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Distance and proximity: the spectatorship of trauma and film viewing in postmillennial Hong Kong

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ABSTRACT

We are all spectators of the times to varying extents. With the commencement of the twenty-first century, our spectator experience began to transform, becoming more scattered, divergent, and unsettled in response to technological advancement and the decline of consensus around social values, cultural meanings, and political agendas in the face of changes. In post-handover Hong Kong, a breach of meaning has been cumulatively caused by divided opinions on priorities (e.g. economic, democratic) and intensified by the contested narratives around history, identity, and reality. In the aftermath of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement, a discursive construction of authority and legitimation has taken place in legislative affairs, a renewed school curriculum, and official speeches, among other organized patterns of action. Against this backdrop, this paper will focus on the spectatorship of trauma that has been generated by community screenings and documentary filmmaking. Two case studies will be presented in terms of their distance (distant vis-à-vis immersive) from the epicentre of these traumatic events. The first case study will explore the spectatorship of visual trauma, in which authoritarian experiences were transmitted through social movement-themed documentaries (e.g. Ukraine's *Winter on Fire*) and drama films (e.g. South Korea's *1987* and *A Taxi Driver*) that gained popularity and stirred up noise in Hong Kong in the lead-up to 2019. The second case study will explore traumatic responses through bodily reactions to pain and suffering as captured in post-2019 Hong Kong cinema. On the whole, the paper will demonstrate how viewing experiences embody shared and individualized responses (e.g. resistance, resilience, retreat) and how understanding spectatorship allows us to discern the social sentiments, cultural implications, and affects generated at a particular time.

KEYWORDS Hong Kong cinema; Korean cinema; civil rights movement; diaspora; film circulation; community screening

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Introduction

In the lead-up to its handover, Hong Kong's cultural scene, according to Michael Berry (2008), was enveloped by an 'anticipatory trauma' (p. 367). This widespread phenomenon in literature and cinema has been defined as 'a complex whereby angst and trepidation about the future are projected into catastrophic visions of what is to come, reconfirmed by historical or psychological scars from past traumas' (Berry 2008, p. 367). In a similar vein, in examining Hong Kong's horror and exploitation (or Category III) cinema of the 1980s and 1990s, scholars have proposed various symptomatic readings of the population's insecurity and uncertainty towards the future economy and changes in the political landscape (Stringer 1999, Davis and Yeh 2001, Williams 2002, Willis 2018). On the other side of the same coin, some scholars and critics have viewed comedy-induced laughter as a therapeutic way to 'overcome the shock and the trauma' of the Tiananmen incident in the post-1989 era (Li cited Stokes and Hoover 1999, p. 250). Beyond generic categorization, a series of memory-themed films – featuring characters who 'desperately strive to uncover lost memories' and those 'who desperately try to forget persistent memory' – were deemed a response to what Law Wing-sang (2006) called the 'June 4th trauma', the painful memories of which shaped the 'paradoxical formation of Hong Kong's subjectivity' (p. 387). In the anxious countdown to 1997, these interpretations, both symptomatic and allegorical in nature, exposed a negative space that was filled with the repressed, the unconscious, and the dis-appeared. Ackbar Abbas (1997) notably termed Hong Kong culture in 1997 a space of disappearance. Over the years, scholars (Abbas included) have contributed to an academic discourse that has brought to light the cultural representations of Hong Kong that were grounded alongside this 'moment of a crisis', as emphasized by Esther Cheung (2001). The rest is history.

In the immediate post-handover years, the discussion of trauma in relation to Hong Kong was seldom invoked beyond the Tiananmen incident – thus circling back to what Berry (2008) observed as a phenomenon of 'anticipatory trauma' (p. 367). After examining the Musha incident, the Rape of Nanking, the February 28th incident, the Cultural Revolution, and the Tiananmen Square Massacre, Berry (2008) ended his book, *A History of Pain*, with 'Hong Kong 1997' as a coda. As in 2008, he deemed Hong Kong in 1997 'the ultimate deconstruction of the historical site of atrocity' (p. 380), further explaining that,

as the specter of China's cannibalistic past prepared to descend once more, history proved the imagination wrong. Indeed, "nothing happened" in Hong Kong in 1997 – at least, no massive political purges or restaging of the Tiananmen Square Massacre. (p. 380)

In less than a decade's time, Berry may have jumped to a conclusion too soon.

This paper will explore the perception and representation of suffering and pain as traumatic responses that precipitated Hong Kong cinema, which, in turn, pointed to the experience of traumatic events that were often deemed unrepresentable. Against this backdrop, the paper will focus on the spectatorship of trauma that was generated at a distance in a state of anticipatory trauma in the lead-up to 2019, and the epicentre of the trauma that emerged thereafter. The two case studies will respectively focus on the spectatorship of what I call distant trauma – which includes, but is not limited to, anticipatory trauma – in the post-handover years, and the spectatorship generated in post-2019 Hong Kong cinema around the experience of having witnessed or been exposed to trauma. These two case studies are representative of suffering and pain and their distance from the traumatic epicentre. Through an analytical framework informed by contemporary trauma theory, as well as the study of spectatorship, reception, and performativity, my discussion will take into account the reception of pain and the spectatorship of suffering in explaining the relationship between spectators and distant sufferers, which has been constructed by cultural consumption and media transmission (Scarry 1985; Chouliaraki 2006). This spectatorship of trauma, manifested in the intersections between trauma, memory, and narrative, has facilitated a critical reflection on witnessing and standing witness as well as the politics of representation. As there are ‘different positions and contexts of encounters with trauma’ (Kaplan 2005, p. 1), examining the traumatic responses that are embedded in and manifested through the spectatorship of suffering is the key to understanding, or at least getting closer to an understanding of, the elephant in the room.

Too soon: anticipatory trauma and traumatic responses

The relationship between narrative and memory is often invoked in tandem with the representation of, or attempts to represent, trauma of the recent past. This line of inquiry can be found in the scholarship of South Korean cinema and Taiwan cinema, which have respectively drawn on the regions’ colonial past, history of authoritarianism, and the project of democratization in the twentieth century. In the wake of political traumas, scholars have identified the domination of the ‘narrative of post-traumatic recovery and failure’ – which was the case in South Korean cinema during the 1980s and 1990s, with the epicentres tracing back to the Korean War (1950–53) and the Kwangju massacre (1980) (Kim 2011, p. 166). A post-traumatic repetition compulsion was, likewise, observed in Taiwan cinema from the 1980s to the 2000s, in which an orphanage psyche and melodrama aesthetics continued to repress and represent, simultaneously, the psychological wounds across generations (Ma 2015). The goal of attaining empowerment and reconciliation through

cultural production and dissemination in the post-conflict years was reciprocal to the rise of discourse on truth seeking and transitional justice. June Yip (2004), in the context of post-martial law Taiwan, identified the tendency of rewriting national histories and restoring the personal voices that were previously dismissed or suppressed, while Chungmoo Choi (2021) discussed how the possibility of healing historical trauma was entangled with the co-presence of a variety of mixed feelings that were generated from having a guilty conscience, pity, resentment, and nationalism, among others, in South Korean cinema and literature.

It is important to note that the operation of forgetting does not cease and can potentially be turned into a positioning strategy, as dealing with trauma – even in a post-conflict society – involves selective remembering to ensure that ‘memories of the past do not overwhelm the present and the future’ (McGrew cited Choi 2021, xvi). Considering Taiwan’s *Cape No. 7* (Wei Tesheng, 2008), a commercial film hailed as ‘a miracle in the history of Taiwanese cinema’ (Wang 2009, p. 244), the love story between two Taiwanese-Japanese couples in two different generations was seen in the light of an ‘imagined postcolonial community’ (Wang 2012, p. 135), while it also embodied the presence of a split psyche wherein a trauma was ‘repressed and kept alive’ (Ma 2015, p. 16). In the respective regions, a gradual shift in the politics of representation, from the political and national allegory to ‘privatized’ memories (Kim 2011, p. 152) and an autobiographical impulse (Yip 2004, p. 81), was reported, as the trauma in focus was becoming more and more distant in time as well as in the public’s consciousness.

In the early 2020s, Hong Kong is nowhere close to meeting these conditions of development. Even though scholars in the post-handover years have repeatedly called for critical reflections on postcoloniality and the need to undergo decolonization in a bottom-up manner (Lo and Pang 2007, Erni 2010, Chan 2015), the unfinished project has been subject to even more challenges as things stand at the turn of the 2020s. Following the 2014 Umbrella Movement, the 2019–2020 Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill (Anti-ELAB) Movement, and the 2020 National Security Law (NSL) legislation, the drastic changes in the sociopolitical landscape have contradicted the relief that Berry (2008) once expressed in calling Hong Kong’s condition an ‘anticipatory trauma’. Berry believed that ‘[t]he leap from history to the imaginary’ (p. 383) had been attained in the case of Hong Kong and was the conclusion of what he compiled as the history of pain. Mapping the five stand-alone traumatic events that have taken place in Taiwan and mainland China and placing Hong Kong’s ‘anticipatory trauma’ in the coda, this historiographical approach to trauma revealed the positioning pertinent to the context of its writing during the mid-2010s.

Existing scholarship has also observed the growth of civil society activities in Hong Kong since 2003. With hindsight of what would happen in the

transition from the 2010s to the 2020s, the concept of ‘anticipatory trauma’ was in part built on the subtext that Berry (2008) had detected in the lead-up to the handover. These instances included cinematic representations of Hong Kong under siege, which were expressed in the depiction of the city’s occupation during the Second World War in Ann Hui’s *Love in a Fallen City*, Leung Po Chih’s *Hong Kong 1941*, and the dramatization of violence in John Woo’s *A Better Tomorrow* series (1986, 1987, 1989) and *Bullet in the Head* (1990), among others. The need to address this ‘anticipatory trauma’ is not purely imaginary or a reflection of its actualization but rather a symptom of the unease and ambivalence that have been lingering in the post-handover years. In addition to the up-close encounter with violence of all sorts, the condition of the 2020s is a post-traumatic response to the shock and aftershock caused by the unexpected jump from the imaginary, to borrow Berry’s term, to a raw reality, as well as the de-compartmentation of the past, present, and even the future by the triggering of traumatic memories. In other words, ‘anticipatory trauma’ does not prepare one to mitigate trauma. Because the location and the impact of trauma cannot be neglected, a look at the scholarship of contemporary trauma studies is therefore necessary.

In her seminal book *Unclaimed Experience*, literary scholar Carey Caruth (1996), by extending from Freud, interpreted trauma as ‘a wound of the mind’ – ‘the breach in the mind’s experience of time, self, and the world’ that is ‘experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known and is therefore not available to consciousness until it imposes itself again, repeatedly, in the nightmares and repetitive actions of the survivor’ (p. 4). Although human history has never parted ways with trauma, the association of trauma – originally meaning ‘wound’ or ‘injuries’ – as a psychological condition emerged in Europe in the nineteenth century, a time when war, abuse, and industrial, railway, and road accidents were rampant. By the late twentieth century, trauma theory drew heavily from references to trauma narratives (e.g. the discourse offered by psychoanalysis) in the previous century and to traumatic events (e.g. wars, genocides) in the recent past, which in the 1980s led to the clinical recognition of post-traumatic stress disorder.

The study of trauma and responses to it overlaps in a number of disciplines and domains: in psychology, for example, trauma is understood in various cognitive, behavioural, biological, and neuroscientific terms, among others. In literary and cultural studies, Caruth built on her scholarship by focusing on Freud and Lacan’s writings, de Man’s notion of referentiality, and literary and philosophical texts by Duras, Kant, and Kleist. Caruth’s approach and her emphasis on voice highlighted the role of representation in understanding trauma that was in itself a fragmented experience accessible only by a partial memory. Traumatizing events in the twentieth century that shocked the world, such as the Holocaust and nuclear bombings, would continue to

inform a large body of research, alongside how they were retold and represented in the form of texts, narratives, and testimonial accounts. What I find useful to my discussion in this paper is the spectatorship that is generated by trauma – which consists of not only different ways of seeing, sensitizing, and responding but also different degrees of proximity and distance.

In this regard, literary critic Shoshana Felman and psychoanalyst Dori Laub (1992) explored the acts of witnessing and listening to probe the relationship between narrative and history, art and memory, and speech and survival. The duo is known for having boldly claimed that devastating traumas such as the Holocaust are ‘event[s] without a witness’ (Felman and Laub 1992, p. 75). Under this logic, the crisis of witnessing stemmed from not only the elimination of the witness from the traumatic event in focus but also the unrepresentability of the traumatic experience at the outset. What I want to highlight, moreover, is Felman and Laub’s (1992) emphasis – not necessarily as a resolution – on the complementary operation of the ‘contextualization of the text’ and ‘textualization of the context’, with a view to minimizing the constrains of perception brought about by pre-existing frames of reference (p. xv). Laub, a survivor of the Holocaust, pointed out this double-bind in the acts of witnessing, testifying, and listening that are entangled with and are always affected by the bodies, voices, and positionings occupied by them on both the conscious and subconscious levels:

The victim’s narrative – the very process of bearing witness to massive trauma – does indeed begin with someone who testifies to an absence, to an event that has not yet come into existence, in spite of the over-whelming and compelling nature of the reality of its occurrence. While historical evidence to the event which constitutes the trauma may be abundant and documents in vast supply, the trauma – as a known event and not simply as an overwhelming shock – has not been truly witnessed yet, not been taken cognizance of. The emergence of the narrative which is being listened to – and heard – is, therefore, the process and the place wherein the cognizance, the “knowing” of the event is given birth to. The listener, therefore, is a party to the creation of knowledge *de novo*. The testimony to the trauma thus includes its hearer, who is, so to speak, the blank screen on which the event comes to be inscribed for the first time. (p. 57)

Regardless of the difficulty or impossibility of accurately articulating or truly understanding trauma, the attempts that form an act or a process can be examined as events themselves. In another work by Felman (2002), *The Juridical Unconscious*, the literary scholar expanded the line of inquiry to the relationship between trauma and law by focusing on trials in which trauma narratives were summoned and by examining how these legal events themselves were witnessed, textualized, and mediatized. One case in point is the trial of war criminal Adolf Eichmann, a high-ranking officer in the leadership of the Nazi regime who was arrested in Argentina. The trial, which took place in Israel’s District Court of Jerusalem in 1961, sparked a

series of events, ranging from judicial processes, media reportage, interviews, and debates inside and outside of court, not only in Israel but in other regions, that bore witness to and passed judgement on other events that involved what the Israeli persecution termed 'crimes against the Jewish people'. In her famous, no less controversial book *Eichmann in Jerusalem*, which was originally published as a series of reports about the trial in *The New Yorker* in 1961, Hannah Arendt (1963), a survivor of the Holocaust and a witness to the hearings, criticized the court's framing of Eichmann's acts as 'crimes against the Jewish people' and insisted on the use of the accusation 'totalitarian crimes against humanity' (pp. 275-276). In addition to her term 'banality of evil', Arendt's sharp critiques of the court's emphasis on selected victims rather than the criminal and her accusation of the court's attempt to construct a historical narrative, among others, drew criticism and debate in the years to come. Nonetheless, I want to highlight how Arendt's presence at the trial, the publication of her work, the controversies it sparked, and the intellectual inquiries (such as Felman's) that followed demonstrated the layering effect and the unavoidable framing device embedded in all events and their narration, not only in terms of trauma.

In the study of trauma, complications stem from not only the politics of representation, identity, and memory but also ethics and the frame of reference. Born in 1912 and having joined the Resistance against the Nazis, Jean Améry (1980), in his autobiographical account *At the Mind's Limits: Contemplations by a Survivor on Auschwitz and Its Realities*, originally published in 1966, objected to Arendt's phrase the 'banality of evil' and her reading of Eichmann as a man who committed atrocities but lacked motivation: 'For there is no "banality of evil," and Hannah Arendt, who wrote about it in her Eichmann book, knew the enemy of mankind only from hearsay, saw him only through the glass cage' (p. 25). Améry (1980), who had survived three concentration camps (including Auschwitz), attributed the cause of Arendt's incomprehension to distance and detachment. Not only was his evaluation underlined by a measurement of proximity to the epicentre, but it also revealed the intricate relationship between humans and events:

When an event places the most extreme demands on us, one ought not to speak of banality. For at this point there is no longer any abstraction and never an imaginative power that could even approach its reality [...]. Only in rare moments of life do we truly stand face to face with the event and, with it, reality. (pp. 25-26)

Améry's (1980) rationale implicated human vulnerability, if not subordination, to human-inflicted atrocities and suggested that only the witness of a traumatic event had access to this 'reality'. Améry did not publish his wartime experiences until the 1960s, and in 1978, he committed suicide following the publication of *On Suicide: A Discourse on Voluntary Death*.

One strand of debate around Arendt's criticism of Eichmann's trial led to the question of distance and proximity, alongside Felman and Laub's (1992) inquiries into the crisis of witnessing, which will be explored in this paper. In the following, the first case study will start with the phenomenon in which other people's trauma (e.g. authoritarian experience) was transmitted through cultural representations, including social movement-themed documentaries – such as Ukraine's *Winter on Fire* (Evgeny Afineevsky, 2015) – and drama films – such as South Korea's *1987: When the Day Comes* (Jang Joon-hwan, 2017) and *A Taxi Driver* (Jang Hoon, 2017). These films gained popularity and stirred up noise in Hong Kong, attracting a special form of spectatorship that simultaneously externalized the anticipatory trauma aforementioned and internalized distant suffering to different extents in the lead-up to 2019. This first case study will also provide a significant and necessary basis for understanding post-2019 Hong Kong cinema in the second case study.

Too far: the spectacle of suffering

Considering the social and cultural experiences embedded in the act of viewing, spectatorship in this paper is understood as not only a phenomenon of responses to visual images (media reportage, cultural production), dissemination, and consumption but also the relationships between the spectator, the object, and the context of viewing.

Ukraine's Winter on Fire: shared resilience

On 29 August 2019, the documentary *Winter on Fire* was shown at community screenings that were organized in tens of locales across Hong Kong. Initiated by netizens and with event information disseminated on the LiHKG forum and various Telegram channels, the occasion was called 'Blossom everywhere film screenings'. At this point, the Anti-ELAB Movement had reached its three-month mark. Directed by Evgeny Afineevsky and co-produced by a number of studios based in Ukraine, the United States, and the United Kingdom, the documentary recorded the 93-day civil rights movement that took place in Ukraine from 21 November 2013–23 February 2014, in opposition to the then-pro-Russia Government. Following its premier at the Venice Film Festival and screenings at various international film festivals, the film became available for streaming on Netflix in October 2015. The film went on to garner attention to the resistance movement in Ukraine through its circulation and its Oscar and Emmy award nominations, among others.

A fortnight prior to the screenings in Hong Kong, in mid-August 2019, a netizen approached Director Evgeny Afineevsky on Twitter and asked for his permission to show *Winter on Fire* in public (Twitter, 13 August 2019).

Afineevsky not only replied with a positive response that same day, but also sent an open letter to the people of Hong Kong (Twitter, 13 August 2019). Many rejoiced, as the director had delivered his support for the pro-democracy movement in the city. From the beginning of the Anti-ELAB Movement, the comparison between Ukraine's civil rights movement and Hong Kong's pro-democracy movement in terms of the police-civilian stand-offs and resistance strategies had been widely circulated on the Internet, ranging from screencaps to social media posts and forum discussions. Intriguingly, contrasted with the popularity of the film in 2019-Hong Kong, the Ukrainian revolution did not stir up the same amount of noise in the city as the civil disobedience campaign, the Umbrella Movement, did, which took place from September to December in the same year. This offered a curious case on what Chouliaraki (2006) theorized as the 'spectacle of suffering'.

The spectacle of suffering

The 'spectacle of suffering' propels us to revisit what has been said about witnessing, but in this case, witnessing has two aspects – as a victim witnessing while suffering a traumatic incident and as an onlooker or spectator witnessing a trauma that has been inflicted on others. When Chouliaraki (2006) developed the idea of 'spectacle of suffering', she was addressing the latter – the relationship between the spectator and the sufferer with regards to the questions of 'proximity-distance' and 'watching-acting' (p. 23). An example of this spectatorship is news broadcasts, whereby viewers are confronted with 'distant suffering' through a *mise-en-scène* as well as a narrative of suffering – though identification is not 'guaranteed' due to geographical distances and/or cultural differences. According to Chouliaraki (2006), visual immediacy brings spectators in optic-sensorial and psychological proximity to a distant event as well as the distant sufferers, and the media capturing this suffering, to different degrees, are capable of generating a variety of responses, ranging from pity and contemplative identification to action (e.g. denunciations, protests, donations). Therefore, media reports do play a role in shaping political correctness in public life and producing ethical norms in society. While Chouliaraki's (2006) discussion focused on television, her thesis largely assumed that emotional responses, ranging from empathy to the sentiments of pity, regardless of the intensity and the extent, could be triggered through a person's viewing of such scenes and images.

Considering the transformation of viewing habits over the years, in what follows, my discussion includes screens – particularly, portable screens and make-shift 'screens' (any surface that can be used as a screen) in the context of community screenings – in addition to television screens. Under this logic, the viewing of documentaries such as *Winter on Fire*, in which brutal crackdowns on civil society are shown, can also be considered a

'spectacle of suffering'. Through the transmission of these images, the documentary mediated the spectators' understanding of resistance in Ukraine in 2014 – in the case of Hong Kong, a connectivity was built up despite the distance in time and space, but only in 2019-Hong Kong. The crowd that took in the public screenings of *Winter on Fire* across different districts – hundreds of people, for instance, gathered at the Central Pier to watch the documentary (Lui 2019) – constituted a contemplative spectacle as well as visible spectatorship in a city in which police-civilian clashes had created split opinions, controversies, and a crisis in governance for consecutive months. In less than a month, on 19 September 2019, the documentary would be screened again in the community in different districts and in the June 4th Museum (Wong *et al.* 2019). In this regard, the two aspects of witnessing the aforementioned overlapped in the appearance of this 'spectacle of suffering'.

The 'spectacle of suffering' does not always mobilize the same or even a similar response. In December 2005, the World Trade Organization (WTO) conference took place at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre located in Wan Chai North, Hong Kong Island, along Victoria Harbour. Anti-WTO protesters, mainly consisting of South Korean farmers, opposed the opening of their domestic market to international competition, and their campaign was joined by participants from Indonesia, Thailand, Taiwan, the Philippines, Sri Lanka, and France. During the protester-police clashes, the police deployed pepper spray, tear gas, water cannons, and bean bag rounds and arrested more than 1,000 people. Some of the arrestees, according to an investigative report, 'experienced serious human rights violations during the "round-up" of protestors on Gloucester Road for more than 10 h as well as problems related to their transport to police stations and their groundless detention' (Hong Kong People's Alliance on WTO and Asian Human Rights Commission 2006, no pagination). According to Ip lam-Chong (2005a, 2005b), local mainstream media and the authorities had instilled a negative image of the anti-WTO protesters prior to their actual arrival. By providing a testimony of the diverse protest tactics (including a procession filled with singing and dancing), Ip, a professor of Cultural Studies and a co-founder of an online citizen media outlet, criticized the 'conservative' and 'close-minded' (no pagination) media narrative that stereotyped the protesters as radical militants, without investigating the underlying causes of their contention nor offering reflections on their discourse on globalization. Under these circumstances, filmmaker Kong King Chu produced a valuable record in the documentary *Her Anti WTO* (2006) by following a group of local activists who had joined the 'guest' protester-initiated anti-WTO rallies in their city but were left out of the media spotlight.

Yet, in the time-space of 2005-Hong Kong, most of the population remained mere spectators, if not uninterested bystanders, to the violence and the arrests faced by the anti-WTO protesters – even after a series of

traumatic moments (to the protesters) took place at their doorsteps and the hard-line actions of the authorities had been questioned by critics, human rights concern groups, international news outlets, and public figures, including the then-Bishop of the Hong Kong Catholic Church, Joseph Zen (Hong Kong People's Alliance on WTO and Asian Human Rights Commission 2006, Lo 2006). As Chouliaraki (2006) admitted, 'neither proximity nor distance, in themselves, have to do with the closing of moral distance' (p. 42). Likewise, in 2005, the protests against globalization and the open market hardly resonated with the majority of the population of a city in which its status quo ideology was built on its capitalist system and the rhetoric of the free market. However, the course of events in 2019 confirmed one of the arguments made by Chouliaraki (2006), that connectivity between the spectator and the sufferer could be established under 'particular circumstance and explanatory context' (p. 42).

South Korea's *A taxi driver* and 1987: when the day comes: the spectatorship of suffering

With hindsight, the transforming receptivity of distant suffering should be read symptomatically. Ann Hui's 1982 film *Boat People* is a precedent case. Apart from international recognition by critics, the film's box-office success in the domestic market was interpreted as a result of 'Hong Kong people's long hidden fear of communism' (Cheuk 2008, p. 217). The story, which is set in Vietnam, depicts the life of the local population after the Communist Government takes over the country. Through the camera (eye) of a Japanese journalist (played by George Lam), the film delves into the past lives of those who survived their attempts to escape their war-torn country and would become known as the 'boat people'. While Ann Hui's track record and the production timing suggested that the film was 'honestly a self-reflexive attempt to understand the Vietnamese cultural others within, rather than a self-centered worry about Hong Kong's 1997 anxiety' (Szeto 2010, p. 54), the reception of the film, despite its deviation from the filmmaker's original intent, revealed a structure of feelings associated with the contextual experiences of Hong Kong audiences that watched the film during the Sino-British negotiations and underwent appropriation according to their social reality. In a similar vein, Ching-kiu Chan (2017) argued that cinematic experiences in the post-Umbrella Movement era evinced a critical and affective engagement, with an eye to the growing disappearance of hope for the future. Chan's study – which involved the spectatorships generated by the web fiction-turned-sci fi film *The Midnight After* (Fruit Chan, 2014), the action-crime thriller *Overheard 3* (Alex Mark and Felix Chong, 2015), and the indie film project *Ten Years* (omnibus, 2015) – provided a methodological foundation for my exploration of the intersections

between screening practices (especially self-organized ones), film viewing, and the spectatorships engendered in the mediation and articulation of actual and anticipatory trauma.

Following a series of civil disobedience campaigns in 2014, the popularization of community screenings as an alternate trajectory of film distribution outside the mainstream theatrical circuit was a noteworthy trend that made a bottom-up, community-building impact. While the practice itself is not new, as it had already been employed by cinephiles, video artists, and indie film groups, its large-scale spread, reaching out to conventional filmgoers, took off after the phenomenal screening of the aforementioned *Ten Years*, which imagined a dystopian future in Hong Kong, between 2015 and 2016 (Wu 2018). At the same time, the documentary wave revealed an urge to document and preserve the memories of the city's resistance history (Wu 2022). Intriguingly, some viewers in the local audience found resonance in commercial films that depicted social movements in other places. South Korea's domestic blockbusters *A Taxi Driver* and *1987: When the Day Comes*, which were respectively released in theatres in Hong Kong in 2017 and 2018, were examples of how the reception of a film during its transnational flow was able to reveal the 'dominant interpretations in the society which would affect audiences' as well as 'the cultural and social characteristics of the society itself in relation to a transnational pop culture' (Kim 2009, p. 752).

Based on a real-life incident, *A Taxi Driver* portrays the titular character and a German journalist's trip to Gwangju and their witnessing of the Gwangju Uprising, where pro-democracy protests were brutally cracked down by military forces under the order of the government. Also based on the continued struggles for democracy in South Korea, *1987: When the Day Comes* captured the angst and silence in society in the aftermath of the Gwangju massacre through its re-enactment of the deaths of two student activists, Lee Han-yeol and Park Jong-cheol – one died of torture during an interrogation and the other died of head injuries caused by a tear gas cannister projectile. In this resistance narrative produced during a time in which transitional justice was being sought (Kim 2013), the narration of the two deaths became a trigger for a series of events that ultimately led to the collapse of authoritarian power, which revealed the significance of the two deaths through the remediated act of witnessing via filmmaking and film viewing and embodied the purpose of healing.

On the one hand, the plot demonstrates how audience's emotions can be manipulated in the re-presentation of trauma – a useful tactic in commercial cinema. Towards the end of the story, the film skilfully reveals the subtle causal connections that were plotted narratologically – but not consciously planned as a scheme – between what had been presented as isolated events in earlier parts of the narrative. In doing so, these individual acts

undertaken by the featured characters at different levels – in the government’s office, on the university campus, on the streets, and in households – that eventually led to the nation-wide June Democracy Movement in South Korea, as the ending scene of the film suggests, bestowed significance on the personal as well as the ‘sacrificed’, the ‘traumatized’, and the ‘suppressed’ in revisiting the traumatic past that lingered on to different extents in the collective memory of the living under an authoritarian regime. Moreover, this narrative technique also suggests that the ultimate triumph of the pro-democracy struggles was indebted to the will of the individuals who would then *become* the subjects of the new nation – *vis-à-vis* the viewers of the film, who *were* the subjects of the modern, democratized Korean nation – hence aligning with the mainstream nation-building narrative that was in currency in the situated present of the filmmaker and viewers alike.

While the study of New Korean Cinema and its auteurist trajectories (e.g. the oeuvre of Lee Chang-dong, Kim Ki-duk, and Park Chan-wook) has often been associated with the wounded memories of having lived under an authoritarian regime, and the mediation of traumatic memories in commercial cinema and the popular success of these films – through the drama and the star effects, and hence the spectatorship, evinced – seems to have divulged an urge to restore public consciousness and the silenced voices with an aim to ‘heal’.

Summa: ‘hell is other people’, or not

In the lead-up to 2019, the theatrical releases of *A Taxi Driver* and *1987: When the Day Comes* in Hong Kong stirred up noise in the public sphere and sparked discussions of the city’s own sociopolitical reality, echoing Kang’s (2018) observations of research on Hong Kong audiences’ responses towards Korean cinema:

Hong Kongers who live in this rapidly changing post-colonial society would either find inspirations from post-colonial political struggles in Korea and social problems presented on screen or they would find escape through other entertainment forms. (p. 295)

In 2018, *A Taxi Driver* and *1987: When the Day Comes*, co-joined by Yang Woo-suk’s *The Attorney* (2013), were nicknamed the *jik kyun* 逆權 trilogy by the media and netizens in Hong Kong. The term *jik kyun*, in a legal context, denotes ‘adverse possession’, but in the context of the three social movement-related films the term means something completely different in their connotation of the reverse or overturning of power through resistance and resilience. Under scrutiny, *The Attorney* was translated into *jik kyun daai zong* 逆權大狀 (literally, ‘the power-overturning attorney’) in Hong Kong,

which gave rise to the use of the term *jik kyun*. Considering that *daai zong* in Cantonese has an equivalent meaning of 'attorney', the addition of *jik kyun* put an emphasis on the act of civil rights resistance when the film was introduced to audiences in Hong Kong. This film was also inspired by a real event in 1981, in which over 20 students and educators were arrested and tortured for their book club activities. The story follows the 'coming of age' of the titular character, from a profit-oriented attorney to a human rights lawyer and political activist, after his experiences of injustice while defending students in court. Four years later, *A Taxi Driver* was released in Hong Kong, translated as *jik kyun si gei* 逆權司機 (literally, 'the power-overturning driver'). The word 'taxi' in the original English title was replaced with *jik kyun*. Like *The Attorney*, the translated title – through substitution – emphasized that the titular driver was the one who was challenging the regime. One year later, *1987: When the Day Comes* was translated into *jik kyun gung man* 逆權公民 (literally, 'the power-overturning citizen'). The insertion of the term *gung man*, which means 'citizen', continued the localized nomenclature that highlighted the presence of an individual (attorney, driver, citizen) and a freedom-seeking people.

Furthermore, the renaming of these films was not only informed by the retrospective knowledge of the outcome of the pro-democracy struggle (that *the day* the authoritarian regime collapses did come in South Korea in 1987), but it also introduced an interpretative and contemplative dimension by revisiting human-inflicted trauma, which was otherwise illogical and therefore incomprehensible (and traumatic), with a note of consolation. If the film under domestic circumstances was an attempt to heal the trauma of the past, the explicit indication of the formation of a citizenry in the post-conflict era disclosed an attempt to articulate the transitional discourse on justice, which could, in turn, be regarded as a wilful projection in the context of Hong Kong. With the so-called trilogy ending with the desired outcome (i.e. democratization), this somehow fulfilled what Ching-kiu Chan pointed out as 'a vacuum for hope' (2017, p. 834) for Hong Kong viewers when discussing their cinematic engagement. In this light, the local and the future were 'un-imagined' after the Umbrella Movement because the civil disobedience campaign was often perceived to have 'failed' in yielding the ideal outcome of democratization.

With the differences in the timing of their release and their directorship, the films' localized nomenclature and reception in Hong Kong pertained to a transborder, transtextual affinity that was founded on the cinematic revisualization of the struggles for democracy. This close reading also echoes Yiu-wai Chu's (2015) going against the grain to discern the underlying meanings in the catchphrases and dialogues in the films produced in what he called the SARS New Wave. The market conditions for the SARS New Wave – upon the signing of the Closer Economic Partnership Arrangement between

Hong Kong and mainland authorities in 2003 – facilitated the development of the Hong Kong-China co-production model and created the ‘unpresentable’, such as Hong Kong’s signature crime and gangster genre which was not welcomed by Chinese censors. As the ‘unpresentable’ in Hong Kong culture, which referred to what ‘cannot be presented (or represented) in the existing co-production model’ (Chu 2015, p. 114), had already been looming before 2014, with time reading between the lines and appropriation-as/in-reception became strategies to express the ‘unpresentable’, which included, at first, anticipatory trauma, and, later on, collective trauma in reality.

In this regard, it might be worth mentioning that *A Taxi Driver* was banned from entering the Chinese market, reportedly to avoid any association with the June 4th incident (Rudolph 2017). Nonetheless, this confirmed, by its negative space, another instance of a film’s localizing effect at the end of its reception. In the case of Hong Kong, in addition to their theatrical releases, the films *The Attorney*, *A Taxi Driver*, and *1987: When the Day Comes* were circulated in the form of community screenings before and during the 2019 Anti-ELAB Movement. In the high times of the unprecedented months-long protest over the course of 2019 in Hong Kong, the Taiwanese horror film *Detention* (John Hsu, 2019), adapted from a video game against the backdrop of the White Terror period, attracted the attention of Hong Kong audiences and sparked discussions of Taiwan’s past and Hong Kong’s present in media reports, film views, and netizens’ comments.

The spectatorships revealed in this case study eloquently show how the cinematic representation of suffering and the social memory of one population that had been exposed to the trauma of state violence evoked resonance in an audience located elsewhere.

Too close: bodies in pain in post-2019 Hong Kong cinema

Elaine Scarry (1985) reminded us in her book *Pain in the Body: The Making and Unmaking of the World* that pain per se is an experience and a condition that can neither be shared nor eloquently expressed:

Whatever pain achieves, it achieves in part through its unsharability, and it ensures this unsharability through its resistance to language [...] physical pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it, bringing about an immediate reversion to a state anterior to language, to the sounds and cries a human being makes before language is learned. (p. 6)

Based on literature, artwork, medical case records, verbal records, letters, and events, Scarry (1985) examined the representation of pain through the infliction of violence, such as torture and war, and the creative acts of imagining, verbalizing, and making artifacts. Scarry emphasized that ‘pain does not simply resist language but actively destroys it’. In other words, pain itself

also pertains to a power to destroy. Under this logic, cinema at best serves as a referent or, in Scarry's (1985) term, an 'agency', to describe bodily damage, as no narrator and no character are *in a full body* to transmit the feeling of pain. In addition to what Scarry called the 'language-destroying' power of pain (p. 19), the absence of voice was also suggested, as in extreme cases the agony of the victims is muted by their death. Hence, if any 'affective communication' had taken place, it was built on an imagination of pain and a potential evocation of trauma among the witnesses. While the earlier parts of this paper adopted Caruth's (1996) interpretation of trauma as 'a wound of the mind' (p. 4), Scarry's (1985) thesis, which focused on physical pain, will complement the discussion on proximity and post-traumatic responses in the second part of this paper.

In post-2019 Hong Kong cinema, the portrayal of suffering and pain is worth examining with regards to the attempts to process traumatic memories, whether successfully or not. While Scarry (1985) focused on physical pain, my discussion will take into account not just physical pain but also psychological pain, as psychological pain is capable of inducing bodily effects, including physical pain. Concerning the language-destroying power of pain as per Scarry, it is true that cinematic representations, just like any other forms, are unable to transmit the feeling of pain, but the fact is that pain also requires a body in order to be manifested. In other words, for pain to be expressed as a cultural representation, a performing body is required to externalize the effects of pain. The rationale behind this case study was grounded on another equally important fact: a corporeal body is required in the medium of film. The representation of pain in cinema is not in full as the second-degree response to these representations (e.g. of the viewers, the censors) is expected to generate different spectatorships of suffering and pain.

In 2023, post-2019 Hong Kong cinema has already experienced a few turns in response to the impacts of the enactment of the NSL on 1 July 2020 and the revision of the Film Censorship Ordinance in 2021, among others. In addition to the sociopolitical landscape, another factor was the COVID-19 pandemic that erupted in 2020, during which the authorities ordered commercial theatres in Hong Kong to close three times, each for more than 110 days (Man 2021). In 2021, theatres were again closed for another 48 days (Youngs 2021), and in 2022, theatres remained closed from 7 January to 20 April. During the times that theatres were allowed to open, they could be only partially filled according to the social distancing measures. The famed UA Cinemas chain, which was established in the city in 1985, closed down completely in March 2021 without any prior warning (Law 2021). In brief, the challenges facing post-2019 Hong Kong cinema are many, while the two most prominent ones are erasure/censorship and dissemination.

Regarding the former, the documentary *Inside the Red Brick Wall* (2020), which recorded the siege of The Hong Kong Polytechnic University during the Anti-ELAB Movement, is a case in point. By applying direct cinematic techniques, the film captured one of the most traumatic episodes of events during the protests, including the countless nameless bodies in pain, exhausted from mental and physical violence, in addition to their murmurs in anticipation of arrests and persecutions. Despite some hurdles, the film obtained a license from the Hong Kong authorities to screen; however, most screenings were cancelled in the latter half of 2020, as screening organizers and venues received written attacks and verbal harassments from pro-establishment channels and others. This was a time in Hong Kong cinema when the credits of documentary film crews could not be shown out of safety concerns. Meanwhile, the screening (or non-screening) of the documentary bespoke the challenges in standing witness and treating trauma through the act of listening and viewing. Nonetheless, the film was named Best Film of the Year by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society and garnered attention and accolades from international film festivals, such as Best Editing at the Amsterdam International Documentary Film Festival (2020), Grand Prize at the Taiwan International Documentary Film Festival (2021), and Best Documentary Award at the Yamagata International Documentary Film Festival (2021).

Following *Inside the Red Brick Wall*, what was regarded as the 'unpresentable' in post-2019 Hong Kong cinema had become obvious. By early 2023, what I perceived as a perversive situation in the 2020s was the appearance of brief glimpses of old news footage – peaceful demonstrations and a brief mention of the 2012 anti-national education campaign – which triggered 'surprises' among critics and netizens. The school documentary *To My Nineteen-Year-Old Self* (Mabel Cheung, 2022), which was named Best Film of 2022 by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society, originally passed the censors' radar. However, because of the director's potentially unethical treatment of her interview subjects, public screening of the film was withdrawn due to the pressure amassed from the debates and discussions among practitioners in the film industry and audiences alike.

Between 2021 and 2022, Hong Kong censors demanded that at least four shorts and two documentaries be excised in order for a screening license to be granted. The Taiwanese short film 'Piglet Piglet' (Lin Tseung Yen, 2020) was asked to remove scenes of the 2020 Taiwanese presidential election and the image of Tsai Ing-wen (Wu, 2021). *The Lucky Woman* (Tseng Wen-Chen, 2021), a Taiwanese documentary about migrant workers, was asked to remove scenes that showed a protest in front of the Presidential Office Building in Taipei (inmediahkhk.net, October 27, 2022). The short film 'Far From Home' (Mok Kwan-ling, 2021) was asked to add a criminal offence warning, to excise its content extensively, and even to change its name.

Set in the autumn of 2019, the original story followed a girl shown organizing the belongings of her boyfriend after he is arrested, which revealed the split opinions, political stances, and values between generations and in a family. The film was in competition at the ifva Awards and was slated to be shown in a series of screenings, which were eventually cancelled following the censors' feedback and the director's refusal to resubmit the film as requested (Yuen 2021).

In 2022, 'Losing Sight of A Longed Place' (Wong Tse-ying, Shek Ka-chun, and Wong Chun-long, 2017), a seven-minute graduate project that was the first from Hong Kong to be named Best Short Animation at the Golden Horse Awards in 2017, was denied a screening license after it was slated to be screened by the Group Up Film Society. It was reported that the censors demanded the excision of a less-than-one-second shot in which banners that read 'never forget the initial cause' and 'I want ...' were shown (inmediahk.net, August 10, 2022). According to the censors, the scene revisualized an act of 'unauthorized occupation' (inmediahk.net, August 10, 2022). The censors also asked the director of 'The Dancing Voice of Youth' (Erica Kwok, 2021), a 21-minute experimental film that received Special Mention at the 27th ifva Awards, to remove the phrase 'resist unjust rules' from an intertitle, calling it an 'ungrounded statement' (Leung 2022, no pagination). The same film, however, received the censors' approval to screen in March 2021, before its second submission, because of the amendment of the Film Censorship Ordinance in October 2021 (inmediahk.net, June 21, 2022). This was only the tip of the iceberg.

The transition into an era after the new laws and ordinances came into effect saw the overseas releases of protest-themed documentaries and dramas, such as *Revolution of Our Times* (Kiwi Chow, 2021), *May You Stay Forever Young* (Rex Ren and Lam Sum, 2021), and *Blue Island* (Chan Tsz-won, 2022). This foretold the impending difficulties that have defined Hong Kong cinema in the 2020s, as the concept of locality was in the process of experiencing a paradigmatic shift with the outflux of the population, the relocation of creative talents and capital, and diasporic viewers. To understand the spectatorship that is engendered by films that are *still* screened in Hong Kong under these circumstances, it is important to go against the grain and read between the lines.

This brief overview has showcased some of the major contours of post-2019 Hong Kong cinema that have affected the conditions of filmmaking and film viewing. The following will present films on pain and suffering according to three criteria: (1) films that were released in Hong Kong in theatres or shown at festivals, regardless of the mode of production; (2) films that extended extratextual linkages to a past and/or a situated present that were shared with (at least some of) viewers; and (3) films that were outside of what had been perceived as mainstream genres. Yiu-wai Chu (2015) pointed out

that the crime and gangster genre has long been a signature of Hong Kong screen culture, and thus the cinematic representation of injured (heroic) bodies is not uncommon – as shown in *Raging Fire* (Benny Chan, 2021), *Limbo* (Cheang Po-sui, 2021), *Overheard 2* (Herman Yau, 2021), *Caught in Time* (Lau Ho Leung, 2021), and *Detective vs Sleuths* (Wai Ka Fai, 2022), all of which were mentioned by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society in its list of recommended films in 2021 and 2022. However, the generic convention under which audiences of Hong Kong cinema have been trained for decades has resulted in little affective responses to these injured bodies – apart from sensorial reactions – in the mainstream action genre. In this light, I have identified three kinds of bodies, namely, the disposable/dispensable body, the body of memories, and the body that is overwhelmed, in Post-2019 Hong Kong cinema, and I will examine the representation of the physical body as a site of suffering. In any case, I do not intend to be exhaustive, as it is not possible due to the length of this paper to outline every moment of suffering in post-2019 Hong Kong cinema. It is also worth mentioning that apart from ‘Moonshine’ and *Keep Rolling*, two 2022 indie productions, all the films that I will draw on in what follows have been named by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society in their recommendation list published annually from 2020 to 2023.

Disposable/dispensable bodies

Subaltern bodies in pain are given a central presence in *Drifting* (Jun Li, 2020) and *Hand Rolled Cigarette* (Chan Kin-long, 2020). *Drifting* is a down-to-earth portrayal of a group of homeless individuals, which includes an ex-convict, a refugee, a former escort, an unemployed person, and a runaway, among others, inspired by a real-life event in Hong Kong. An explicit form of violence that they endure is the destruction of their streetside ‘homes’ and the forced disposal of their meagre belongings by the authorities. Their personal struggles and fragmented personal histories, particularly, their unarticulated yet shared trauma of abandonment by their family and the system, spurs them to file a lawsuit against the government, with the support of a social worker, for the injustice inflicted upon them. Their constant state of pain bonds these street people together, and they decide to build their own make-shift wooden huts under a bridge and live as a community. However, their plight remains unchanged, and their pursuit of justice causes them even more pain – from harassment to forced evacuation.

They come to believe that their bodies are beyond salvation. Dai Shing (played by Chu Pak-hong) discloses his fear of going to Hell and not being able to see his deceased mother in Heaven, while Sister Chan (played by Loletta Lee), who nearly overcomes her drug addiction, chimes in and says that she is certain that they are all going to Hell for what they have done.

Their self-contempt, if not self-hate, is embedded in their claims of having a disposable/dispensable body, just as the city has no space for these bodies, dead or alive; in an earlier part of the film, Fai (played by Francis Ng), after being released from prison, is informed of the impending removal of his son's urn as the rent is long overdue. The sorry state of these bodies in pain is also accentuated by their drug use, which temporarily dims their harsh reality but brings about much graver consequences, as shown by the self-inflicted wounds that cover Fai's body after years of injecting drugs.

Towards the end of the film, both Fai and Master (played by Tse Kwan-ho) take their own lives, and their bodies finally succumb to a form of self-inflicted violence. Master throws himself into the river after discovering that his long-lost son has had a good life in the United States. As a Vietnamese refugee who failed to join his family in the US because of his criminal record, Master experiences consecutive traumas that can hardly be articulated. Fai commits self-immolation in his wooden hut after everyone leaves. He insists on hearing an apology from the authorities, instead of taking their monetary compensation, until the very end. The violence that these marginalized individuals are subjected to results in the creation of pain not only in their bodies but also in a seemingly unbreakable cycle of pain that will only cease by inflicting more pain – as the ending of *Drifting* suggests.

Hand Rolled Cigarette offers a space to contemplate the violence inflicted on a racialized body. The story depicts the bond between Kwan Chiu (played by Gordon Lam), a former officer in the colonial-era Hong Kong Military Service Corps, and Mani (played by Bipin Karma), a young man of Southeast Asian ethnicity, after the two residents of Chungking Mansions become the target of a triad. The plot, which involves a manhunt and scenes of physical torture, is based on the generic framework of a gangster film narrative; however, through its characterizations, *Hand Rolled Cigarette* compels the audience to reflect on the treatment of a racialized body in relational terms. Mani, who speaks fluent Cantonese and lives with his locally born and raised brother, is treated as an outsider in the city. Though Kwan is actually a kind-hearted person who later offers to help Mani and his brother, the discriminative name that Kwan unthinkingly throws at Mani during their first encounter is a concrete example of in-your-face racism. Even when pain is not transmittable, Mani's bodily reaction to violence – always bending or curling, if not dodging – suggests that his body is in habitual pain.

Intriguingly, Kwan was also once positioned as a racialized other as he used to serve in the Hong Kong Military Service Corps, which was actually a part of the British garrison in Hong Kong that consisted of locally enlisted officers (mostly of Han Chinese ethnicity). The unit was disbanded in 1996 due to the impending transfer of the sovereignty of Hong Kong from Britain to the People's Republic of China. Kwan suffered a loss of identity and status after retiring without being granted British citizenship for his

service. In this regard, the cameo appearance by Tony Wah-chiu Ho, who plays the role of Kwan's former colleague in the former British Garrison, cannot help but remind one of Fruit Chan's *The Longest Summer* (1998). In this second instalment of Fruit Chan's 1997 trilogy, Ho plays the role of a former officer in the Hong Kong Military Service Corps who decides to rob a bank after deserting from the army.

With an eye to the labyrinthine setting of Chungking Mansions (c.f. Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* [1994]) and many more signature scenes from Hong Kong action cinema (e.g. chasing scenes in a night market, action on rooftops), it is quite clear that *Hand Rolled Cigarette* intended to pay homage to Hong Kong (genre) cinema, which is confirmed by the director's acknowledgement in the closing credit: 'passing the flame to future generation'. Following a four-minute-long take in which Kwan fights with several gangster members, the surviving Mani rolls a cigarette and lights it for Kwan, who dies before he can enjoy it. Before Mani's presence, Kwan's body was not disposable, unlike after retiring from the army – 'no one ever rolled me a cigarette' are Kwan's last words. Contrary to the body in pain in the present, the video of his army life before the handover, which transforms from black and white in the opening scene to colour in the ending scene, shows Kwan's youthful body and those of his peers in the past as memorabilia.

By giving visual weight and exposure time to maltreated bodies (e.g. *Drifting*) and vulnerable bodies (e.g. *Hand Rolled Cigarette*), these films bring to light the body as a site of pain. In examining the violence inflicted on bodies that are deemed disposable and/or dispensable, this discussion shows that the details of the context and the construction of the storied world (set in Hong Kong) provide the contours of pain, even though it might not be fully comprehensible, as Scarry (1985) has suggested. What has become prominent in post-2019 Hong Kong is how audiences are made to gaze at bodies in pain that are neither glamorous nor spectacular.

Bodies of memories

Post-2019 Hong Kong cinema was a response to its situated presence, where production and dissemination have been shaped by the (geo)political landscape, the market conditions during and after the pandemic, and the changing audiences' body and taste. Approaching 1997, Ackbar Abbas (1997) most notably put forward his idea of 'dis-appearance' in the study of Hong Kong culture. While Abbas emphasized the role of visuality, one of the causes of 'dis-appearance', or 'reverse hallucination', is the problem of 'not seeing what is there' (P. 25). The blurry vision presented in Wong Kar-wai's cinema was identified by Abbas as one of the symptoms. After 2019, I contend that instead of 'not seeing what is there', there has been an urge

among a portion of the population to articulate, or look at the articulations related to, some relatively recent memories and experiences, but in different forms.

The anthology *Memories to Choke On, Drinks to Wash Them Down* (hereafter, *Memories to Choke On*), one of the five recommended films of 2019 by the Hong Kong Film Critics Society, consists of three fictional shorts and one documentary that offer an example of how recent memories and experiences have found ways to relate cinematic expression, whether consciously or unconsciously, through embodiment. In what follows, I will focus on the third segment, 'Yuen Yeung'. The Cantonese transliterated term is the name given to a beverage that mixes milk tea and coffee in Hong Kong, but it also denotes a pair of mandarin ducks and, by extension, a couple. Before going into this segment, it would be helpful to highlight the people-oriented perspectives of the entire collection: The three remaining segments portray, respectively, a day's 'adventure' by an Indonesian domestic helper and an old woman with amnesia; two estranged brothers recalling their childhood memories in their mother's toy store, which is about to be shuttered; and a woman who wants a carefree, fun lifestyle but decides to run in the district council elections against a pro-establishment candidate.

The story of 'Yuen Yeung' portrays a local man, John (played by Gregory Wong), and a foreign woman, Ruth (played by Kate Reilly), who are both teachers in a secondary school, embarking on a journey to discover food culture in Hong Kong. This English-dialogue short film is dominated by food scenes, which are made up of food-related objects and places, ranging from vending machines, street food trolleys, tea restaurants ('*cha chaan teng*'), and open-air food stalls ('*dai pai dong*') to multinational fast-food chains. In addition to the visual appeal of food, the story about food that is recounted by John in his conversations with his foodie partner is also a story about *his* city, converging the history of encounters, localization, and hybridization into a sense of taste. The 20-minute short depicts how the two grow close, and then apart. Although the cause is not explicitly presented, the chemistry between the two fades after Ruth reveals her plan to leave Hong Kong for mainland China. In fact, the disconnection between the two is foreshadowed during a fast-food meal – in this memorable scene, John calls their location – a fast food restaurant in Admiralty – 'the most romantic KFC'. As the homesick foreigner eats her comfort food, the exaggerated description can be taken as a flirtatious comment from John, who has been presented as an eloquent speaker throughout the story. In fact, viewers are compelled to ponder the meaning of 'romantic' when everyday life goes on as if nothing has happened. In the next scene, John is seen lost in thought as he looks out at Harcourt Road from the flyover that is accessible by an elevator close to the fast-food restaurant. Through his eyes, the evening scene is, for a moment, blurred and is turned into a flashback of the Umbrella Movement, during

which the road was filled with protest art and protesters' tents. With the establishment of a point-of-view shot and the reappearance of this image of the past, viewers are invited to *see what was/is there*.

Under scrutiny, this short film maintains a difference in the presentation of a memory in 2014 and that in 2019, whether consciously or unconsciously. Towards the end of the short, the audience catches a few brief glimpses of a human chain formed by uniformed students, hand in hand, surrounding their school to express their pro-democracy demands. These fragmented images pop up without any explanation, nor are they explicitly tied to the narrative, even if they are serving as an indicator of time. Compared with the sense of preparedness when retrieving memories of the Umbrella Movement (i.e. the entrance of its image is intended by the plot, the setting, and the camera), memories of the Anti-ELAB Movement are intrusive. How these unexpected images flare up in an unannounced manner suggests not only the fleeting nature of time but also that the traumatic memories have yet to be fully processed. Nonetheless, these split-second shots – created by short takes and quick editing – re-enact the short-lived moments of memory recall, voluntarily or involuntarily, simulating an oscillating state between a response to trauma and post-traumatic responding. All these images as a whole create an affective spectatorship that stimulates communication with and is expected to speak to those who recognize these cues of past memories and visions.

Most of all, through the lens of an unfulfilled romance (as in 'Yuen Yeung'), intimacy is denied even with proximity. In the next short film, the body, too, is burdened by the memories it carries. Erica Kwok's 'April's Interlude' is a black and white short collected in the pandemic-themed omnibus indie filmmaking project *Keep Rolling* (2022) that was produced during the COVID-19 pandemic with the support of the Goethe-Institut. The short depicts the everyday life of the protagonist, Shan (played by Chan Yat Ling), who is a self-employed cosmetologist, during lockdown. The fear of proximity, which is a common motif in epidemic and pandemic narratives, is seen in the passenger train's distance from Shan and the forced shut down of businesses such as Shan's by the newly-implemented health regulations. However, Shan's mundane life is about to change after she reconnects with an acquaintance who she once had a romantic interest in. As an anti-climax, Shan withdraws, and again the triggering point is shown only subtly in one eating scene. The man tells Shan that he finds 'what happened in Hong Kong in recent years' incomprehensible, and their conversation pauses after Shan hears the man's detachment to the city. While the audience must make its own interpretation of 'what happened in Hong Kong in recent years', Shan, at a loss for words, makes up her mind about it in a later scene.

In depicting a romantic spark that does not last, the two stories imply the looming presence of an apparently unamendable rift – in terms of views and

values – between these urban dwellers in post-2019 Hong Kong. The common decision made by the protagonists, John and Shan, in the respective films, to withdraw themselves, is proof of how trauma and post-traumatic responses have become entangled and how the body remembers pain in the past to an extent that their actions are affected. To add one more layer to this structure of feeling and to problematize the boundary between spectatorship, performance, and witnessing, news of the KFC branch in *Memories to Choke On* shutting down was widely circulated after it was mentioned on actor Gregory Wong's social media page (Facebook, February 17, 2023), who, in real life, was facing charges for his involvement in the 2019 social movement.

Bodies overwhelmed

The discussion around the unrepresentability of trauma might not bring about an ultimate answer. Insofar as this paper has traced the manifestation of post-traumatic responses as well as the memories and experiences of trauma in pain and suffering, neither at a distance nor in proximity, pain, according to Scarry (1985), is equally unrepresentable, as presented in the intersection of the unrepresentable and the unrepresentable in post-2019 Hong Kong cinema.

The 15-minute short film 'Moonshine' (Yeung King-lun, 2022), the winner of the ifva Gold Award in the Open Category, captures the pain that intertwines the personal and the political in both private and public life. The emotionally engaging short features a phone conversation between a nameless female protagonist (played by Hanna Chan) – the only character visible – and an anonymous man from Taiwan. The story is set in a dim-lit room that looks like the protagonist's bedroom, and the short was filmed in a one-take shot, beginning with the protagonist picking up the call. Encrypted and emotional, the conversation reveals that this is their first contact since the man self-exiled to Taiwan. The near-death experience during his escape has obviously traumatized the man, given his short and disrupted recall of the experience. The couple both try to repress their emotions with pauses and silence, but their voices tremble more and more as the conversation progresses and appears to be ending but does not. In the end, the man, in an apologetic tone, tells the woman that he is seeing someone and that she should not wait for him. In an even more apologetic tone, he asks his former lover, a person whom he can trust to partially disclose his whereabouts, to visit his aging and ailing mother and to send him money one last time. In tears, the woman, who is curled up on a sofa, answers quietly and genuinely that she will do as he has requested, and then tells him to take good care of himself.

This powerful story does not give an explicit explanation of the cause of their separation, nor the reason why the man has had to endure his traumatic

experience. The audience is left to fathom what they can by mobilizing their own resources in the past and present. With this example of yet another unfulfilled romance, the vulnerability of these characters is revealed before their memories, trauma, fear, and concern, which are intrusive and uncontrollable. The feeling of being overwhelmed is often understood as a symptom of traumatic stress. What complicates this situation in post-2019 Hong Kong cinema is that these individuals are literally overpowered by external circumstances that continue to limit the choices that they can make and the decisions that they might have made. In this case, the lovers face separation on a personal level because the man cannot stay in their hometown anymore on a political level. Psychological pain is definitely causing them physical pain.

In post-2019 Hong Kong cinema, departure and separation as a theme, to a large extent, has been informed by the emigration wave that marked the largest population outflow in the past sixty years beginning in 2019 (CBC, December 20, 2022). Looking back in time, the previous emigration wave that took place before 1997 saw the rise of films about diaspora in Hong Kong cinema, especially after the 1989 Tiananmen incident (Lu 2000, Cheung 2008, Williams 2015). Some well-studied films in academia include, but are not limited to, Allan Fong's *Just Like Weather* (1986), Mabel Cheung's *An Autumn's Tale* (1987), Stanley Kwan's *Full Moon in New York* (1990), Ann Hui's *Song of Exile* (1990), Clara Law's *Farewell China* (1990), Wong kar-wai's *Days of Being Wild* (1990), Peter Chan's *Comrades, Almost a Love Story* (1994), and Evans Chan's *To Live* (1994). It is not an exaggeration to say that most of the auteurs that emerged from Hong Kong cinema during the 1980s and the 1990s made at least one film about the diaspora. Even in commercial cinema, the theme of emigration can be found in Lunar New Year comedies such as *It's a Mad, Mad, Mad World II* (Clifton Ko, 1988).

Whereas most of these diasporic films of the 1980s and 1990s focused on the self (e.g. adaptation, relationships, the quest for identity), in early post-2019 Hong Kong cinema, departure was depicted as being much more painful, with references to sociopolitical changes, the loss of hope, and the personal-political entanglement between the diegetic and the non-diegetic world. In the face of separation, proximity has become almost unattainable, be it to the dear ones or to the land. For instance, in 'Moonshine', right before the protagonist picks up the call, she is watching Taiwanese programs on her computer; however, this does not prepare her to cope with the unexpected phone call nor to articulate her thoughts – between sighs and tears, the presumably private conversation between the two once-intimate bodies in an intimate space is filled with silence and pauses.

Meanwhile, the act of re-presenting memories of the past is also contested. As a case in point, the documentary *Blue Island* (2022) juxtaposes four moments, namely, the cultural revolution in China between 1967 and

1976, the leftist riots in Hong Kong in 1967, the June 4th protests in Beijing, and the responses in Hong Kong to the 1989 incident, the Anti-ELAB Movement in 2019, and thereafter, in its exploration of the subjectivities and memories of Hong Kong people at large and whatever they embodied. With the daring but no less controversial attempts of the filmmaker, the interviewees of different age and from different backgrounds perform the role of one another in scenes that re-enact each other's past trauma. In particular, the film's pairing of a leftist-turned-businessman who claims to have faced political persecution during the 1967 riots and a Hong Kong youth charged with rioting following the 2019 pro-democracy movement sparked enormous controversies in the local Hong Kong and diasporic communities, although the film did not have an official release in Hong Kong. On the one hand, the debates seem to suggest, once again, the untransmittable nature of experiences, especially when history, ideology, and public sentiments are factored in. On the other hand, one important lesson to learn from Scarry's (1985) study of pain is that 'making' (creation) should not be unthinkingly justified just because the binary opposition 'unmaking' (destruction) is deemed immoral.

Somehow, the extreme feelings of being overwhelmed (due to proximity) and numb (due to distance) are simultaneously embodied by those who leave as well as those who stay. Trauma is a score that is not unsettled and is still counting. Contrary to 'not seeing what is there', for those who want to see, what one needs to do is to actively look for clues (which include, but are not limited to, silence and pauses) and decrypt the underlying message and images in post-2019 Hong Kong cinema.

Conclusion

In 2020, the Chinese version of George Orwell's *1984* was the tenth most borrowed book in Hong Kong's public library. *Animal Farm*, another work by the same author, was ranked thirteenth (Hong Kong Free Press, April 20, 2021). *Hong Kong Free Press*, an independent online newspaper outlet, reported that 'the jump in popularity in Orwell's works come amid fears of censorship and diminishing civic freedoms in Hong Kong amid a Beijing-led crackdown on political dissent in the city under a national security law imposed last summer [2020]' (April 20, 2021). In another news report released in 2021, some school libraries in Hong Kong were considering the removal of George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal Farm* because of their portrayal of an authoritarian regime (South China Morning Post, August 8, 2021). At the epicentre, proximity certainly draws one closer to pain and suffering as a lived experience; however, this proximity, which is also shared with the unrepresentable as well as the unrepresentable, is a double-edged sword – one still has to borrow other forms or agencies (e.g. George Orwell's *1984* and *Animal*

Farm) to articulate trauma responses and, at best, to seek resonance and consonance if healing is ever possible after overwhelming external circumstances inflict pain.

A body suffering pain (in its muscles and more) that is subject to constant frustration and adversity in an environment in which one has no control over gains its physicality in *The Narrow Road* (2022), the second feature-length project by the director Lam Sum, following his previous co-directed work *May You Forever Stay Young* (2021). The story follows the male protagonist, Chak (played by Louis Cheung), whose cleaning company is (often) on the verge of closing down, and the conflict and bond he develops with his new hire Candy (played by Angela Yuen) and her daughter during the pandemic. One of the most memorable scenes in the film is the stain left on a mattress and the floor by a decomposed body. The stain, which is in the shape of a human body, captures a frozen moment of death. Transmitted to viewers is the shock of a traumatized Candy while standing at the threshold of the living quarters (a very small cubicle) of this now-dead and rotten person whose body has been removed. Candy asks Chak what should be done about what she has found, and he advises her not to think too much about it when cleaning up the room, removing the mattress, and washing away the stain on the floor. The room is cleaned, but the contour of the body has been imprinted on the characters' minds and probably the minds of viewers too.

Apart from bringing to our attention a decomposed human body, the consequences of staying humane to Chak, who is always seen doing laborious work, also makes him 'disposable' and 'dispensable' – for instance, he is doxed and banned from his line of work after he shoulders the consequences of Candy's mistakes. Amidst guilt and disappointment, their bond does not develop into what a commercial film might formulate as a romance. Chak reminds Candy, who is always looking for shortcuts and who commits petty crimes to 'survive', that 'No matter how f – up the world is, it doesn't mean one shall be a f – up person'. Last, but not least, the repeated scenes in which Chak and Candy are seen spraying a cleaning agent while wearing respiratory masks and protective gowns (Chak calls it 'gear') with the white fume (from the cleaning agent) building up in the room certainly evoke memories of the recent past in post-2019 Hong Kong.

While a growing body of scholarship continues to explore the representation of trauma and its limitations (Kaplan and Wang 2004, Meek 2010, Leese *et al.* 2021), in another way round, trauma can also be regarded as a challenge to existing modes of representation. In other words, the study of the representation of trauma also propels us to rethink the taken-for-granted conventions in our meaning-making processes. While this paper focused on films that were shown in Hong Kong to support the discussion of the generation of different types of spectatorships and viewing bodies in the city, it was not my intention to draw a boundary around post-2019

Hong Kong cinema. Quite the contrary, the modes and trajectories in the distribution of post-2019 Hong Kong cinema have shown the diffusion of various local-translocal spectatorships. Hopefully, with the help of two case studies, this paper – which is a part of my larger study on spectatorship – has provided some insights, namely, the spectatorship of foreign social movement-related works and the characteristics of post-2019 Hong Kong cinema, into the spectacle of distant suffering and traumatic responses at proximity with the epicentre, which in turn captured the transforming conditions in postmillennial Hong Kong. In a post-traumatic state, the liminal space between testifying (or attempts to testify) and witnessing (or the experience of having witnessed) bespeaks the ambivalence and the nuance of seeing, keeping at a distance, and resonating.

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