematic noir aesthetic as well as the long history of “mystical countryside” depictions of Guizhou, while *Mind Game*’s premise relies on a rich ecology of anime franchise genres which it combines and layers in order to explode beyond them. Such an engagement with genre, *2046* has here shown, allows the films to continue to produce thinking beyond their historical date of expiry. Because their temporal excursions cannot be subsumed under the genre logics that make them possible, they don’t merely ‘reflect’ the anxieties of their time. Instead, they can continue to help us understand the temporal ripples of history as they develop, through the thought experimentations possible from their specific historical conditions. These conditions constrain – as in the time regimes of international capital, national times of forced synchronization, the “denial of coevalness” which temporally excludes regions and populaces, or the regional post-Cold War fault lines under which divergent temporalities may be subsumed under competing imperial projects. At the same time, these films show that such subsumptions are never complete: beyond what cannot be made, said or shown within these conditions, these cinematic imaginations are able to destabilize the present and work through the constrained clichés of their time.

2046’s context is one in which Hong Kong is more and more integrated into a national Chinese story and timeline, where indeed a vast network of high-speed railways connect the world, compressing geographical time and space, as well as some spaces of

possibility. When 2047 is ‘already here,’ and the *déjà suspendu* is already overtaken by a chain-effect of rapid change, we find ourselves somewhat in the perspective of the Japanese traveller protagonist of Chow’s science fiction story. Just as him, we have “already visited” 2047, and just as him, we are confused whether anything changes there, because “no one has ever come back.” These ‘end times’ are however only the beginning, a ground from which to think how the pasts and futures of Hong Kong (whether local or diaspora) may be constructed through processes of storytelling. *2046* functions thereby as a document, not so much to lock into place something which has already gone, but instead as part of an archiving movement that gathers imagined pasts and futures to produce a Hong Kong that is still coming into being – as Audrey Yue writes, the “potentiality and the possibility of the Hong Kong post-transnational coming community” (173). In the years after *2046*, its future imaginations have become even more salient as the borders and configurations of what is possible have been changing, and questions around history have become more and more pre-coded into established political positions. These issues resonate far beyond Hong Kong, as noted by Chu Yiu Wai, who, reflecting on its changing position within a rising China, once again locates the city in the future tense: “Sooner or later, the challenges Hong Kong has been facing will be shared by many other regions in the world” (22).

From hindsight, *2046* as a belated text on Hong Kong adopts the circular logics of repetition and substitution (in the more specific forms of superimposition and ventriloquism as we have seen) to find resonances across times and produce a shared experience. Hong Kong has, of course, since colonial times always been a site of exchange and migration. And when socio-political imaginations are frustrated, faced with a future that seems foreclosed, people often find hope in substitution and circulation – looking for futures in other places, or through for example mutual aid networks such as the “yellow economic circle,” where one can still vote with one’s wallet when the ballot box is seen as a lost hope. Just as a “Hong Kong identity” can only be produced out of these processes and movements rather than cultural essentialisms, so does *2046* work as a historical document not in the sense that it can be consulted to demonstrate an accurate image of history, but rather as a story that (for now)

remains alive in a shared world of images, sayings, and whispers, where the feelings elicited by the mention of a “bird with no feet” or a “tree hole” can be readily understood. Just as a secret only survives if it is talked about, and only dies with its last carrier (or when the desire for its contents wanes), so will these imaginations of longings and losses continue to live, as long as we keep critically seeing, telling, and writing the Hong Kong story.

Conclusion: Wayward time travel as intermedial mode



Fig. 5.1 Animated trains in *Peppermint Candy* and *Kaili Blues* (top), *Mind Game* and *2046* (bottom)

Trains and their tracks: they appear at key moments in the films discussed in this thesis, sometimes suddenly, in a way that in each case draws attention to their animation and thus on the workings of cinematic time that rely on a hidden contradiction between stasis (photographic instant) and movement (intermittent projection). Between the animation stills juxtaposed above, *Mind Game* as an all-animated feature has been discussed most extensively in this regard, but each of the ‘wayward time travel’ films embraces animation to emphasize such a contradiction of continuity. *2046* renders science-fiction style computer-generated imagery of its future train network as interludes between its romantic plots, and *Kaili Blues* presents two unexpected moments of train animation: the aforementioned reversing clock, as well as a flipped projection (pictured here) of a train inside the protagonist’s house, that

inexplicably appears over the bed while two men discuss the ‘abduction’ of Weiwei that will soon set off the film’s main plot and Chen’s time travels.

Returning to the very first image above, we see *Peppermint Candy*’s train, which in the interludes between the fatal scenes of the protagonist’s life, moves backwards over the tracks. Is this animation, or simply reversed footage? The way these images are presented to us, over time, is significant here. Only after a few interludes, more than half an hour into the film, we slowly start to realize their reversed nature: when at first the track is only lined with relatively static or cyclically moving objects (walls and tree branches), a first subtle hint of the direction of time appears when blossoms fall upwards into tree branches at the sides of the frame, while a later interlude removes any doubt by placing the tracks side-by-side with a highway on which a backwards driving car accompanies us. This slowly revealed temporal inversion then functions similarly to the slowly expanding long take revealed to the audience in *Kaili Blues*; *Mind Game*’s growing supercut of worlds that consist of elements between different levels of photography, sketching, and digital geometry; as well as the stuttered movement of step printing in *2046*. Each of these techniques push the boundaries of cinema’s mechanics as a time-based medium while they bring us into the psychological interiority of a time-sick protagonist.

These techniques demonstrate how both animated and live-action cinema similarly produce an illusion of movement out of stillness. The famous description of the cinematic apparatus by psychoanalytical film critic Jean-Louis Baudry might as well be repurposed for animation in this regard:

Thus on the technical level the question becomes one of the adoption of a very small difference between images, such that each image, in consequence of an organic factor, is rendered incapable of being seen as such. In this sense we could say that film - and perhaps in this respect it is exemplary - lives on the denial of difference: the difference necessary for it to live, but it lives on its negation. This is indeed the paradox that emerges if we look directly at a strip of processed film: adjacent images are almost exactly repeated, their divergence being verifiable only by comparison of images at a sufficient distance from each other. (Baudry 42)

The source of these movements-through-difference seems to diverge between the cases of live-action cinema and animation: in the case of the first, we are of course dealing with a re-constituted movement – the projection *brings back* “what would seem like instants of time or slices from ‘reality’ (but always a reality already worked upon, elaborated, selected)” (ibid). However, animation’s movements are also often a *restoration* of a pre-existing set of differences: it often uses rotoscoping (tracing movements from filmed footage) or other motion tracking technologies. In the examples above, ‘cinema’ and ‘animation’ emerge as modes of different relation to realism, within a shared medium that has the uncanny ability of reproducing moments that happened before. Although these reproduced moments constitute realities “already worked upon,” they do present experiences of time that in many ways feel real.

While films like *Mind Game* and *Peppermint Candy* might seem a world apart in terms of mood, style, and audience; the analyses in this thesis demonstrate how ‘wayward time travel’ emerges as a shared mode between art cinema and the more fast paced narratives found in animation or what in the Chinese context has been called “net-born generation cinema” (Liu 882) such as the *Lee’s Adventure* online animation that was subsequently adapted into a feature film – forming the bridging link with more pop culture approaches to nonlinear storytelling introduced in the beginning of the thesis. One of the main discoveries that this comparative analysis presents is the common narrative of failed masculinity which signals a shared response to history across these genres that are not commonly read together. They all try to navigate a set of modern conditions which in different contexts of contemporary East Asia produce a limitation of expressing feelings and an overwhelming presence of historical structures which the protagonists’ time travels aim to escape. These films’ meandering, aimless nature make them more niche than most of the ‘time travel’ narratives introduced at the start of the thesis, yet these films also have large transnational audiences – both from within film festival circuit as well as from more online-driven cult cinema communities. Their experimental mode coupled with an empathetic inward-looking focus seems to resonate across borders, and they each stand out – appearing at a specific

historical junction – rather than forming as a sustained (sub)genre. How they belong to these respective historical moments has been the focus of the chapters of this thesis, which have juxtaposed two already well-established and thoroughly analysed films (*Peppermint Candy* and *2046*) with a set of more recent films that have not yet garnered as much scholarship, as well as animated films (*Mind Game* and *Lee's Adventures*) which have not been brought in conversation with these more serious arthouse films before.

Their bridging between cinema and animation is not the only way in which these films have been read as inter-media stories. They also reference the logic of digital media in their construction of experimental film times, and incorporate media outside of 'cinema proper' to keep the medium relevant in contemporary media contexts. The return to previous moments of the protagonists' past in *Peppermint Candy* for example employs a similar structure and branching rails metaphor as video game's branching narrative – even this is not explicitly intended or acknowledged. *Kaili Blues*'s wandering point-of-view camera long take similarly shows great affinity with the world of first person role-playing videogames, which also allow for a seamless immersive experience that stitch together the many times underpinning the non-linearly generated world that the player explores. We also saw how Wong Kar-wai's films and their mythical story of a 'tree hole' inspired online users to share their secrets and thereby create anonymous public time capsules – an example of how cinema reversely shows its capability to generate internet culture phenomena.

The encounters between cinema and 'new' media in these cases echo earlier film histories of media transformation. Bao Weihong's discussion of the coming-together of film and theatre in a 1940 screening of *Mulan Joins the Army* in the wartime Chinese capital of Chongqing is a useful point of comparison here. During this screening, a group of agitators in a planned effort climbed the stage and denounced the film based on its producers' collaboration with the Japanese, after which the audience became enraged and burned the film reels outside the theatre. This interruption of cinema by theatre on the one hand turned away the audience's gaze from the screen and thereby revealed "the mechanism, or *dispositif*, of the classical viewing situation of cinema" – but this bringing together of seemingly opposed

media did something more: “what was staged was not a simple media competition that reified medium borders, executed in an act of ‘medium violence,’ but something that changed conceptions and practices of cinema and theater, through which a new connection between them was forged” (Bao 3). What is useful in this comparison is that it shows how such encounters between media form the historical basis for new viewing modes, which in the 1940s Chinese cinema was one of participation and agitation, and in the post-1990s context discussed here heralds a return of viewer participation along very different lines. The fragmented, reversing, and branching modes of the DVD player, videogames, and social media in this case interrupt cinema at the same time as the medium gleans from the possibilities of temporal return and repetitions offered by their mechanisms.

At the same time as it appears as an infusion of new technologies, the mode of wayward time travel functions as a returning of the roots of cinema as a ‘time machine.’ Both cinema and time machine were arguably ‘invented’ at the same time: in 1895, at the first public screening in Le Salon Indien du Grand Café in Paris, and in H.G. Well’s writing of *The Time Machine*. In her book *The Emergence of Cinematic Time*, Mary Ann Doane discusses another time travelling story that appeared around the same time, which revolves around a man who sees many faraway and ancient wonders, dances, and battles through the eye holes of kinoscopes in a dark room, and then mysteriously encounters a man who claims to ‘have been there’ – at these impossibly distant times and places. This story, appearing during this time of early cinema in which its reconstitution of movement was still new and constituted a spectacle in itself, connects this cinema’s viewing situation, the temporality of spectatorship, and the ability of cinema to inhabit ‘other times’:

The protagonist's viewing of these filmed records of other times and other places occurs in a placeless and timeless space that resembles in many ways ... the cinema theaters of a much later period. ... The story conjoins many of the motifs associated with the emerging cinema and its technological promise to capture time: immortality, the denial of the radical finitude of the human body, access to other temporalities, and the issue of the archivability of time. The stories [within the kinoscope viewing boxes], unlike the space of their projection, are all familiar, and they reinscribe the recognizable tropes of orientalism, racism, and imperialism essential to the nineteenth-century colonialist imperative to conquer other times, other spaces. (Doane 2)

The films discussed in this thesis reveal the continued relevance of this promise, born out of an imperialist history, at the same time as they try to complicate such a conquering of other times and spaces through their derailment of cinematic time. Rather than imagining a centre from which other times are visited, wayward time travel films position themselves as peripheral and local, as can be heard in their accents and dialects – the strong Beijing accent in *Lee's Adventures*, the Guizhou Mandarin of *Kaili Blues*, *Mind Game*'s Osaka inflections, and the mix of Cantonese, Mandarin, Shanghainese and Japanese in Wong Kar-wai's cinematic universe. This thesis has in each case taken such locally grounded voices and their own positioning as most imperative, to discover their shared experience of inhabiting such 'other' times, *behind* or *ahead* of the normative structures imposed by historical formations of the nation state, empire, and the transnational synchronization produced by capital.

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