The Hole: Diasporic Cinema and the Ontology of Absence

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In his seminal work *Entertainment and Utopia*, Richard Dyer proposes that the classical Hollywood musical is essentially a compensatory genre: one that recovers (in both representational and non-representational forms) “real needs created by real inadequacies in society” (Dyer 25). Tsai Ming-liang’s *The Hole* (1999), although not a musical in any traditional sense, makes use of this generic syntax in the way it externalizes the material and psychological impoverishments of its characters. Tsai fashions an alternating binary of parodic masquerade and desolate elegy, where fatalistic naturalism coexists with the fanciful and the absurd. The eponymous hole, through which various bodily fluids, appendages and insects emerge, acts as a kind of mediator for the film’s interpretation of human identity, of which national affiliation is but only part. Moreover, Tsai’s status as a diasporic Chinese and as an auteur whose stylistic and thematic concerns consistently reflect upon marginality, also pose interesting dilemmas about how to address cultural history: both as a collective ideology and as an epistolary formulation.

In this sense, although the musical sequences introduce, as Amy Herzog suggests, “a profound discontinuity into the chronological flow of the film” (264), they are not necessarily radically out of place in a film about the contradictions of visibility. Contrasting bodily excess, in both its spectacularized and degraded forms, with a minimalist, almost ethnographic style, *The Hole* explicitly thematizes the disparity between self and other, a struggle that can easily be encapsulated in the ontology of exile cinema. At the same time, the film elides the realist notion of psychological depth: its characters are archetypically named “the man upstairs” and “the woman downstairs”, a narrative strategy that emphasizes their anonymity and affective displacement from greater society. Their lives, as displayed by Tsai, are composed entirely of mundane routines (sleeping, going to the bathroom, putting on face cream) shot with a static, irrepressible camera.

These telling contrasts reveal many of the contradictions inherent in both the musical form and (being transnational, popular culture products) within stable discourses of national identity. Tsai, an ethnic Chinese born in Malaysia¹, and operating out of Taiwan, occupies an ambiguous position in regards to national affiliation; a factor that is reflected in the fraught and often contradictory relationship he shares with the Taiwanese government.² His work is historically and stylistically grouped within the Taiwanese New Cinema, a movement that particularly concerned itself with reconceptualizations of national history and that initiated dialogues concerning cultural essentialism and the treatment of minority peoples. However, Tsai’s films situate themselves amongst a more detached, contemporary historiography: one that demonstrates the liminality or transience of urban spaces.

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¹ Technically, Tsai originates from Sarawak, a British colonial property that was incorporated into the Malaysian Foundation in 1965. This factor, of course, adds another complication to the task of deriving his heritage and further obfuscates how that heritage operates in his work.

² Tsai’s situation exemplifies the typical paradox of “national cinema’s” relationship to the state: despite the KMT’s objections to his representation of Taiwan, the national exposure and acclaim that his work has received (especially in Europe) signifies a certain level of cultural prestige.
The film depicts a Taipei swallowed by consumerist detritus and urban sprawl, the apartment complexes coated in omnipresent rain and the populace withering away in the throws of an epidemic. However, these features do not simply point to a master narrative of globalization, assimilation and post-modern media confluence. What *The Hole* proposes as a challenge to many conceptions of world cinema is its operation primarily on the level of non-representational signs, rather than culturally-articulated or historically-encoded representational signs. This too, is related to the film’s generic use of musical elements, which function primarily on the level of affect and barely articulated desire.

In this sense, despite the musical’s seeming investment in ideological recuperation and narrative cathexis, the genre is capable of producing profoundly dissonant texts: ones that acknowledge the symbolic (or perhaps, in this case geographic) distance between material reality and the fetishized object of desire. For all musicals, even the most reductively conventional, are preoccupied with the dialectics of plenitude and absence, bolstered as they are by an aspiration towards wholeness, by a concretization of the past and present states of being. According to Hamid Naficy, this phenomenon is also indicative of diasporic migrancy: of the cinema created by individuals who have been simultaneously hybridized and negated by their gradual removal from their homeland. As Tsai Ming-liang has said about his experiences as a diasporic Chinese, “I feel I belong neither to Taiwan nor to Malaysia. In a sense, I can go anywhere I want and fit in, but I never feel that sense of belonging” (Huang 2).

Here is where the conceptualization of the musical, of Dyer’s formulation of lack and compensation, intersects with increasingly deterritorialized and interstitial conceptions of national identity. The tensions implied here, informed as they are by the post-modern deterioration of stable classifications and the introduction of performativity, are perhaps inherently reflective of hyper-connected global culture. At the same time, one must be careful not to de-historicize the communal elements of nationalism: for whether or not national allegiance can be easily delineated, the affective conceit of “belonging” to a particular group continues to have repercussions, especially for those excluded from its borders. Identity may be essentially fluid, and the borders are probably socially or culturally constructed, but neither of these propositions addresses how the individual contends with these systems.

One useful way of examining marginality is through the pre-Oedipal theories of defilement formulations of Julia Kristeva. According to Kristeva, abjection stems from a virulent disavowal of the maternal influence, a rejection that results in the amniotic fluids, or other remembrances of the womb, being characterized as repulsive or monstrous. Thus, in order to form an individual identity, the child must cast off the residue of her place of origin, thereby permitting the association of defilement with her former place of symbiosis with the mother. Mimetically approaching broader social theory, the feminine represents subjugation or marginality, abjection being the status of those without a space in dominant society. The porous hole that connects The Man and The Woman’s respective apartments serves the narrative function of externalizing this abjection: trapped inside by torrential downpour and (implicitly) by their economic impoverishment, it becomes a site of mutual antagonism and self doubt.

Moreover, this scenario mirrors that of the diasporic condition: of existing as a perpetual stranger, yet continuing to be cathected to the homeland. Avoiding a facile analogy that would
tie the literal hole in the film to various dialectical pronouncements: male/female, public/private, individual/society, it would suffice to say that the film’s disinterest in its symbolic status indicates an effacement of binary categorizations on the whole. If the hole achieves representational status, it is as a problematization of identity, a fissure if you will. It is an absent space, one that is continually re-opened, much like the Kristevan image of an open wound. At the same time, it is also a measurable presence, one that, like Yang’s flashy costumes and clunky choreography, is almost an overdetermined presence. It is, in a sense, irrepresible: it makes what is generally invisible (fear of contagion, sexual frustration, urban anomie) visible.

One of the approaches that Tsai uses to enforce this visibility is the exaggeration and luxurious poverty of camp. Perhaps aping strategies utilized by gay culture, Tsai treats musical sequences as bicameral sites of resistance and pleasure, basking in the refutation of the real and the reconfiguration of hierarchal order. Susan Sontag, in her seminal article on the subject, proposes that “the essence of camp is its love of the unnatural: of artifice and exaggeration” (275) and that “camp taste is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation, not judgement” (291). It represents, as a style of viewing, both the aestheticist “theatricalization of experience” (Sontag 286) and a humanistic sympathy for the marginal, the epicene and the invisible. Fakery becomes a kind of survival mechanism, a means of combating or ridiculing the banal oppressiveness of everyday life.

Moreover, camp is also a phenomenon of “the age of reproduction,” an attribute reflected in its extensive affection for popular culture relics and simulacric kitsch. The Hole’s usage of archaic, primarily American cultural motifs (girl groups, greasers, various sartorial concoctions featuring feathers) in tandem with Chang’s music produces a national hybrid, one that speaks in Mandarin with an American cadence. Apart from providing a fantasy of capitalistic abundance, as well as a garish sexuality that seems to be denied to the characters elsewhere, these sequences rely upon a complex matrix of memory and identity. The packaging of pop songs, from their length to their material production to their shallow veneration of dominant modes, points to their inherent disposability. Yet, pop music is also a locus of performance, of playfulness, and metamorphoses. It is a place where authenticity, the nature of the ‘true self’ and with it, the prison of national or minority consciousness, gets tossed to the side.

Caught within an ongoing national discourse between the relative values of art and commerce, Tsai’s works are (regardless of how one determines their national origins) essentially marginal themselves. Kai-Man Chang cites a 1990 survey conducted by Kuang San-Ren stating that, “more than 70 percent of Taiwanese audiences agreed that Taiwanese cinema lacked attractive stories and lucid narratives, and more than 80 percent believed that Hollywood movies were of better quality than their Taiwanese counterparts” (Chang 46). Although it is probable that Tsai’s work, both by the nature of his content and in its expression, would have a limited audience, the tone of Kuang’s poll assumes that this is a detrimental characteristic. Why must the question be organized around the binary terms of the good object (narrative entertainment) and the bad object (experimental art)?

Ultimately, what both excessively post-structuralist theories (negate the national) and excessively ideological theories (over-value the national) have in common is their neglect of affective subtleties and the interstices of identity. Pastiche (such as that on display in The Hole)
is not radically anti-hierarchal nor entirely ignorant of historicity. Perhaps it has become part of our means of parcelling together the world, of recognizing that there are subcultures within minorities within dominant structures; and that perhaps a coherent image of all these sites cannot be composed. There will always be a degree of indeterminacy, of ideological confusion and of geographical limitation. This is the ontology of absence: the recognition that with films, just as with people, there may always be a phenomenological gap that cannot be breached. The Hole confronts its audience with this proposition, that the nation is not concrete, or perhaps even particularly relevant. Yet, as in the classical musical, the notion of community, of a locus of shared experience continues to be a powerful one. By the conclusion of The Hole, both protagonists have been tormented by disintegrating private environments, by the realization of their own helplessness. If the end depicts a community, an “imagined community” if you will, it is one where inherent lack has been diminished, but will never be eradicated.
Works Cited


Films Cited