

Touching the Millennium

The Nostalgic Impulse of Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*

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ABSTRACT

By taking a close look at the forms and cinematic strategies of Tsai Ming-liang's 1998 film *The Hole*, this article intends to identify the nostalgic subtext that emerges from the tensions generated by different temporal/diegetic levels of representation. Using proper citation mechanisms, the film dialogues with the memory of the century that ends, while projecting into the near future—the overly symbolic year 2000—the anxieties of the present, ultimately proposing a way out through human unmediated connection. Relying on scene analysis, the text will invoke thinkers from cultural studies, film studies, politics, history, philosophy and sociology as well as objects from the visual arts and fiction literature, to create an ample mesh of references that can help contextualize Tsai's gesture as a filmmaker of its time.

INTRODUCTION

A retrospective impulse defined the twilight of the twentieth century. Attested by social, political and cultural manifestations of many types, about that which has since been labeled “an accursed century” (Badiou 2), this urgency can be understood as an attempt to make sense of colossal structural changes—at the intersection between globalization and digital technology—and inexpressible angst, brought up by baffling wars. Simultaneously, a conscientious look into the near future (the advent of the overly symbolic year 2000) equally defined artistic and literary gestures guided by anxious anticipation.

In the late 1990s, French film production and distribution company Haut et Court selected a group of filmmakers from around the globe (Ildikó Enyedi, Walter Salles and Daniela Thomas, Hal Hartley, and others) proposing an anthology composed of ten fiction feature films about the impending turning of the millennium, named *2000 vu par...* (*2000, Seen by...*). *The Hole*¹ (1998), written and directed by Malaysian-born Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang, is arguably the most intensely studied and discussed film of this heterogeneous

collection. The context from which this piece of apocalyptic contemporary cinema surfaces is symptomatic of a generalized state of apprehension regarding the near future.

This article proposes a critical look at the aesthetic and narrative forms of the director's exquisite picture through the perspective of nostalgia, specifically following Svetlana Boym's influential concept of “reflective nostalgia” (2001), placing the filmmaker's choices in the larger discourse about the memory of the century (substantially shaped by cinema) and the challenges of the future in a globalized and technologized world. As a methodological principle, the text will allow for an encounter between *The Hole* and other cultural objects, as well the mapping of a larger context, where the ideas of globalization and nostalgia are guiding compasses.

Primarily, the film will be summarized, not only regarding its narrative episodes and visual identity, but also the very important construction of its temporality. Additionally, the text will be concerned with Tsai's gesture as a filmmaker, trying to interpret the way the director responded to the proposed

1 Original title in traditional Chinese: 洞, Dòng.

challenge, and how his artistic choices reflect a particular idea of memory and nostalgia, underlining that the history of the twentieth century is inseparable from film history. It will be proposed that the musical sequences that interrupt the narrative flow are the key to understanding this nostalgic impulse, largely conceived by a collective way of visualizing history through a cinematic structure.

In her book *Screening the Past*, Pam Cook offers a tactful insight concerning historical fiction films, stating that

they use the cinematic medium self-consciously to explore our imaginary relationship with past events, presenting history as a collection of mementoes, as fragmented and partial, accessible only through the mediation of personal perceptions and emotional responses. (177)

Set two years in the future, rather than standing as a hypothetical exercise, Tsai Ming-liang's film can be thought of as a historical recreation in reverse. *The Hole* projects into the future the uneasiness that defines its present, while permanently quoting and communicating with a troubled past.

A detailed analysis of the complex and multi-layered *The Hole* inevitably invokes the works and thought of many artists and writers, such as Boym, Gary Cross, Guo-Juin Hong, Andreas Huyssen, contemporary thinkers of nostalgia, a problematic and ubiquitous concept, as much an abstraction, a technique or an ethos; Susan Sontag and the idea of disease as a metaphor; Laura U. Marks or Marianne Hirsch and the symbiotic relations of skin and memory; the works of Fan Kuan, Edward Hopper, Luís Carmelo, Hou Hsiao-hsien, or Grace Chang, where aesthetic principles and thematic affinities can be sources of comparison. Concurrent with the vast networks of a globalized culture, the political and geographical specificities of the insular country that is Taiwan—as well as Tsai's condition as an expat artist—indisputably participate in the shaping of the film as an artistic phenomenon.

Considering the century in its graspable essence, the focus on the transition years can also outline a path for thinking about the present, as the film portrays the reality of a virus-stricken city, where political and health authorities dictate mandatory quarantines. Within the diegetic universe of *The Hole*, a hypothetical sense of normalcy has been fractured (indeed, the film can be read as a search for comfort in disturbing times) firmly conditioning any reflection made during these early years of the millennium's third decade.

TIME THROUGH A HOLE

The Hole is built on a multitude of dichotomies: masculine/feminine, private/public, modern/post-modern, dry/wet, human/non-human, past/future, up/down, local/global. Yet, Tsai Ming-liang's 1998 film doesn't necessarily offer a binary view of the themes it tackles, even if polarization and these

ontological conflicts – and the tensions that consequently arise from them – are at the core of its identity. Succinctly, the film follows a woman (Yang Kuei-mei) who lives downstairs from a man (Lee Kang-sheng) on an almost empty building in urban Taiwan, during the last days of 1999. Preceding the opening shot, the soundtrack discloses the social context of this fabricated future over a black screen. A voice from a news anchor informs that, due to the spread of a dangerous virus, the areas under quarantine rules will cease to have water supply, starting 1 January 2000. The Kafkaesque consequences of this invisible threat—it can make people behave like cockroaches—echo Susan Sontag's words about the HIV/AIDS epidemic: “[t]he most terrifying illnesses are those perceived not just as lethal but as dehumanizing” (126), establishing a point of reference with a familiar extradiegetic reality².

The very descriptive first frame shows the man upstairs sleeping on his leather couch, with a mountain of peanut shells, a pack of cigarettes, a can of beer, a glass of water, and a remote control over the coffee table. It rains, and the walls are plunged with sparse mold stains. These are important details, as the great majority of the dialogue comes from television sets, and the two main characters—onely, alienated, and apathetic—are mostly presented through their movements, their objects, their private surroundings. The woman's apartment downstairs is in a more deteriorated condition: the wallpaper barely sticks to the impressively wet walls, and there is a palpable humidity that conveys a sense of eerie discomfort. In the chaotic state of things, these two individuals embody the resistance against governmental directives, deciding to remain inside the almost deserted building. The main conflict ensues when water starts dripping from above, into the woman's space, creating a large hole, an entity used for surveillance, communication, sexual exploration and eventual communion.

After a few challenging days of rain and tacit animosity between the two residents, the hole that connects their independent habitats becomes a symbol of unity. One of the final images of the film (Fig. 1) silently suggests that salvation is a possibility: there is hope for the new millennium, if human touch is made



Fig. 1 | Connecting through touch in Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, 01:24:28. Celluloid Dreams, 1998.

2 On the television documentary *My New Friends* (1995), Tsai directly addressed the impact of HIV in Taiwan, through the testimonies of two men.



Fig. 2 | Musical sequence from Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, 00:15:49. Celluloid Dreams, 1998.



Fig. 3 | Musical sequence from Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, 00:31:14. Celluloid Dreams, 1998.



Fig. 4 | Musical sequence from Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, 00:32:57. Celluloid Dreams, 1998.



Fig. 5 | Musical sequence from Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, 01:03:30. Celluloid Dreams, 1998.

viable. Through the hole, the man offers the woman a glass of water, and then gives her his arm so that she can ascend, to the upper floor, to the light.

In between scenes, disrupting not only narrative linearity but diegetic status as well, five musical segments, set in the common areas of the apartment building, punctuate the narrative, like autonomous music videos. Respecting genre conventions, these instances have the characteristics of an integrated musical (Thompson and Bordwell 229) where the numbers are not justified by the presence of a stage or an in-film audience, but rather occur spontaneously, within mundane spaces, and are purposefully made for the spectator. In these colourful scenes, Yang Kuei-mei lip syncs to recordings of Hong Kong-Chinese singer Grace Chang (except for the final one, where the main couple quietly dances to the song), singing of love and deceit, of broken hearts and innocent hope, directly facing the camera. As deliberate fissures in the storyline, these musical sequences enable the reading of the many contrasts they make evident.

Where the visual traits of the main plot are damp and pale, the exuberant performances of Chang's songs bring colour and suppress the sensory avalanche of the film (Figs. 2-5). Laura U. Marks details the connections between the senses and the pulsation of memory, developing a theory that

contemplates olfactory and tactile responses to audiovisual objects. For the author, “[m]emory is a process at once cerebral and emotional, and this is especially evident with smell” (148), and although *The Hole* is not part of the *corpus* Marks analyzes,

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it is a clear example of the invocation of time and memory through cinematic technique, by creating a densely sensory atmosphere. Since spoken dialogue is scarce, the bodily interactions between the main characters and the environment are preminent: the woman and the man urinate, defecate, vomit, and blow their noses, in scenes that emphasize the leftovers of human bodies, and the omnipresence of sanitary systems as indicative of the inescapable condition of social networks. As “the most intimate room in the house”³ (Vincent 231), the all-present bathroom purports the perverse negotiation between private and public, where the lens is another hole for the audience to spy from.

3 The author examines nineteenth century habits that make up “private life,” using France as a case study.

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Along the oppositions evidenced by the intrusion of the musical numbers, the confrontation of different temporal stances (chronological and sensible time, *chronos* and *kairos*, respectively) is at the core of the film's identity, and a nostalgic impulse defines its subtext.⁴

In her important study of nostalgia as a defining concept for the end of the century – in itself a symptom of the larger nostalgic impulse that prevailed as the year 2000 approached – Svetlana Boym distinguishes between two main conceptions of nostalgia: “restorative” (41–48), a model characterized by a disregard of the marks left by the passage of time, utilizing the idea of a supposedly extraordinary past that must be recovered, or even recreated, whose values must be brought to the imperfect present⁵; and “reflective nostalgia” (49–55) defined by an acceptance of the impossibility of reconstruction, an approach marked by ironic interpretations and a collective perception of memory. Considering the Greek etymological origin of the word, nostalgia means the ache associated with the desire to return home. In its contemporary colloquial use, it concerns the longing for a specific historical time and a delimited space – as in a geographic location, where cultural and political landscapes contribute to a cohesive sense of national belonging. According to Anthony Smith's theory, there can be a point of view based on the “consciousness of belonging to a nation” that does not implicate ideological models or nationalistic movements (82), which suggests the possibility of associating reflective nostalgia with questions of national identity while, on the other hand, exploitative nationalistic operations rely on the restorative ethos. The reflective posture is arguably present in Tsai Ming-liang's millennial film, through its nonverbal discourse and formal qualities.

Taking into account the fragmented sense of belonging, upon which Tsai Ming-liang has publicly commented, seeing himself as neither Malaysian nor Taiwanese (Huang lines 81–83), it can be a delicate operation to analyze the filmic text through the prism of national identity. However, given the unequivocal diegetic place of his films – and the ontological condition of the *dispositif*, the camera as an observer, more than anything – the nostalgic impulse may present itself as a consequence of particular historical dynamics. Arguably, the

major events in Taiwan's political twentieth century are associated with the Japanese colonial rule that lasted from 1895 until 1945⁶, and the subsequent transference of power to the Kuomintang (KMT) that implemented martial law until 1987, when a democratization process became viable. The politics of cultural assimilation result in a “dauntingly complicated diversity” (Hong 6) that is naturally mirrored by artistic efforts. In literature concerned with the local and the global, regarding history and identity in Taiwan, the 1990s are seen as an decade of crescent preoccupation with identity, regarding national history and heritage (Lu 17-18), as if the impending millennium (or the ending of a hectic century) demanded a retrospective look at the politics of acculturation, oppression and the shaping of individual and collective senses of nation, as well as a search for “authenticity” (Tu 1122), an ever-present concept in the ample discussion about Taiwanese identity. Hsin-Yi Lu also refers to the impact of globalization, during the period from where Tsai's feature came to be, as being both “liberating and confusing” (18), reinforcing the negotiations between local and international, between a singular historical past and a common path, defined by economic structures and technological development, and the need for affirmation:

Owing to Taiwan's peculiar geo-political history, and particularly its entanglement with mainland China, the dynamic tension between globalizing energies and the urge to create an ever more robust nation is pronounced and central to the island's daily existence. (Lu 43)

Once more, the dichotomies that *The Hole* vehemently displays, and from which the nostalgic appeal surfaces, are coherent with the scattered sensation—felt by the characters, within the city, or even by the director—of belonging to somewhere.

The singularities of Taiwan's political situation at the turn of the millennium, and the global fixation on the year 2000 – Haut et Court's ambition to document the global expectations over the near future, through the works of high profile filmmakers from different countries, demonstrates this preoccupation – can also help sustain the affinity between reflective nostalgia and *The Hole*, proposing that the film establishes a transnational dialogue with the history of cinema, and appeals to a type of collective memory built by cinema and film practices. At the end of the millennium, a phenomenon labeled the “Taiwan miracle” defined by solid economic growth despite

4 Acknowledging this precise topic, Song Hwee Lim argues that the integration of Grace Chang's 1950s and 1960s musical references only carry a nostalgic quality “in retrospect,” as the songs don't have any “inherent nostalgic qualities” (142). This important remark sets methodological guides for the possible operations with nostalgia as a cultural field, given the constant transformations of the symbolic nature of cultural objects. From a twenty-first century perspective, *The Hole* is, like Chang's songs, an object of the past where traces of another time – CRT televisions or landline telephones, for example – are printed in collective memory, and are valuable details for the emergence of nostalgic undertones.

5 Boym mentions conspiracy theories and general displeasure with present conditions when compared to a grander past. This attitude can be observed in political far-right campaigns, focused on national symbols and professing an artificial necessity to restore a mythologized past.

6 Taiwan became a Japanese colony following the first Sino-Japanese War in 1895. With Japan's defeat in the Asia-Pacific War in 1945, political and cultural power was transferred to the Republic of China, to the Kuomintang (KMT) party (Nishimura 81-82).

financial adversities in the Asian continent (Wu 47), could be taken to, in a very broad sense, outline the diegetic conjuncture of *The Hole*, regarding the social and economic undertones of the dynamics inside the apartment building, defining the place of the main couple as members of a struggling class. Assuming the perils of resorting to simplistic correlations between filmic discourse and political climate, it can nevertheless be noted that, on a pragmatic level, themes of isolation, resistance and a vigorous attachment to an abstract idea of home are central to the film.

In addition, as part of an anthology, as an object that is forced to communicate with a larger structure, *The Hole* also belongs to a globalized, multicultural(ist) ecosystem that celebrates international diversity through worldwide distribution and the influence of film festivals.⁷ Contemporary discussion about the not-so-objective definition of globalization tends to address multiple phenomena of “Americanization,” although, as Robert Holton sharply states, the synergies that are at stake at end of the century global cultural exchanges, are not linear nor are they easily limited (141). His conception of hybridization is particularly appropriate here since it is mostly identifiable in the arts (149), and the exchange processes involved are evident in *The Hole*. For example, the ubiquity of television sets in many of the film’s scenes—a source of information regarding the developments of the epidemics, and a gate for escapist entertainment—implies the weight of uninterrupted connectivity, the global village made possible by electronic devices. The nonstop news broadcasting and “tevisual immediacy” (Tomlinson 59) are also marks of the changes in the perception of time and distance in the age of astounding technological progress. While the residents of the building execute their basic routines, voices from around the world – a French doctor, for instance – speak through their television sets about the spreading of the disease, another symptom of ineluctable connectivity.

Thus, the nostalgic impulse of Tsai Ming-liang’s film, immersed in end of the century apprehension, comes as well from a larger discourse about progress and the perception of time. While introducing her investigation, Svetlana Boym asserts that

Nostalgic manifestations are side effects of the teleology of progress. Progress was not only a narrative of temporal progression but also of spatial expansion. [...] Instead of coevalness of different conceptions of time, each local culture therefore was evaluated with regard to the central narrative of progress. Progress was a marker of global time; any alternative to this idea was perceived as a local eccentricity. (10)

Bringing this comprehensive statement to the closely bounded universe of *The Hole*, the nostalgic expression that

emanates from the articulation of cinematic strategies and narrative principles is like a side effect, the surplus of all the other elements (temporality, editing choices, camera angles and movements, colour palettes) that compose the film. The woman downstairs and the man upstairs – power dynamics and gender inequality (De Villiers 66) are accentuated by the places the characters occupy – defy unbridled progress and resist the authoritarian speed that defines the advent of the millennium, by staying, and by interacting with different temporal dimensions.

[T]he nostalgic impulse may present itself as a consequence of particular historical dynamics.

As previously hinted *The Hole* is not an heir of classic narrative structures, favoring a dispersed and slow unfolding of events without much regard for typified arcs or paradigmatic progression. The musical intermissions comprehend an additional layer of disruption to the already fragmentary scheme—aligned with modernity, with the cinema of the time-image (Deleuze), where the fractures of history are mirrored, absorbed, or processed by cinematic forms—and are, once again, saturated with irony, corroborating a reflective stance. In confluence with the erratic screenplay, the aesthetic and political identity of the film takes form through cinematic elements—especially editing patterns—that are decisive in creating a nostalgic subtext. Throughout the non-musical scenes, *découpage* is mostly neglected in favor of strictly arranged sequence shots⁸, where the camera pans, follows and hides, like a sensor responding to movement. Sometimes, it is like the camera is also in danger of contracting the virus, roaming carefully around the humidity-stricken dark chambers of the building, witnessing as much as showing. Nostalgia is then a by-product of these artistic decisions, surfacing from the collision between an idea of home—molded by conscience of locality and global syncretism—and a deep consciousness of temporal liminality – the looming new century, and the final moments of the old one, whose traces of inexpressible atrocities, political tumult and uncanny technological advancements are printed in collective memory.

A detailed temporal analysis confirms that during the ninety minutes of “real time”—measurable, chronological, expressed in numbers—the apparatus is precise in delimiting narrative time: the eve of the year 2000 is expected from the first scene to be the ending point. During seven days, the woman and the man go on about their lives while the hole gets larger, and eventually, in 2000, is used for the symbolic ascension. Another facet of temporality, which relates to a time that cannot

7 The film premiered at the 1998 Cannes Film Festival.

8 Curiously, the hole serves as a cutting device since scene architecture also depends on the position of the characters inside the building. Thus, most of the scenes are not strictly continuous, as there are indeed many cuts motivated by the up-and-down setting.



Fig. 6 | The suspended leg in Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, 01:07:54. Celluloid Dreams, 1998.

be measured, that is not necessarily linear nor can it be expressed in discrete units – thoroughly observed by Gilles Deleuze, Mary Ann Doane or Matilda Mroz, influenced by Henri Bergson's concept of duration – can be thought of as being intrinsically cinematic. As Mroz sensibly argues, “to speak of a homogenous process of film viewing is impossible” (41), as the perception of time is influenced by a number of variable factors and individual discernment. For Doane, the continuous shot embodies “a certain understanding of time and even a philosophy concerning its representation” (179), in truth, a film like *Werckmeister Harmonies* (2000) directed by Hungarian filmmakers Béla Tarr and Ágnes Hranitzky – also an arresting cinematic impression of the turn of the millennium – where every scene is a long sequence short, clearly exemplifies the philosophical questions regarding time, perception and the mechanisms of the apparatus. Still, the minimal *découpage* that creates the temporal fabric of *The Hole*⁹ and the different rhythms that infer the chronological clash between diegetic stances—where in the main narrative line, small actions dictate the duration of the shots, in the musical scenes, rhythm and camera movements are motivated by the songs' tempo—do propose a specific approach to time, and a possible commentary about the immediacy of electronic communications, the temporal acceleration of the era, where speed “has reached its ‘natural limit’” (Bauman 10).

The “liquid modernity” that Zygmunt Bauman attributes to the end of the twentieth century, where the pace of the world makes it impossible to maintain solid individual and institutional identities is contested by how temporal progression takes form in *The Hole*.

Preceding one of the most striking images of the film—the man upstairs' leg dangling over the woman's ceiling, after he decides to penetrate the hole with his inferior member (Fig. 6)—a sequence of essentially medium-long shots show Lee Kang-sheng's character slowly executing trivial tasks. He washes a metal spoon, eats from an open can while ignoring an insistent doorbell ringing, and cleans up around the hole on his floor, as if preparing for the act, like a ritual that needs to be consummated. The sound of ceaseless rain and the light of the room (greatly reminiscent the moody, dim landscapes of Fan Kuan, like *Travelers among Mountains and Streams* (谿山行旅) (c. 1000), or Edward Hopper's *Sun in an Empty Room* (1963) for its shadows, angle and straight lines (Fig. 7)) contribute to the duration of this buildup, which results in a grotesque

As the year 2000, in all its apocalyptic symbolism, comes to be, collective memory (...) can be a source of comfort

9 Which, evidently, is not particular to the director's 1990s features like *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992) or *Vive L'Amour* (1994) which are replete with the same recurrent motives, since his twenty-first century films *What Time Is it There?* (2001) and the accompanying *The Skywalk Is Gone* (2002) or *The Wayward Cloud* (2005), maintain the temporal identity and themes of displacement, solitude, urban alienation and a political configuration of place.



Fig. 7 | Light in an empty room in Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, 01:11:38. Celluloid Dreams, 1998.

exploration of repressed desire, giving yet another connotative meaning to the hole: a sexual vessel, or bodily orifice.

These temporal traits are made explicit by the unannounced overstepping of the musical scenes, where *découpage* is employed and the choreographed performances, excess, flamboyancy, bursting colors and vibrant music alter the rhythmic patterns of the film. It is also in the tension between these two approaches to scene composition that a nostalgic impetus lies, in that the direct citation of the 1950s and 1960s within a contemporary (barely) futuristic diegesis, where everything is somber and diseased, reveals a tender attitude towards that specific epoch. As Gary S. Cross writes,

the designation “the fifties” or “the sixties” is arbitrary and ambiguous, yet it is somehow still necessary even if and even because we each give “our” decade personal meaning. In fact, nostalgia invents periods like “the 1950s,” reducing a complex and contradictory decade into an image that says almost as much about when the decade was “invented” in nostalgia as about the decade itself. (89)

The historical and political complexity of the “arbitrary” decades makes the work of citation a delicate one, as the retrospective act invariably presupposes processes of framing and exclusion. In broad terms, during these decades Taiwan experienced the abrupt passage of governmental rule (and profound cultural changes), with the late 1940s marking the beginning of, in Peng Hsiao-yen’s words, “the so-called White Terror, which lasted for two or even three decades after the war” (234), a period of violent repression that “sowed the tragic seeds of

[T]he quasi-sacred image of ascension that concludes the film announces an alternative path for the troubled times to come.

lasting tension between the Mainlanders and Taiwanese locals” (Hong 39), echoed to international audiences on a particular important moment in Taiwan’s New Cinema, Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *A City of Sadness*, winner of the Golden Lion at the 1989 Venice Film Festival. Evidently, unlike Hou’s film, *The Hole* does not provide historical recreations neither does it offer an explicit commentary on concrete political events. Instead, the mid-century the film evokes is akin to the traits of artistic and cultural diffusion, reviving *motifs* from musical films.

In a way, spectators cannot have access to the 1950s and 1960s that the film projects, beyond the discrepancies of style that the musical moments enunciate. It is precisely that disconnection with what can be called a “realistic” approach, which is openly acknowledged, that points the way to the nostalgic traces. In *The Hole*, the artistic processes of inclusion and exclusion in order to create a space that merges different chronologies—the near future of the year 2000 and the abstract apparitions of past decades—is used as methodological principle.

Observing the frequent reminiscences of Classical Hollywood in Robert Longo’s photographic work, Vera Dika points out that a longing for these conservative decades is not promoted by the artist whose stills endorse the “resistance



Fig. 8 | A manifest sense of smell in Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, 00:46:18. Celluloid Dreams, 1998.

practice of the same era" (41), consolidating the need for these operations of cutting and clipping when remembering, representing and commenting on past periods.

The referencing of 1950s and 1960s Grace Chang's performances comes to life somewhat like the mental process of remembering an abstract mood, or an undefined time: through fragmentation and interweaving temporal and spatial dimensions, as the common areas of the building are the settings of the musical numbers, placing them in 1999, like apparitions from the past¹⁰. The present—which is also the near future—is the prevailing time, whereas the past is quoted, referenced, illustrated, alluded to, but never represented as a cohesive reality. In this manner, *The Hole* does not take the deceiving path of restoring a utopian past, or relying on a moralized memory of the precedent decades.¹¹

The ending title, signed by the director, reads "In the year 2000, we are grateful that we still have Grace Chang's songs to comfort us" (01:27:09–01:27:24), which could be a key to

grasping the central premise of Tsai Ming-liang's response to Haut et Court's project. As the year 2000, in all its apocalyptic symbolism, comes to be, collective memory – boldly and broadly shaped by film and popular music – can be a source of comfort, and unmediated human touch can be a solution for the *fin de siècle* unconstrained anxiety.

Tsai's film almost eradicates loneliness from its vocabulary.

If smell is a narrative *motif* throughout the film, related to human excretions and a diseased environment (Fig. 8) – notably, taste is also strongly manifested through the recurrent presence of canned meals and instant noodles. Like Gérard Vincent notes, regarding the evolution of private life in the twentieth century, "[p]eople in a hurry have no time for traditional cooking" leading to the development of "instant

10 As Yu Si-wah has pointed out, Grace Chang was herself a symbol of intercultural posture, performing Latin dances and merging Western and Chinese musical numbers (Yu 28).

11 A more recent example, from contemporary Hollywood cinema, *La La Land* (2016), directed by Damien Chazelle – "readily identifiable as a nostalgia film" (Sprenghler 38) and part of a tendency in commercial American cinema to invoke mid-century USA (Sprenghler 37) – reconstructs the atmosphere and formal techniques of Golden Age Hollywood musicals. Unlike Tsai's film, there is only one diegetic level in *La La Land*, and although the nostalgic appeal and mechanisms of citation related to a palpable consciousness of film history are equally promoted, the gesture of *The Hole*, with its ironic tone roaming meticulously through the realm of self-awareness, does not rely solely on aesthetic affinities with mid-century Asian and American cinema. Another suitable title would be Cheryl Dunye's 1996 feature film *The Watermelon Woman*, which exposes racist tropes in Hollywood representation methods, by constructing hypothetical 1930s and 1940s fiction films, that the main character (Dunye), in the present time, studies in order to find the identity of a neglected Black actress. Here, the aesthetic principles and mechanisms of segregation from Classical Hollywood are imitated for political reasons, as if to underline the fallacy of nostalgic idealization.

coffee, powdered milk, powdered soups, powdered sauces” (245) traces of which invade the world of *The Hole* – touch is kept restrained, as human contact is, given the pandemic situation, imprudent.

On the topic of haptic cinema and the possibility of a multi-sensory experience through audiovisual media, Laura U. Marks points out that touch is not necessarily stimulated by the presence of hands or skin on the screen, as that would “evoke a sense of touch through identification” (8), giving sound, textures, editing patterns, media characteristics and a multitude of other elements the ability to provoke the sense of touch. The similitude of filmmaking and handcrafted arts has also been addressed by media theories like Giuliana Bruno who, while introducing a section about the haptic qualities of Wong Kar-wai’s cinema, states that “[t]he filmmaking process has been linked in this intimate way to the pattern of tailoring since its inception” (36), confirming the implicit importance of the hands as producers of visual sensory territories and meaning. Marianne Hirsch, whose compelling definition of “postmemory” permeates contemporary conversation about inherited trauma, views skin as a surface able to record experience and retain memory and, consequently, transmit it through touch and haptic visibility (48). In *The Hole*, even if there is indeed an expressive haptic ambiance—notably by virtue of the humidity that invades the domestic spaces and the sexual tension generated by the hole—the symbolic nature of human touch is paramount. The long-awaited touch, made viable by an architectural accident, could be interpreted, using Hirsch’s formulation, as the transmission of an engraved experience, that of displacement, of disentanglement with the rhythms of the world at the verge of the millennium. Eventually, the *quasi*-sacred image of ascension that concludes the film announces an alternative path for the troubled times to come, where human contact prevails over fears, diseases, and technological mediation.

A HISTORY OF THE CENTURY, A HISTORY OF CINEMA

In *Camera Historica*, Antoine De Baecque examines the symbiotic relationship between cinema and history. For the author, cinema has the capacity of capturing historical events and, by means of its “mastery of time,” of creating history (16). Even though historical reenactments are abundant in film history, what De Baecque mainly tackles is the idea of a symptomatic meaning created by cinematic objects—a concept prominently advanced by Siegfried Kracauer in *From Caligari to Hitler*, a seminal observation of the signs imprinted in the cinema of Weimar, as clues for understanding a national disposition or collective mentality that could be linked to the rise of Nazism—whose forms are capable of absorbing the larger historical context. These processes of interweaving history and cinema may not be intentional or rationalized but are consequences of the inevitable anchoring of artistic manifestations in cultural and political conjunctures.

Regarding the complex cultural status of Taiwan cinema, Guo-Juin Hong observes that

filmic form makes legible the spectral and contingent quality of nation and nationhood in the context of Taiwan’s multiple and overlapping colonizations as various sets of forces that are different and apart from, and yet closely implicated by, the Mainland influences, the Japanese colonial legacies, and the changing international pressures. (6)

A keyword in both Hong’s statement and De Baecque’s conceptions, form – as the manifestation of the convergence of multiple aesthetic/narrative/technical elements – is interlaced with the paths of legibility (or interpretation) of the filmic text, which, in the case of Tsai’s film, and following Hong’s sharp argument, appears inside the tensions created by history. Moreover, the author asserts that “[f]ilmic text (...) must be taken seriously as a materialization of historiography and even meta-historiography” (Hong 184). As previously stated, in *The Hole*, the story of the alienated neighbours at the dawn of the millennium doesn’t explicitly allude to a historical perspective over the century that is ending. However, it is still relevant to situate the director’s work (and the characters’ diegetic universe) within a historical framework, in order to unveil the intricacies of the filmic discourse. The friction arising from globalization in a post-war context, and the politics of locality and definition of a national identity are particularly evident in the case of Taiwan. The consolidated impact of Taiwanese cinema comprehends not only the notable domestic success, contributing to the “definition of a transnational Chinese identity” (Yang), but also its consistent presence in European film festivals and North American award circuits.

Cinema itself (not as the collection of insurmountable filmic texts, but as an art with specific instruments), being a turn of the century event and an extremely impactful artistic (and educational, propagandist, or political) vehicle throughout the twentieth century, undeniably shaped the general relation with memory and the passage of time, as a major authority in the configuration of a visual idea of chronological progression. By the end of the millennium, the global fear of technological collapse—materialized by the Y2K problem, an ironic embodiment of the apocalyptic rhetoric associated with the year 2000—generated by the increasing dependence on digital structures, a substantiated transformation of the perception of time brought by the Internet, and the condition of a globalized world, understandably affected the international cinematographic panorama, while setting the anxiety tone for thinking about the future.

The Hole—and, perhaps, the whole body of Haut et Court’s anthology—is a capsule of its time, as it expressively mirrors the anxiety regarding the future, and establishes a conversation with the memory of the century that ends. Also, it might be said that it represents a form of resistance to what Paul Virilio has called

“the lack of depth of the present”¹² (144), a consequence of the emergence of a global time, through its narrative themes and cinematic technique.

Even if the Internet and digital technologies are not part of the film’s universe – which was shot “traditionally,” not echoing the digital transition in filmmaking practices – the late 1990s and early 2000s were marked by an exponential growth in worldwide Internet users, with documented numbers in Taiwan and mainland China (Tang 282), placing the film in the unavoidable context of abrupt rearrangements in human contact. The operations with temporality can be seen as a possible symptom of this crescent invasion of technology in everyday life, with the virus being a symbol of global connectedness. Memory and nostalgia are not indifferent to the way the virtual space is organized. Again, a theory of speed is brought forward as “[t]ime in cyberspace is conceived in terms of speed: speed of access and speed of technological innovation” resulting in the annihilation of “temporal experiments of remembering loss and reflecting on memory” (Boym 347), an idea that is concomitant with the question Andreas Huyssen poses regarding the “boom” in both memory and the act of forgetting that defines the turn of the millennium:

[w]hat if the relationship between memory and forgetting were actually being transformed under cultural pressures in which new information technologies, media politics, and fast-paced consumption are beginning to take their toll? (17)

The personal and heterogeneous experience of watching Tsai Ming-liang’s film—considering that a historical approach to film analysis can imply the invocation of other motion pictures that communicate with *The Hole* in indirect ways by sharing aesthetical principles or displaying similar artistic gestures—brings to mind countless examples (besides the direct summoning of mid-century Hong Kong films like *The Wild, Wild Rose* (1960), starring Grace Chang) that also bear a close relationship to history, that silently comment on the disquietude of the times. Ildikó Enyedi, the Hungarian director whose vision is also part of *2000, Seen by...*, reflected on scientific progress with an oneiric outlook in *My 20th Century* (1989), a magical tale about the beginnings of the century—another instance of the retrospective and nostalgic impulse—where early cinema is thoroughly referenced. Hollywood’s *The World, the Flesh and the Devil* (1959), directed by Ranald MacDougall presents a post-apocalyptic New York city where, like in the deserted building of *The Hole*, a man and a woman are the only remaining residents. In place of a dangerous virus, *The World...* uses nuclear catastrophe (mirroring the political tension and generalized fear of the 1950s) as a motivation for a larger perspective over racial prejudice, class struggles, and gender conventions. Hou Hsiao-hsien’s properly titled *Millennium Mambo* (2001), an early twenty-first century work, narrated from ten years in

the future, also approaches the millennium as a place of significant change – individually and at a global level. This state of mind, shared by Hou, Tsai, Yang, and so many others, is crystallized by their artistic efforts, as ways of extracting meaning from the strangeness of time.

Finally, as an odd companion piece, (and because the globalized perspective from which *The Hole* can be watched, may allow the invocation of disperse cultural manifestations), Portuguese novelist Luís Carmelo’s *A Falha*, published the same year Tsai’s film had its premiere, begins in 2001, as one of the main characters remembers an extraordinary event from the late 1990s. The intricate plot is centered on a high school reunion lunch in 1996, which culminates in the trapping of seven former colleagues under a monumental rock, at the base of a quarry. The human condition is put to test by the bizarre circumstances and the book ends precisely on the last day of 1999. This slightly futuristic exercise bears enormous affinities with Tsai Ming-liang’s vision of this specific moment in history, regardless of national identity and political prospects. The polysemy and inherent geological metaphor of both titles (*falha* means fault), or the act of placing human beings under extreme conditions, as if that would be the definition of the end (of the century), are two points of convergence between these two seemingly unrelated objects, that corroborate the retrospective/futuristic impulse of the era and the assumed consciousness of this chronological mark as a symbolic occurrence. In the words of Eric Hobsbawm, “the century ended in a global disorder whose nature was unclear, and without an obvious mechanism for either ending it or keeping it under control” (562). In a way, it is as if these cultural signs tried to untangle the disorder by processing it through their respective cinematic or literary tools.

FINAL REMARKS

While promoting *The Wayward Cloud*, Tsai Ming-liang said that truth is at the center of his intentions as a filmmaker, stating that “there is nothing more truthful than when a person is being alone” (Huang lines 87–89) implying that people’s social performances are absent in moments of complete loneliness. Within this paradigm, the focus on the mundane activities of the deeply lonely characters of *The Hole* comes up as a logical strategy to achieve that idealistic truth. Nonetheless, what this analysis tried to demonstrate is that, as a fragment of millennial cinema, deeply anchored both in a national setting and a globalized idea of the century that comes to an end, Tsai’s film almost eradicates loneliness from its vocabulary on two levels: a narrative one, where the two main characters are united by touch, taking advantage of the hole, breaking the physical barrier that keeps them apart; and a textual or symptomatic level, as a work that takes on collective memory and collective conception of the past to address the anxieties of the near future.

12 Italics from the original

Nostalgia, specifically Boym's understanding of a reflective posture towards it, comes forward with the peculiar musical sequences, while hovering throughout the entirety of film. Author Liew Kai Khiun, on a study regarding transnational memory and popular culture in Asia, has noted the "semi-divine connotations" in "everyday practices and performances of popular culture", referring to the use of holographic images in popular iconography (Liew 57-70). This play between the material and the immaterial (akin to the sacred and the profane) could also be a way of observing the nostalgic impulse, while admiring the Grace Chang numbers in the 1998 film. The

1950s, or the 1960s, whether they be a flawed globalized idea, or a structured historical and localized succession of events, or an abstract place of comfort, appear in the futurist dystopia that is *The Hole* as a hologram, an untouchable visual representation that is detached from reality while appearing to be contemporaneous with it. Thinking about the millennium using cinema as a medium – and it could probably be verified with similar conclusions, albeit very different approaches, in the other works that compose *2000... vu par* – imposes a sense of temporality, of absorbing individual and collective pasts to allow for a livable future. ■

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