

## Intro

In 2018 I organised an international workshop Taiwan Lost Commercial Cinema with the unevaluable help of the Centre Culturel de Taiwan à Paris and Ministry of culture; we screened classic but rarely seen movies from the 1960s and 1970s, as *Fantasy of Deer Warrior* (大俠梅花鹿 *Daxia meihualu*, Zhang Ying 張英, 1961) or *The Best Secret Agent* (天字第一號 *Tian zì dì yī hào*, Zhang Ying 張英, 1964).

In April 2019 I have been part (with my esteemed colleague Wafa Ghermani) of a series of discussions and presentations at Cinemathèque Française in occasion of a retrospective dedicated to Taiwan cinema in the 70s. highlight were recently found movies as the forgotten masterpieces *The End of the Track* (跑道終點 *Paodao zhongdian*, Mou Tun-fei 牟敦芾, 1970), the rare *Typhoon* (颱風 *Taifeng*, Pan Lei 潘壘, 1962), as well as a full house (re)discovering rape and revenge maudit classics as *Women revenger* (女性的復仇 *Nǚxìng de fùchou*, 歐陽俊 Ouyang Jun, 1982) and *Lady Avenger* (瘋狂女煞星 *Feng huang nǚ shaxing*, 楊家雲 Yang Jiayun, 1981).

In 2019 I program for my Master and Ph.D. students genre movies: the anticipation *10 years* (十年 *Shi nian*, 2018) is a port-manteau movie featuring different shorts that imagine possible futures ten years from now, in Taiwan; this anticipation film is a “sequel” – or a parallel project – of *Hong Kong 10 Years* (2015), the anticipation movie that earned the best film prize at Hong Kong film festival and the ban and fury from Beijing. These texts demonstrate how genre movie (here, the SF postulate is to imagine a very near future) could be very productive in discussing important political, cultural, economic issues. An extremely intense discussion came from the rediscover of Wang Tong 王童 Taiwan trilogy: *Strawman* (稻草人 *Daocaoren*, 1987); *Banana Paradise* (香蕉天堂 *Xiangjiao tiantang*, 1989); *Hill of no Return* (無言的山丘 *Wúyán de shanqiu*, 1992). The trilogy dwells in history and memory, contributing to redefine local identity in a moment of crisis (diplomatic setbacks, lift of martial law); it uses humorous tones, hybridizing the gravity of the most celebrated New Taiwan Cinema with classic, grassroots comedies; it's both a successful crowd-pleaser and an important reflexion on colonial past and its legacies.

These events have striking similarities (public screening introduced by academic discussion) but very different scope – commercial screenings vs free academic event. Therefore, different public – even if all interested in discovering or deepen their knowledge of Taiwan culture.

In all these cases the mediation is important – or necessary: seeing these movies without a historical and cultural context, the public might miss important issues: language, political, history: why these films were censored? Why they were considered important or subversive?

Even if mediation is needed to introduce issues, contexts, problematics, yet the focus on pop culture can help cultural diplomacy to extend its soft power via neglected or “forgotten” genre films that might have different functions: first, to attract a public interested in popular and counterculture; secondly, to shed a light on less travelled roads around Taiwan cinema and audio-visual culture.

### Content: shift from “art” to “popular culture”

In the academic as well as cultural sphere (film distribution) what has been most studied, screened, written about is the New Taiwan Cinema in a context of what can be called, “Global art cinema”,<sup>1</sup> a form of art that circulates in international film festival, that has a specific pattern of distribution and exhibition (the cinema theatre in the first place, the DVD or VOD later), a normative way of consumption (from the beginning to the end, in the quietest environment as possible, in the dark...) and a narrative that, even if largely elliptical or evocative, can still be described as fiction. I’m obviously referring to Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Edward Yang, Tsai Ming-liang and more recently Midi Z. Without neglecting these auteurs, I’d like to focus more on (or add a scholarly approach to) liminal filmmakers and movies that can be much more central/pivotal than what they seem – I use here the definition of “liminal” that proposes Stephane Corcuff about Taiwan: decentred from the big diplomatic game, yet an invaluable point of view to analyse Chinese (華) and Asian geopolitical, cultural and sociological issues:

“With regard to its relation to China, Taiwan is in a liminal situation that has slowly developed over four centuries. The term ‘liminal’ is proposed as an alternative to the term ‘marginal’. It suggests acknowledging the complexity of a relation that can be called a ‘marginal position’ only if it is reduced to its negative elements and by viewing it from one particular point of view, the one of the centre. (...) The liminal position of Taiwan is also a consequence of the ‘conservatory/laboratory’ combination that the island has because of its multicultural society in

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<sup>1</sup> Rosalind Galt and Karl Schoonover, *Global Art Cinema*, Oxford University Press, New York, 2010.

which Chinese culture is an important matrix: as Taiwan protected Chinese culture, it also constantly revisited it, inventing new forms of Chineseness, a civic, if not national, Taiwanese identity, and ways to be global in the absence of diplomatic recognition. (...) geopolitical liminality here defines an asymmetric interdependence where the small entity has something to say in the couple formed with the bigger entity, thanks to the historical and cultural thickness of their geopolitical relation over time. A geopolitical understanding of liminality, in this sense, may be exportable to other fields in the discipline; perhaps not without the risk of losing some of its substance, but hopefully as a way to rebalance the analysis of the strengths of the weak, as well as of the weaknesses of the strong.”<sup>2</sup>

The liminal position of Taiwan is echoed by the liminal position of its filmmakers, and especially the ones that has been neglected by festival circuit, and therefore losing the opportunity to get prizes and enhance their sociocultural appeal; it’s no secret that, even if Tsai and Hou movies are not wildly seen (but again, how many spectators in Europe get the last Godard movie?), they are extremely powerful in cultural field, and in a very consistent way: opening cafes and restaurants, organising film festival and producing new directors, being scattered and omnipresent (Tsai in museum, VR venues....).

So, if these auteurs are a sure reference for sinologist and cinephiles, others have been under the radar, and I argue here the importance of relooking, studying, screening and presenting such “alternative” directors/movies to complexify the image of Taiwan, its history, its legacy. Again, not to substitute or neglect the great masters, but to draw a complex reference intertext to show where the great masters blossomed, in which context, in reaction to what, or simply what visual, narrative heritage are working on Hou and Tsai while opening their own, original creative path.

### Screening comedies

For example, Wang Tong’s comedy *Strawman* is an interesting case study that can reconcile the desire to be entertained and to explore Taiwan history.

Wang acknowledge the inspiration from *The Gods Must be Crazy* (Jamie Uys, 1979). The south African comedy tells the ubuesque story of an isolated tribe described with all the stereotypes of the “bon sauvage”: peaceful, living without private property – therefore no jealousy or fights; the

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<sup>2</sup> Stéphane Corcuff “The Liminality of Taiwan: A Case-Study in Geopolitics”, in *Taiwan in Comparative Perspective*, Vol. 4, December 2012, pp. 34–64, p. 64.

rhythm of their life gets perturbed when they receive a mysterious object from the gods: it is a Coca Cola empty bottle that a pilot through out of his plane, but to the indigenous minds it is a sacred, mysterious or evil object; the patriarch starts a journey to give back the uncanny object to the gods. Wang's homage let us think of an interesting alliance of "world cinema", or: peripheral/post colonised realities that develop a discourse to reflect on colonial legacy negotiating the Janus desire for/resistance to American culture, focusing on common people and their struggles through history. It has to be noted here that *The Gods* has been criticised for its arguably condescending vision of the subaltern – Jamie Uys is an Afrikaner – and Wang as well has been questioned regarding his legitimacy as a weishengren to film a Taiwanese story. Wang, by citing *The Gods* revendicates a decentred focus, a peripheral status that can raise its head and tell its own stories – somehow representing the "liminal" position of Taiwan itself.

Even if this film has a specific comedic tone, yet many sequences can recall masterpieces of New Cinema and past heritage of healthy realism, slowing down the rhythm to create contemplative pause. For example when the landlord announces to the brothers that he will sell the land to the Japanese factory (leaving the peasants without any source of income), the camera keeps its prudish distance, letting the gaze plane on the distressed figures of the two men but also on the sheer beauty of the apparently uncontaminated fields. This sequence, as many others that magnify the fertility of Taiwanese soil, is also a visual reminder of classics like *Beautiful Duckling* (Yangya renjia 養鴨人家 Lee Hsing 李行, 1965), the "healthy realism" classic that promoted government policies implementing a bucolic representation of Taiwan landscapes. This sequence Somehow remind me of the very end of *Dust in the wind* (戀戀風塵 Lianlian fengchen, Hou Hsiao-hsien 侯孝賢, 1986), where the young soldier comes back from the military service: his girlfriend is gone, his youthful dreams washed away; but the presence of grandpa, is inconsequential talking about harvest as if the nephew never left home, and the composition of the frame that surrounds the small men with the foggy, emerald green beauty of tropical nature seem to suggest a broader picture, a metaphysical crave for an outwardly spiritual salvation.

Wang Tong will later develop a style closer to the “pan-Asian minimalism”,<sup>3</sup> or “slow cinema”<sup>4</sup> – especially in *Hill of no return* and *Red Persimmon* (红柿子 Hong shizi, 1994), both acutely poetic, slow pace, distant camera, plan-séquence, researching for equilibrium and harmony; *Strawman* remains resolutely linked to the (dark) comic genre, while *Hill of no return* or *Red Persimmon* are much closer to what the Asian slow cinema stereotype look like. Consequently, less indicated to certain context, namely the foreign language faculty, where no film studies cursus is taught, and students might be more reluctant to embark in a 3 hours slow pace journey through Asian history.

## HISTORY

So how genre films (comedy, action, horror) are important in a cultural diplomatic strategy? *Strawman* is indeed a comedy and it's a historical comedy. We can, therefore, “use” the “easy” tone to attire – seduce – public (students and/or cinephile), because it is undoubtedly a funny and feel good movie; and then, introduce important elements of context, and namely the representation of Japanese colonial rule by an eclectic weishengren that incorporates other languages (Taiwanese, Japanese) and memories (1940s) in his own reconstruction of National History. Colonial past, grassroots oral history, the legacy of multiples experiences (colonizers and colonised, middle classes and farmers, gender roles and revolutions): trough the interstices of the epic and comical narration it's possible to tell, analyse, discover important elements of Taiwan past and present.

*Strawman* display different strategies of representation of the past. Firstly, as every movie, *Strawman* can also be considered as a historical artefact documenting its own epoch – the eighties, the end of martial law, overture to historical recollections, new approach to literary past with focus on nativist literature, stress on Taiwanese experience as specific and distinct both from Japan and China. Besides, Wang stresses that the film was realised with a mandarin soundtrack, except in few chosen movie theatres that took the risk and projected the original, Taiwanese version.<sup>5</sup> Taiwanese industry has always had a two-headed production, where movies in Taiwanese struggled facing the imposition of state studios that developed mandarin as the privileged output for national movies. But at the beginning of the nineties Taiwanese is back on the screen and, what's most important it mingles with Mandarin – like in daily life. Some directors had already used the multilingual (and sometimes the reciprocal misunderstandings) to stress the richness and contradictions of

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<sup>3</sup> David Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 231-234.

<sup>4</sup> Son Hwee Lim, *Tsai Liang-liang and a Cinema of Slowness*, Honolulu, University of Hawaii Press, 2014 ; Ira Jaffe, *Slow Movies: Countering the Cinema of Action*, London and New York, Wallflower, 2014.

<sup>5</sup> 王童七日談：導演與影評人的對談手記 <https://www.books.com.tw/products/0010490992>

Taiwanese modernity: *Good Neighbours* (两相好 *Liang Xiang hao*, Lee Hsing, 1962). But it is only now, during the eighties, that mandarin AND Taiwanese are systematically displayed together, accordingly to circumstances; the two languages interact in a more realist way, to incarnate people's origin, political standpoint, incomprehension and seductions.

Secondly, *Strawman* is a historical reconstruction: the art department contributed to the recreation of tissues, clothes, props. According to Wang, the movie itself became a "history book" to show contemporary students and scholars how was the daily life during the 40s in occupied Taiwan (architecture, social system, daily routine, production and taxes, colonial government organisation). The shooting of the fields itself has been an intense history class: now the fields are well displayed, rationally organised, and often switched to produce watermelon or taro (instead of rice), while back then it was more a chaotic anarchy, so the troupe has to rent a field that could be harvested as in the past. The recreation has then also pedagogical/historiographical aim. The importance of this artistic, popular historiography is evident: it can take the form of narration based on personal memories, or the multilayer metafilmic documentary recollection of archive images. They present complementary histories adding emotionally charged structures of feelings to the official history book narration and to the formal experiments of globally celebrated New Cinema. They all evaluate personal experience, and all imply the multiplication of point of view and the legitimacy of contrasting interpretations. In the sense of Robert Rosenstone, who's developing the reflexions of Marc Ferro and Pierre Sorlin, these texts are legitimate forms of historiography, since they provide a "signification" of the past, and historical metaphors that can help the present to "think historically":

You may also see these films as part of a separate realm of representation and discourse, one not meant to provide literal truths about past (as if our written history can provide literal truths) but metaphoric truths which work, to a large degree, as a kind of commentary on, and challenge to, traditional historical discourse.<sup>6</sup>

The "metaphoric truth" of Wang's Taiwan trilogy might be the pivotal role of "brotherhood" in the creation of contemporary Taiwan. This could be read as a statement of the human condition: people suffer from huge historical events that eschew their control; yet, travelling the same road, "all men are bothers" and they can (and should) be there for each other, scolding but ultimately helping their fellow travellers. I think that the fact that in *Banana* the "army brothers" have to

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<sup>6</sup> Robert Rosenstone, *History on Film, Film on History: History: Concepts, Theories and Practice*, Harlow, Pearson, 2006, pp. 8-9.

change identity in order to survive in the new configuration of Taiwan politics and the impossibility to go back to mainland, and they keep in living together all their life can be a (wishful?) humanistic proposal of a possible way to create a Nation: as a community of suffering, of small pleasures, of needing bodies and suffering compromises, capable of building a house on complicity and solidarity. In *Strawman* the brothers are depicted as simply, naturally, spontaneously relying on each other, especially when they have to use all their wits to survive. To bring the unexploded and very dangerous bomb to the Japanese headquarters might sounds absurd, but also a skilful way to circumnavigate historical trauma and make ends meet. Via the figure of brothers in distress, Wang films a comic epic of survival and popular resistance.

Marc Ferro urges to read a historic film for what it says but also (maybe: especially) for what it refrain to say, looking for the Freudian slip that can help the scholar to formulate a diagnosis, analysing the “ideological and social zones” that have been suppressed.<sup>7</sup> We might then see under the surface of an apparently armless comedy the “call to arms” to build or rebuilt the consciousness of the multiplicity of a specific Taiwan contemporary identity, contesting both global trends and continental drives. Even if Taiwan contemporary cinema industry can’t resist neither the sirens of China (in terms of distribution and production), nor the international, Hollywood-style pattern of narration, there will still be voices establishing, rekindling and revamping what made Taiwan arguably unique – its unique combination.

Not only the Japanese left heritage, scars and a controversial legacy: the Americans did, too, and here is in the shape of a fearful bomb. Another comedy (again, neglected by international film circuit) is *Buddha Bless America* (太平天國 Taiping tianguo, Wu Nien-jen 吳念真, 1996): situated during the Vietnam war in a poor village that host an American base, the film tells the stories of the villagers, the prostitutes and the American soldiers. After the soldiers are gone the children roam the brothel to scavenge what the soldier have left behind: a coin and a vinyl (money and popular culture). In *Strawman* the Americans drop a bomb that doesn’t explode, the two protagonists start a ubuesque journey to the provincial hometown where Japanese are collecting metal scraps.

As mentioned above, in *Banana* the protagonist had to fake an identity to become a KMT bureaucrat; at the end he receives a call from the parents of the person he has been impersonating for decades; the call comes from the mainland, after decades of impossibility to communicate. Not only the protagonist does not reveal his forgery, but cries listening to the voices of his “parents”, in what appears as a sincere expression of pain. Even if the persons are not the right ones, even if

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<sup>7</sup> Marc Ferro, *Cinéma et Histoire*, Paris, Gallimard, 1993, p. 23 (original edition 1977).

he had to trick and ruse in order to survive, bypassing totalitarian regime control, yet he endorsed his character to the point of expressing a universal pain, a cry of distress that is sung for all the people like him that history obliged to compromise, lie and suffer.

Let's then go back to the beginning and the invitation of Rosenstone to "think historically" through the films: at the beginning of *Strawman* we are introduced to the strawman that speaks directly to the spectator and introduces the characters. Interestingly enough, he remains a central visual element of the story, but won't speak anymore. Hence, we can interpret the Strawman as an embodiment of the grassroots people, humble but clever, who avoids explicit political commentaries but manages to be close to the community and relate an unofficial, repressed historiography; he can speak when the Taiwanese could not. He is silent at the end of the movie; I guess it's because Wang Tong gives his (human) characters the opportunity to speak. The movie ends with a collective chattering of the Taiwanese. The movie therefore accomplishes his mission to talk for and to the people, but not on a paternalist or propaganda tone, instead it embraces the tricks, the vulgarity, the stupidity and the compassion, the resilience, the surviving spirit of the people that ultimately made a country much more than political slogans or abstract ideology. As to suggest that a Taiwanese identity could only be described by telling the stories of its inhabitants and its colonizers – stories that form a complex and rich mosaic that resist all narrow definitions. Furthermore, I suggest that the idea of "prosthetic memory" as defined by Alison Landsberg is extremely useful here. Landsberg proposes an analysis of movies, TV shows and media where the emotional/affective response and involvement of the public absorb non-lived memories as prosthesis – hence something external that becomes part of the body and influence the individual sense of belonging to a determine society. Landsberg elaborates:

"modernity makes possible and necessary a new form of public cultural memory. This new form of memory, which I call *prosthetic memory*, emerges at the interface between a person and a historical narrative about the past, at an experiential site such as a movie theatre or museum. (p. 2) (...) With prosthetic memory, as with earlier forms of remembrance, people are invited to take on memories of a past through which they did not live. Some of the strategies and techniques for acquiring memories are similar, too. Memory remains a sensuous phenomenon experienced by the body, and it continues to derive much of its power through affect. But unlike its precursors, prosthetic memory has the ability to challenge the essentialist logic of many group identities."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Alison Landsberg, *Prosthetic Memory: The Transformation of American Remembrance in the Age of Mass culture*, NY, Columbia Uni Press, 2004, pp. 2-9.

Landsberg explicitly links this form of memory to new technological mass media:

“What separates prosthetic memory from those other experiences and makes it a phenomenon unique in the early twentieth century is its reliance on commodification. Commodification enables memories and images of the past to circulate on a grand scale; it makes these memories available to all who are able to pay. Prosthetic memory, therefore, unlike its medieval and nineteenth-century precursors, is not simply a means for consolidating a particular group’s identity and passing on its memories; it also enables the transmission of memories to people who have no “natural” or biological claims to them.”<sup>9</sup>

This sentence appears to describe with a certain precision the very experience of a Wang Tong, a mainland director that gradually appropriates memories that are not “natural” (say, part of his family history)<sup>10</sup> but became part of his intellectual, memorial, cultural DNA. Mutatis mutandis, it the same process that Landsberg describes when accounting for the American experience:

“Therefore I argue that constructing national identity is not exclusively the work of the state, or even of intellectuals who force-feed to “the masses” a specific version of the past; it is equally the work of individual immigrants, who accept prosthetic memories in order to craft American identities for themselves.”<sup>11</sup> Since the weishengren not only emigrated to Taiwan, but also became the backbones of political and economic structures, this appropriation of prosthetic memory enhanced by new media as cinema (and later TV, Internet etc.) led to the creation of a mosaic, plural, contested yet lively, creative national identity negotiating with a “portable, fluid, and non-essentialist form of memory.”<sup>12</sup>

### AFTER END: prosthetic Japan

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<sup>9</sup> Landsberg, p. 18.

<sup>10</sup> Landsberg further explains how prosthetic memories are not “natural” or “organic” in the “hereditary nineteenth century sense” but are derived from engagement with a mediated representation”: “The idea of prosthetic memory, then, rejects the notion that all memories—and, by extension, the identities that those memories sustain—are necessarily and substantively shaped by lived social context. Prosthetic memories are not “socially constructed” in that they do not emerge as the result of living and being raised in particular social frameworks. At the same time, prosthetic memories are transportable and hence not susceptible to biological or ethnic claims of ownership. These memories are thus neither essentialist nor socially constructed in any straightforward way: they derive from a person’s mass-mediated experience of a traumatic event of the past.” p. 19.

<sup>11</sup> Landsberg, p. 51.

<sup>12</sup> Landsberg, p. 18.

As mentioned before, I see in *Strawman* a formidable anticipator of a recurrent theme in contemporary Taiwanese cinema: the complex heritage of Japanese colonial period; and what's more, often via the eye of comedy. Wei Te-sheng 魏德圣's *Cape n°7* (海角七號, 2008) and *KANO* (2014) , but also *Secrets in the Hot Spring* (切小金家的旅館 *Qie Xiaojin jia de lüguan*, 林冠慧 Lin Guanhui, 2018) , *Father to son* (范保德 *Fan Baode*, 蕭雅全 Hsiao Ya-chuan, 2018), *Miao Miao* (渺渺, 程孝澤 Cheng Hsiao-tse, 2008), *Somewhere I Have Never Travelled* (帶我去遠方 *Dai wo qu yuanyang*, 傅天余 Fu Tian-yu, 2009)...

For Taiwan – a sovereign nation with great resources but still diplomatically isolated and constantly threatened by the rise of the PRC – Japan could represent a guide or, in any case, an image of power to which it is ideologically, politically and socially attached, or so these movies seem to suggest. Not everyone shares this craze for Japan I have just reported; other voices, on the contrary, revive the memory of the injustices suffered during the colonial era. What seems interesting to analyse here is this particular form of representation, indirectly very positive, of the Japanese culture as a model (besides the globalized craze for *anime*, *manga*, J-Pop), as a space of liberty, a trigger of the non-confessed desires, an inspiration. It is a form of oblique and nuanced representation and a source of interpretation that expresses itself in an increasingly powerful voice within mainstream Taiwanese cinema and which, consequently, seems to reject the possibility of a menacing Chinese 'reunification' in the future, orienting itself rather towards Japan. A certainly imaginary Japan (democratic, culturally and economic relevant, Confucianism and Buddhist, refined), yet present in the collective subconscious. Japan that bought war and exploited the land, but that was also the vehicle for introducing (a certain form of) cultural (*Le Moulin*)<sup>13</sup> and technological modernity (*KANO*).<sup>14</sup> Ivy I-chu Chang, discussing *Cape n° 7* and quoting Arjun Appadurai and Stuart Hall argues:

“Imagining a new community in the wake of glocalization, we may propose a “place-based transnational social sphere” in which the citizens, immigrants, and the marginalized people resist state violence, seek social redress, and negotiate their identities as well as modes of living in the interstices between the colonizers, the nation, and the emergent ethnicities. In the transnational

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<sup>13</sup> *Le Moulin* (日曜日式散步者 *Riyaori shi sanbu*者, 黃亞歷 Huang Yali, 2016).

<sup>14</sup> I am here thinking of the sequence representing the engineer helping farmers to build a water canalisation system.

sphere of social lives, as the colonial reminiscence and the emerging ethnicities return from the boundary of the nation, the cacophonies of the (ex)colonizer and the ethnic groups disrupt the monolithic national narrative by re-articulating hidden histories and silenced stories. Exploding the unitary national narrative were the micro-histories composed of myriad stories told through the memories, narrations, and desire in the course of individual experiences.”<sup>15</sup>

*Strawman* orchestrates comedic tones, paradoxical situations, deep compassion for its characters, the focus on farmers and grassroots people, a sharp attention to historical reconstruction, the brotherhood as a central metaphor to narrate one possible national history. The bittersweet symphony that results tells an alternative history made of collective recollections and overlapping values, ranging from celebration of survival spirit to the condemnation of colonial rule, but also a critique of people’s short sight strategies and a floating nostalgia for Japanese heritage. *Strawman* could then be considered the son of popular Taiwanese film celebrating local flavour, and an elder brother of *Cape n°7* and his reconciliatory successors. A deceitfully simple film that can contribute to a better understanding of Taiwan culture and politics – with a sympathetic laugh.

### Genre/cult movies as a powerful cultural diplomacy tool

I focused in the previous pages on History, but we can also reflect on genre-bending movies. Again, I personally strongly admire “art” movies, the challenge that every Tsai Ming-liang or Hou Hsiao-hsien movie launch to the public is a source of intellectual stimulation and pleasure: elliptic narrations solicit public proactive response to fill the blanks of story (and feelings, and leanings); the long take and/or the distant camera leave huge space for the eyes to roam in the frame with an attitude that can recall the classic/traditional appreciation of scrolls and ink paintings. I am not here discrediting these highbrow ambitious artefact: *A Brighter Summer Day* (牯嶺街少年殺人事件 *Gulingjie Shaonian sharen shijian*, 楊德昌 Yang Dechang, 1991) and *The Assassin* (聶隱娘 *Nie Yinni*, 侯孝賢 Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2015) are absolute masterpieces that tell Taiwan’s top-notch cinema production maturity. Yet, I argue that also popular movies can be extremely important in cultural diplomacy: by enlarging the perspective and the perceptions of the Taiwan cinema field, production, distribution and circulation it’s possible (maybe even easier) to introduce the public to the richness of Taiwan cultural output, and its irreducible originality. To put it bluntly: *Strawman*, *Cape n° 7*, *KANO* and *Secrets in the Hot Spring* seduce audiences by their fresh, immediate style; and

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<sup>15</sup> Ivy I-chu Chang, *Taiwan Cinema, Memory and Modernity*, Singapore, Palgrave, 2019, p. 116.

at the same time, if correctly introduced/explained/contextualised, open doors to the complex relations between Japan and Taiwan, the legacy of Japanese colonial period – a legacy that stretches to, say, Lee Teng-hui growing up under the colonial rule and being fluent in Japanese and close to Japan political circles – as told in the recent, polemical movie *The Shooting of 319* (幻術 Huanshu, 符昌鋒 Fu Changfeng, 2019). Besides the Japanese colonial period, movies can tell other Taiwan's specificity: some treasure from Taiwan cinema were just impossible in China at the time: if in the 60s China was stormed by the cultural revolution, Taiwan movies were involved in the Healthy Realism counterpropaganda movies, and the anti-communist war dramas like *Victory* (梅花 Meihua, 劉家昌 Liu Jiachang, 1967) enhance patriotism and a sublimation of National identity. Other movies – like the 黑社會電影 – were simply impossible in the Mainland because of the excesses of violence and sex. It might be obvious for Taiwan scholars, but even informed cinephile or young students might lack the historical background to grasp the uniqueness of Taiwan experience. Following my experience, then, the public screening (both in commercial venues or academic amphitheatres) is an invaluable occasion to introduce or deepen the soft power of Taiwan, regardless the “quality” or personal appreciation of movies.

Lot remains to do. I focused on comedy and Japanese period, but some possible future strategies would include:

Present (screen and discuss, workshop and debate) genre movies as the anticipation *10 Years* (十年) or the CBS (now on Netflix) “black mirror”- style TV miniseries *On Children* (你的孩子不是你的孩子 *Ni de haizij bu shi ni de haizij*, 2018). These movies are not top notch CGI *Wandering Earth* (流浪地球, 郭帆 Gu Fan, 2019) style blockbuster. Yet, *10 Years* (especially if screened in parallel with *Hong Kong 10 Years*) can open up debates around China and Taiwan relations, ecocriticism, aging of population, foreign workers and immigration, alienation in contemporary world and technophobia. *On children* can be parallel with *Black Mirror* or other TV show and discuss the impact on strict and competitive education on children, the near future of technologies (screen, connectivity, control).

To conclude, my long experience with screening Taiwan movies tell me that students, cinephiles and scholars are more and more interested in cinema events, because they can satisfy aesthetic craves but also, and especially, open doors to a better comprehension of the richness of Taiwan society. I would add that we might consider to focus more on genre or popular movies that can

easily attract the public, while being able to narrate, articulate, describe and enrich the perception of and hopefully the study of Taiwan culture.