

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

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.