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SPRING 2008

Asia on Film

HISTORY 300E--003
W 1:40–5:10, DU-120

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This course examines the cinematic cultures of east Asia—China, Hong Kong, Taiwan, and Japan—with some comparative notes with south (India) and west Asia, in particular Iran. We will not, however, be looking at those different cinematic cultures within the same time framework.

We'll begin with Japan and its masters of the 1940s and 1950s: Ozu, Mizoguchi, and Kurosawa, which represent some of the best works of post-war Japan. Even though Japanese cinema continued its thrive in the 1960s and after—at a time when the country has been pacified, absorbed its massive defeat, and became an economic superpower—it failed to produce the caliber of the works of the old masters. Indeed, it is even uncertain how much of the new generations of filmmakers owe to their older masters.

Strangely enough, lines of connection emerge here and there between the old Japanese masters (including Naruse) and some of the most promising and talented of the young "Chinese" (mainland China, Taiwan and Hong Kong) of the fifth- and sixth-generation filmmakers: Edward Yang, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Tsai Ming-Liang, and Jia Zhangke. It is possible that Japan's colonization of parts of China for over half a century (up to its defeat in 1945 in the wake of the bombing of Hiroshima and Nagasaki) has triggered a soul-searching activity in some of the contemporary Chinese filmmakers, pushing them back to the imperial fin-de-siècle of both China and Japan, when the nation-state was still yet to be born.

This search for a history in which to root the modern nation-state and its violence on individuals, territories, and space-time configurations, could constitute the lighting thread to some of the works that we'll be examining this semester. In effect, and up to the late nineteenth century, both Japan and China were "feudal." But while Japan began its long

route towards modernization—and eventually world economic supremacy—in the wake of the Meiji reformation, China was still a degenerating imperial power up to the First World War. After surviving a troubled republican period, it converted to communism after the Second World War, and reopened itself to the world after Mao's death. The point here is that compared, say, to European and North American histories and their much "smoother" *longue durée* transitions, both Japan and China had to go through rapid breaks and transitions, to the point that even that fragile "link" with the nineteenth-century fin-de-siècle seems forever lost. That feeling of loss, and its effects on the individual, family, the territory and the nation, in addition to its disruptive effects on space-time situations (for instance, in the relationships between city and countryside, the memories of young and older generations, men and women, the wealthy, the professional liberal middle class, and the poor) are some of the thematic topoi of some of the films that we'll be exploring.

To explore such themes, Japanese and Chinese filmmakers have invented all kinds of cinematic and narrative techniques. Let us begin with some general remarks that characterize Chinese cinema, or at least traits common to some of the feature films that we'll be viewing this semester.

It is a daunting experience to look at the most promising Chinese filmmaking of the last couple of decades, more specifically since the end of Maoist communism, and China's moving to a more aggressive economy under the leadership of the communist party. We're not discussing here the Hollywood-like Chinese production which, whilst its melodramatic ethos, pedagogically centers on heroic characters: a mastered linear narrative, a process of redemption, an in-between good and evil narration, and a happy or tragic ending—or, rather, the very *existence* of an ending is in itself proof of the plausibility of a story line. In short, structure implies storytelling, character, heroes, emphasis on the person over the family, nature, or the nation.

The Chinese films that we're analyzing take us away from that kind of filmmaking. We need to understand how some technical choices like the long-takes, the rarity of close-ups, the importance attributed to background settings (architectural and natural forms), and the lack of a formal storyline or overreaching narrative structure, express a particular view of the individual, society, history, and nationhood within postmodern consumerism.

In what follows I'll propose some basic comparisons between Iranian, Chinese, and Japanese films. As the societal conditions among these societies are vastly different, as well as their artistic cultures, the detected similarities below are not meant to efface major differences in the *meaning* of a particular technique. For example, long-shot strategies in Panahi or Kiarostami could have an entirely different purpose from the ones we find in Ozu, Hou Hsiao-Hsien, or Tsai Ming-Liang. In short, working out some formal similarities should not dissuade us for an in-depth hermeneutic look at each film separately.

Documentary vs. fiction. The Chinese (and Iranian) films have blurred the classical distinction between "documentary" and "fiction." The post-Fascist era of Italian neorealism, beginning with Rossellini's *Rome Open City,* had famously introduced "documentary"-style shooting in scenes incorporated within larger fictional narratives. The so-called "documentary" style consisted in particular on a reliance on non-professional actors, genuine locations (e.g. street scenes), and long takes with fixed or hand-held cameras. It also implied, albeit very partially,

skirting fully developed and linear (pedagogical) narratives, or the traditional effects of melodrama and its focus on plots and characters (or close-ups). Either narratives could be very sketchy, or else "action" per se and the chronology of events had a secondary role. But by the time neorealism had matured, it had everything into it but that "documentary" claim. Thus, both Antonioni's "existential" ennui style, and Pasolini's thematic abstractionism, had foregone much of the documentary aspect of neorealism. It is well known that Antonioni, who had in the past filmed many documentaries, had repeatedly stated his sense of the inadequacy of this formal structure as well as of the neorealistic vision, which in Italy had found in Rossellini its most inventive representative. The reason why I brought the dilemmas of Italian neorealism in relation to contemporary Chinese (and Iranian) cinema is because of some similarities regarding the documentary versus fiction paradigm. On one hand, Chinese and Iranian cinemas have introduced long shots (often with digital hand-held cameras) that look like mini-documentaries within broader fictional accounts. The street long-camera takes are in particular notoriously hard to complete, as they cannot be cut and edited, and they have to be repeated rather than edited (e.g. Panahi's *Circle*). Herein lies their force: because they cannot be the subject of a traditional cut-and-paste editing, they place the spectator in an uncomfortable position of different expectations, while they breathe a fresh air into the film medium. On the other hand, those mini-documentaries are not as "improvised" as it might first appear. As Kiarostami's *10* perfectly shows, they could be as well crafted as films with traditional narratives and could even require more off-stage lengthy preparations with actors and camera equipment. In the final analysis, the major breakthrough might not be the "documentary" versus "fiction" dilemma, as much as a new way to practice montage. As the French critic André Bazin had already noted, the failure of montage lies in its decision to pre-interpret, through the syntagmatic order it elaborates, every narrative fiction. In other words, the essence lies in changing the rules of montage, and providing a fresh alternative to classical editing, while forcing the viewer to look differently (e.g. a long uninterrupted take, or when two people talk, the camera does not frame them, but frames something else—*hors champs*).

Narratives and micro-histories. Based on what was stated above, the issue of "narratives" (or lack thereof) turns a crucial one in conjunction with the documentary/fiction issue: Do Iranian films, as pioneered for instance by the likes of Kiarostami and Panahi, Hou Hsiao-Hsien or Tsai Ming-Liang, have any "narratives," or are they constructed on other types of narratives? I think that the issue of narrative might be as misleading as that of the documentary-style montage. In effect, the strength of Iranian, Chinese and Taiwanese movies lies less in the structure of their narratives, or their presumed documentary style, than in the *montage* itself. It is, indeed, the montage that would permit a focus on particular scenes within a syntactic arrangement. For example, Jafar Panahi's *White Balloon* is entirely constructed from the time framework of a small girl who is completely focused on recovering the object that she had lost that same day. In this case, the novelty is that the time of the movie coincides with the action's *real* time—a couple of hours within the consciousness of a small girl. As everything is constructed from the eyes of a single protagonist, the spectator is left with no other perspective but that of the girl herself, which requires perhaps a different level of concentration and focus. Reliance on non-professional actors, in conjunction with a quasi-documentary style, improvisation and hand-held (digital) camera techniques, all give that whimsical impression that there is no constructed narrative. But that's, I think, an illusion of montage. Actually, as witnessed in Kiarostami's *And the Wind Will Carry Us,* and *10,* there's a

great deal of formalisms deployed in the combination of narrative structure, acting, framing, and editing, which points to more premeditated than improvised techniques.

Political and social prohibitions. It is well known that since the 1978 revolution the Iranian cinema has operated within all sorts of constraints: women must wear a scarf or chador ("veil"), intimate/sexual scenes are forbidden, and the heritage of the Islamic revolution cannot be critiqued. Yet, in spite of all such political and social constraints, there is a great deal of freedom and experimentation in Iranian movies. What is more paradoxical is that, by all accounts, the Iranian cinema seems to have improved in comparison to the 1960s and 1970s when Iran was under the "secular" régime of the Pahlavis. It seems therefore that Iranian cinema managed to operate better—if not more freely—within its more "natural" setting of Shii Islam. In other words, it is precisely the prohibitions coming from an authoritarian Islamic régime that transformed Iranian cinema into a critical apparatus, even far more trenchant in its observations than the more liberal Turkish or Israeli cinemas have produced since the 1980s.

In similar vein, it is impossible to think Chinese cinema without the experience of communism, and the perseverance of the communist party in post-Mao China, but with considerable autonomy accorded to the Chinese enterprises as a whole. China's rapid transformations have created identity crises of sorts that Chinese art has just begun to explore.

GENERAL

There are 12 films in conjunction with weekly readings that we'll discuss collectively in class. Your participation is essential for the success of the course.

In addition to the two-draft free-topic paper (see below the section on papers), you'll have to submit three interpretive essays based on our films and weekly readings: you'll receive sets of questions for each. *Each paper counts as 20 percent of the total.* ***All interpretive essays are take-home and you'll be given a week to submit them.*** *The purpose of the interpretative essays is to give you the opportunity to go "beyond" the literal meaning of a film/text and adopt interpretive and "textual" techniques. A failing grade in all interpretive essays means also a failing grade for the course, whatever your performance in the term-paper is.* ***All essays and papers must be submitted on time according to the set deadlines.***

First Interpretive Essay: hand out with questions on February 6	**20%**
Second Interpretive Essay: February 27	**20%**
Final Interpretive Essay: April 16	**20%**
Term-paper: 2 drafts 10% each • First draft due on April 2 • Final draft on April 30	**20%**
Presentations, Blackboard postings, and class attendance and participation	**20%**

- It is essential that you complete all readings on time, and that you come to class well prepared. **Always come to class with the required book**: we'll discuss all films and readings extensively.
- The first, second, and final interpretive essays are all based on our weekly films and readings. They all consist of a single essay for which you'll receive the appropriate questions at the dates above, and you'll submit them in class a week later.
- The question handouts will only be distributed in class—no email communication.
- For all five papers follow the procedures outlined below in the section on papers.
- Essays and papers are to be submitted only in class. Do not email or fax any material. Do not submit your papers outside the classroom.
- It's your responsibility to submit all essays and papers ***in class*** on time at the deadlines below. Late papers will be graded accordingly, and papers submitted a week after the deadline will be graded F.
- You must also submit, in addition to the printed hard copies, an equivalent electronic file of each paper in the digital dropbox on Blackboard.
- Each non-submitted paper will receive the grade of F, and your final grade will be averaged accordingly.
- The mid-term paper is a free-topic exercise based on a film(s) of your own choice.
- If you do not show up for an assigned presentation, you'll be graded F.

The course consists of a combination of 12 films that will be shown in class each Tuesday, and four books. In each session we'll discuss one film and the reading assignments. All dates, assignments, readings and films could be subject to change, pending on our progress throughout the semester. You'll be notified of any change on blackboard.

Required readings

- Peter Brunette, *Wong Kar-wai* (University of Illinois Press)
- John Anderson, *Edward Yang* (Illinois)
- Chris Berry, *Chinese Films in Focus* (British Film Institute, California UP)

Films/DVD availability

All 12 films are available on the American market on DVD, zone 1, NTSC format. US copyright laws do not authorize making copies of privately owned DVDs to circulate around.

If you've missed a session, or if you would like to review a film privately on your own, you could either check for the DVD at the Cudahy library, or in other libraries in the Chicago area, or rent it from one of the popular stores (Blockbuster or Hollywood).

You can also check DVD availability at the following services:

- Netflix (mostly rental): Netflix.com
- Facets multimedia (Fullerton, Chicago): http://www.facets.org/asticat
- Amazon.com
- Tower records: http://www.towerrecords.com/

WEEKLY FILMS

1. January 16: *Calendar* (Atom Egoyan, Canada/Germany/Armenia, 1993)

A photographer and his wife take photographs of Armenian churches for use in a calendar. Their driver, a local resident, expounds on the history of the churches while the wife translates. The photographer becomes jealous of his wife's bonding with the driver. In a series of flash-forwards, the photographer stages identical dinners with several women, who pretend to talk on the phone while he writes. His wife, now estranged from him, leaves repeated messages on his answering machine, asking why he never contacts her. Yet another thought-provoking look into strange, intertwined relationships from the always enigmatic Egoyan.

2. January 23: *End of Summer* (Yasujirô Ozu, Japan, 1961)

After his second experience with colour, a light, happy "Ohayo," secretly epic and impressed, Ozu shot one of the milestones of his career: "Kohayagawa-ke no aki" is, with "Banshun" and "Munakata shimai," his best work. Most of the themes exposed in previous films (father's intervention in his daughters' lives, love (in the hands of others), solitude) are here integrated in a comedy-structured film that becomes a drama. It's perhaps his unique melodrama and it is shown with the desperate of the last breath for some characters, as usual in Ozu, doubtful and seeking a place for their quiet happiness.

3. January 30: *Ikiru* (Akira Kurosawa, Japan, 1952)

Kanji Watanabe is a longtime bureaucrat in a city office who, along with the rest of the office, spends his entire working life doing nothing. He learns he is dying of cancer and wants to find some meaning in his life. He finds himself unable to talk with his family, and spends a night on the town with a novelist, but that leaves him unfulfilled. He next spends time with a young woman from his office, but finally decides he can make a difference through his job. After Watanabe's death, co-workers at his funeral discuss his behavior over the last several months and debate why he suddenly became assertive in his job to promote a city park, and resolve to be more like Watanabe.

4. February 6: *Ugetsu monogatari* (Kenji Mizoguchi, Japan, 1953)

In the civil wars of 16th century Japan, two ambitious peasants want to make their fortunes. The potter Genjuro intends to sell his wares for vast profits in the local city, while his brother-in-law Tobei wishes to become a samurai. Their village is sacked by the marauding armies, but Genjuro's kiln miraculously survives, and they and their wives head for the city. However, Genjuro soon sends his wife Miyagi back home, promising to return to her soon, and Tobei, in his keenness to follow the samurai, abandons his wife Ohama. Meanwhile, a wealthy noblewoman, the Lady Wakasa, shows an interest in Genjuro's pots, and invites him to her mansion.

5. February 13: *The World of Apu* (Satyajit Ray, India, 1959)

Apu is a jobless ex-student dreaming vaguely of a future as a writer. An old college friend talks him into a visit up-country to a village wedding. This changes his life, for when the bridegroom turns out to be mad, Apu's friend asks him to become the husband! After initial revulsion at the idea, Apu agrees. Apu takes his exquisite bridge, Aparna, back to Calcutta. But Aparna dies in childbirth, Apu leaves Calcutta, crazy with grief, and his son Kajal is left abandoned with his wife's parents. Only after a long period of total indifference to worldly responsibilities, does Apu become capable of returning to the world.

6. February 27: *The Blue Kite* (Tian Zhuangzhuang, China, 1993)

On Dry Well Lane in Beijing in 1953, Chen Shujuan and Lin Shaolong marry. A year later their son, nicknamed Tietou (Iron Head), is born. The Party is everywhere: Mao's photograph, loud-speaker announcements, visits from the neighborhood committee. Shaolong dies in a reform camp; a close family friend, who protects Shujuan and her son partly out of guilt for lying to authorities about Shaolong, succumbs to malnutrition; a confrontation with the Red Guard leads to injury, imprisonment and death. Shujuan's love for Tietou sustains her, and the child's blue kite embodies hope: "I can make another for you," says Tietou's dad; by the end, Tietou promises this to a small child.

7. March 19: *Yi Yi* (Edward Yang, Taiwan, 2000)

Each member of a family in Taipei asks hard questions about life's meaning as they live through everyday quandaries. NJ is morose: his brother owes him money, his mother is in a coma, his wife suffers a spiritual crisis when she finds her life a blank, his business partners make bad decisions against his advice, and he reconnects with his first love 30 years after he dumped her. His teenage daughter Ting-Ting watches emotions roil in their neighbors' flat and is experiencing the first stirrings of love. His 8-year-old son Yang-Yang is laconic like his dad and pursues truth with the help of a camera. "Why is the world so different from what we think it is?" asks Ting-Ting.

8. March 26: *Three Times* (Hou Hsiao-Hsien, Taiwan, 2005)

Three stories of women and men: in 1966, "A Time for Love," a soldier searches for a young woman he met one afternoon playing pool; "A Time for Freedom," set in a bordello in 1911, revolves around a singer's longing to escape her surroundings; in 2005 in Taipei, "A Time for Youth" dramatizes a triangle in which a singer has an affair with a photographer while her partner suffers. In the first two stories, letters are crucial to the outcome; in the third, it's cell-phone calls, text messages, and a computer file. Over the years between the tales, as sexual intimacy becomes more likely and words more free, communication recedes.

9. April 2: *The River* (Tsai Ming-Liang, Taiwan, 1997)

In Taiwan, Xiao-kang, a young man in his early 20s, lives with his parents in near silence. He is plagued by severe neck pain. His father is bedeviled by water first leaking into his bedroom and then flooding the apartment; rain is incessant. Xiao-kang's mother is overcome by sexual longing for her son, sometimes making seemingly incestuous overtures. They try

virtually every intervention for Xiao-kang's neck: Western medicine, a chiropractor, acupuncture, an herbal doctor, and a faith healer, Master Liu. Are the family's silent dynamics and Xiao-kang's neck pain connected? And what about the body floating in the Tamsui River: is everything dead?

10. April 9: *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (Tsai Ming-Liang, Taiwan, 2006)

Like all of Liang's films, this is a very, very quiet movie. That's the whole point: long takes, minimal dialog, you get out of it what you're prepared to concentrate hard enough on to see the subtlety of.

11. April 16: *Platform* (Jia Zhangke, China, 2000)

Set in Fenyang, Shanxi Province, the film focuses on a group of amateur theatre troupe performers whose fate mirrors that of the general population in China as massive socio-economic changes sweep across the mainland. The film commences in 1979 with the troupe performing numbers idolizing Mao Zedong, ending in the '80s when the shows reflect the strong Western influences pervading China, covering a decade in which China saw tremendous changes.

12. April 23: *The World* (Jia Zhangke, China, 2004)

"The World" is a theme park on the outskirts of Beijing, sixteen kilometers from the Chinese capital, designed around scaled representations of the world's famous landmarks such as the Eiffel Tower or the Leaning Tower of Pisa. The site is seen here not from the visitors' point of view but through the eyes of a few of its staff, lonely people, communicating poorly, a bit disillusioned with life, glittering for the tourists but dull and restricted as far as they are concerned. We meet, among others, pretty young dancer Tao and Taisheng, a security guard who is fond of her but not of personal commitment...

PAPERS

You are requested to write one major research paper to be submitted on April 30. You will have to submit, however, a first draft of this paper on April 2. The first draft should be as complete as possible and follow the same presentation and writing guidelines as your final draft, and it will count as 10 percent of your total grade unless the final draft is of superior quality. The purpose of the first draft is to let you assess your research and writing skills and improve the final version of your paper. It is advisable that you choose a research topic and start preparing a bibliography as soon as possible. I would strongly recommend that you consult with me before making any final commitment. It would be preferable to keep the same topic for both drafts. You will be allowed, however, after prior consultation, to change your topic if you wish to do so.

Papers must be related to film and film theory in Asia, and must include the analysis of at least one film of your own choice. Papers with broader topoi must first receive instructor's approval. *Papers should be analytical and conceptual*. Avoid pure narratives and chronologies and construct your paper around a main thesis.

Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations,* 5th ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987. Intended for students and other writers of papers not written for publication. Useful material on notes and bibliographies.

April 30: FINAL DRAFT DEADLINE

Keep in mind the following when preparing your preliminary and final drafts:

- once you've decided on a paper-topic and prepared a preliminary bibliography, post an abstract and bibliography of your topic on blackboard <blackboard.luc.edu> (see below). Your abstract should include: (i) title; (ii) description; (iii) sources; (iv) methodology (e.g. suggestions on how to read sources). **Your preliminary draft will not be accepted unless you've submitted an on-line abstract by March 30.**
- preliminary drafts should be submitted on time, April 2.
- preliminary drafts should be complete and include footnotes and an **annotated bibliography**. (The Turabian reference above is annotated: it briefly spells what the book is about and to whom it might be useful.)
- do not submit an outline as a first draft.
- incomplete and poorly written first drafts will not be accepted, and you'll be advised to revise your first draft completely.
- if you submit a single draft throughout the semester, you'll receive F for 10% of the total and your final grade will be averaged accordingly.
- **your final draft should take into consideration all the relevant comments provided on your earlier draft:**
  - all factual and grammatical mistakes should be corrected, in addition to other stylistic revisions.
  - passages indicated as "revise" or "unclear" or "awkward" should be totally revised.
  - when specific additional references have been suggested, you should do your best to incorporate them into your material.
  - there might be several additional suggestions in particular on your overall assumptions and methodology. It will be up to you to decide what to take into consideration.
- **Submit the final draft with your preliminary corrected one.**
- if you're interested in comments on your final paper and interpretive essay, request an appointment by e-mail.

Please use the following guidelines regarding the format of your papers:

- use 8x10 white paper (the size and color of this paper). Do not use legal size or colored paper.
- only print on one side of the paper.
- should be double spaced, with single spaced footnotes at the end of each page and an *annotated bibliography* at the end (see bibliography below).
- keep ample left and right margins for comments and corrections of at least 1.25 inches each.

- all pages should be numbered and stapled.
- **a cover page should include the following: paper's title, course number and section, your name, address, e-mail, and telephone.**

Electronic forum

This course is listed on the Loyola Blackboard webpage to freely post messages and conduct discussions: login at <blackboard.luc.edu> and follow the instructions.

Besides a synopsis of all your presentations and term-paper, you must post each week a news item on Asian and/or world art scenes. An Op-Ed or a reply to a posting are considered valid entries.

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