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現代廢墟中的身體感：

以梅洛龐蒂之視野觀看畢贛的《路邊野餐》



**The Body in Modern Ruins:
Viewing Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* from
Merleau-Pontian Perspectives**

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摘要

在《路邊野餐》中，畢贛透過緩慢的鏡頭運動、非線性敘事、符號與意象之使用、詩歌朗誦，以及少量對白架構出一獨特視野，並成就一種對科技化時代之詩性抗衡。其中，現代廢墟之場景設定與其敘事架構是相輔相成的，在此充滿多維度感官經驗之場域，創作者、觀眾，以及電影角色皆立身於意義的多重詮釋過程。此論文旨在探討人與環境之非二元動態辯證關係，並以梅洛龐蒂哲學作為切入視角，據此強調「曖昧」(ambiguity) 之力道，進而提倡一種詩性的觀看態度。

本論文由緒論與三個章節構成。在緒論的部分，我將本論文之架構進行簡單的梳理，並透過文獻回顧以及研究方法，將《路邊野餐》以及梅洛龐蒂觀點之相容性進行探討，以呈現論文探討對象之切要性。在第一章，我則會深入探究電影中之曖昧現象，並以畢贛運用「碎片」之手法，觀察充斥於日常生活中的「衡量」(evaluation) 過程。在第二章，重點則延伸至該象徵性碎片所在之場域：現代廢墟。其「跨界」之特殊性不僅使其成為梅洛龐蒂體現觀 (embodiment) 之理想的探索對象，更在畢贛之剪輯和敘事手法中達到了另外一層意義。在第三章，我進而將《路邊野餐》視為一蘊含「廢墟情境」之生活世界，並藉由梅洛龐蒂對於「情境」(situation) 以及「肉」(flesh) 之詮釋，強調環境與身體之相遇，以及生命經驗之豐富性。

關鍵字：畢贛、《路邊野餐》、梅洛龐蒂、情境、肉身、體現

Abstract

In *Kaili Blues*, Bi Gan employs slow camera movement, non-linear narrative, symbolic objects, recitation of poetry, and minimal dialogue to construct distinctive cinematic landscapes that resonate with the story development. In the realms of multi-dimensional perceptual experiences, the parties involved all participate in the manifold interpretive processes of the meaning of life. This thesis accordingly conducts a reading of the cinematic dynamic relationships between human perception and the world, and aims at uncovering the poetic forces of “ambiguity.”

This thesis is composed of an introduction and three chapters. In the Introduction, I sketch out the overall thesis structure and explicate on the compatibility of *Kaili Blues* and Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy. In Chapter One, I probe into the ambiguous phenomena in the film, and focus on Bi’s adoption of “fragments” as correspondences in the film. In Chapter Two, I argue that modern ruins could be considered as embodied spaces through Merleau-Pontian embodiment, with Bi’s directorial methodology incorporated into the discussions. In Chapter Three, I further view of *Kaili Blues* representative of the lived world with “ruinous situations.” Through Merleau-Ponty’s notions of situation and flesh, I conclude that the constant dialectical encounters among worldly phenomena can be finely observed in *Kaili Blues*, and we should similarly pay attention to the richness of our everyday perceptual experiences.

Key words: Bi Gan, *Kaili Blues*, Merleau-Ponty, situation, flesh, embodiment

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Introduction

I. Background and Motivation

On the course of an approximately two-and-a-half mainstream film, we are tricked into the dashing sophistication of 3D visual effects and advanced sound systems. Gunfights, street explosions, or car racings have become formulae commonly-employed in blockbusters. Cinema has, to a certain degree, developed into a medium for excessive image amalgamations accompanied with intense bombings that sometimes result in cinematic imprecisions or unnecessities, if not employed with discretion. Such a phenomenon, however, assuredly arises from bilateral interactions. Being partially the inevitable outcome of technological enhancement, it is meanwhile continuing to sustain due to the ever-growing appetite from the audience. It is as if the lucrative patterns have been found and set. Despite the multi-dimensional perspectives from which we can look at this issue, be it socio-cultural or neo-capital, what remains common is the subtle sense of hollowness that follows the end of the movie. Such awareness, hence, intrigues the search for a route that can arrive at a return to “the things themselves” and to go back to the elemental nourishment that cinema can possibly bestow on us.

Poetic cinema contributes to an ambience of ambiguity and elusiveness; it denotes a vast territory where the spectator is drawn either into the otherworldly state

of mind of the protagonist, when logical spatio-temporal consistency is forgone, or simply into the sedate scenes that arouse spiritual meditation. In both ways, once a film is delineated with poetic brushes, it opens up the realm of non-dualistic immersions with other beings and the world. In this dimension, Bi Gan's *Kaili Blues* can be considered as provocative of distinct cinematic experiences that trigger similar contemplations. As a director/ poet enormously influenced by Andrei Tarkovsky, Bi creates a cinematic world so poetically-established that it allows us to unreservedly form personal significations without general narrative limits. Moreover, the uniqueness of the space settings further contributes to the film's magical realism sentimentality. That is, the storyline is founded upon authentic living territories that couldn't be more earthier. Unfinished or abandoned architectures constitute the cinematic spaces, with Miao traditional buildings here and there. The cities appear left behind by modernization, and the characters seem to dwell in the conjuncture of the lost and the remained. Therefore, to rest the thesis on *Kaili Blues* is to reckon with its poetic aesthetics that demonstrate personal experiences in intimate relations with the surroundings. In other words, the focuses will be to explore the construction of its filmic spaces, especially modern ruins, to investigate the perceptual experiences of Chen, the protagonist, and to examine his mystic encounters through Merleau-Ponty's ontology of situation and flesh, with the storyline of *Kaili Blues* as the basis. The

primary concerns will be finding possible or latent connections among the innate dynamism and effectiveness of modern ruins, their exemplifications as poetic “circumstances,” and the disclosure of flesh from within.

II. Literature Review

In *Kaili Blues*, Chen, as a poet, an ex-con, and a local doctor, leads his life in a remote village in China. The dim clinic, the timeworn air-raid shelter, the underpass, and the overall gloom emitted from the prevalent debris altogether envelope the film with hues of historicity. The world in *Kaili Blues* is fundamentally composed of architectural remains, and such space settings can be considered as the crucial groundwork for later narrative development. From such an aspect, the discussions will begin from the (re)-evaluations of modern ruins. First, we can examine a volume of essays, *Ruin Memories: Materialities, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past*, edited by Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir. This collection approaches ruins with an anthropological method, and its introduction corresponds to my thesis motive, namely, mass-production in the era of technological advancement. It offers versatile topics dealing with the multi-dimensional features of ruins, such as their sense of “trusted vagueness,” the mapping of time, the recovered memories, the artistic valorization, and the ontology of space. In addition, this volume presents the diverse

attitudes toward modern ruins, as compared to those in response to the classical ones, and questions the general negative reception of urban derelicts. All in all, the collected essays provide refreshing explorations and reassessments on (modern) ruins, presenting theoretical discourses on how we should reflect not only the cultural significance of ruins, but our blurred and somehow swaying identities nowadays as well. Second, *Ruins of Modernity*, edited by Julia Hells and Andreas Schönle, and Nick Yablon's *Untimely Ruins: An Archaeology of American Urban Modernity 1819-1919* are two publications that put specific emphases on modern ruins. *Ruins of Modernity* investigates the hidden dimensions of natural disaster locations, imperial/colonial debris, or factories abandoned by economic recesses to bring out the complexities of identity rendered by the fast-pacing technological advancement. Post-war constructions and industrial ruins, such as the ones in Detroit, are topics among the discussions pertinent to modernist architecture. In the latter publication, Yablon describes several types of "untimely" ruins that are triggered by American urbanism; they are completed not in the form of intact buildings, but emerge already as ruins before completion. Through the inspections on American culture in different eras, Yablon also offers cross-examinations in literary works from other countries. From the initial surging of urban growth, the antebellum times, to the modern technology that brings out the diversity of interactions, this publication details the

processes of geographical transitions and the changes of our way of life.

Following the discussions on the values of modern ruins, we continue to observe such spaces through Merleau-Ponty's notion of embodiment. The explorations begin as in how the sense of "bodiliness" in modern ruins may be expounded through Merleau-Ponty's phenomenological approaches to space, place, or architectural design. First, *Rethinking Aesthetics: The Role of Body in Design*, edited by Ritu Bhatt, can be considered as a collection that draws on many of Merleau-Ponty's conceptions to delineate the role of the body. Bhatt brings together vibrant essays that restate the importance of bodily perception in a particular place. The themes of embodied aesthetics, place identity, body conscious in design, and environmental embodiment are integrated into the discussions, and guide us to rethink our bodily relationship in a particular space. Ruins, however, are not specifically addressed, but the correlations between perceptual experiences and everyday places still provide key concepts for starters. The second book and third book, on the other hand, are based on Merleau-Ponty's phenomenology: Jonathan Hale's *Merleau-Ponty for Architect*, and *Merleau-Ponty: Space, Place, Architecture*, a volume of essays edited by Patricia M. Locke and Rachel McCann. Hale's book locates architectural design in crucial Merleau-Pontian thinking. The embodied space, the thickness of time, the depth of space, the architecture of empathy, and the language of experiences

together present discourses that inter-disciplinarily interpret Merleau-Ponty's conceptions on perceptual experiences and the primacy of perception in the construction of our world view. As for the second collection, while it is devoted to Merleau-Ponty, it also speaks to other philosophers such as Irigaray, Deleuze, and Piaget. The book introduces cross-border thinking on the experience and expression of space on manifold levels, and brings together the understanding of lived space, psychological depth, imagined landscapes, and space's relation with time and memory.

Both of the latter publications, in short, delineate the pivotal matters in Merleau-Ponty's philosophy, and infuse them with the field that is academically considered to be under-theorized. To summarize, modern ruins can be viewed of as contributive to a much higher extent of embodiment. Through the understanding of the hidden forces of modern ruins and the possible relations our body can attain with it, the explications serve as the foundation for the subsequent discussions on Merleau-Ponty's notion of "situation" and "flesh."

With regard to Merleau-Pontian scholarships, we can begin from Samuel B. Mallin's *Merleau-Ponty's Philosophy*. In this book, Mallin states that "situation" functions as the most comprehensive term Merleau-Ponty uses to "express the ultimate unity of man with his surroundings, and thus it is fundamental to the discussion of all aspects of his epistemology and metaphysics" (Mallin 7). By

addressing the logic of situation, Mallin extends its significance to that of primordial contact, perception, cognition, being, and inter-subjectivity. Mallin elaborates on several of Merleau-Pontian ideas on the axis of the ontology of situation; in such a manner, this book should be deemed not only as the insight into the profundity of “situation,” but the re-accentuation on the mutual dependency of the overall Merleau-Pontian conceptions. The second book from which we can examine is Donald A. Landes’s *Merleau-Ponty and the Paradoxes of Expression*. Landes establishes Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as gestural of paradoxical expressions, and such logic can be seen in the example of time: “perfectly familiar to each other, but that none of us can explain it to the others” (VI 3). According to Landes, understanding such a paradox is an imperative step in addressing Merleau-Ponty’s diverse accounts on human perception. The notion of “situation” is addressed in similar discussions, and Lande’s accounts can be valuable when it comes to comprehending both of the implicit and explicit uses of paradoxical expressions from Merleau-Ponty’s philosophical perspectives.

Moving on to Merleau-Ponty’s idea of flesh, we can take a further look at Taylor Carman’s *Merleau-Ponty*, M. C. Dillon’s *Merleau-Ponty’s Ontology*, Gary Brent Madison’s *A Search for the Limits of Consciousness: The Phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty*, and Monika M. Langer’s *Merleau-Ponty’s Phenomenology of*

Perception. First, Carman and Dillon's books can be juxtaposed together for the detailed inquiries they have provided specifically into Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of flesh, or the ontology of flesh. While the former targets more on body, with emphases on body schema, motor intentionality, flesh/ chiasm, and self/ others, the latter contributes to the explications from the ontology in *Phenomenology of Perception* to that in *The Visible and the Invisible*, offering a trajectory with precise examples. Madison and Langer's works, on the other hand, present a more general outlook on Merleau-Ponty's philosophy. Langer's book begins from classical prejudice, and moves forward to demonstrate the problem of the body, and then enlarges it to the scope of the perceived world and the others, and ends the books with the idea of being-for-itself and being-in-the-world. Madison's book then re-constructs Merleau-Ponty's philosophical conceptions by dissecting them into *Being in the World*, *Painting*, *Language*, *Philosophy*, and *Field of Being*, each presented with further clarifications and analyses. These two productions can be viewed of as the comprehensive and necessary handbooks on the overall Merleau-Pontian philosophy.

After the explorations on the characteristics of modern ruins and the bodily reverberations to such poetic situations, we now proceed to the poetics of flesh. Edited by Dorothea Olkowski and James Morley, *Merleau-Ponty, Interiority and Exteriority, Psychic Life and the World* is an essay collection that explores the

fundamental unitary tissue of body/mind, the field of inter-subjectivity, and our body's relation with the surroundings. This volume integrates themes that are useful for understanding Merleau-Ponty's point of view on the exterior/ interior, and idealism/ empiricism. By means of the investigations on the blurring of body-mind distinction, one of the essays, titled "Merleau-Ponty and the Unconscious: A Poetic Vision," written by David E. Pettigrew, even describes the opening of flesh as "a poetic disclosure." Our body is thus representative of the site for a form of expression that shares similarity with poetry. Then, Glen A. Mazis's *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination, and Poetic Ontology* comes as one production that provides an overall consideration into Merleau-Ponty's philosophical features. Mazis especially traces the power of silence in Merleau-Ponty's works, and brings together his understanding of imagination from Bachelard to build a dialogue with Merleau-Ponty's philosophy of the lived body. Mazis also specifically regards Merleau-Ponty's writing as poetic. All in all, in a concise and also poetic style, Mazis offers enriching discussions on a dimension of Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh that oftentimes goes unnoticed or less underscored.

III. Approach

Kaili Blues portrays a way of life that foregrounds in modern ruins with details

requiring equal attentiveness. Under rapid capitalization, modern ruins demonstrate a special kind of aesthetics and overthrow our common explorative strategies in the face of classical heritage. In this thesis, the first step thus rests at locating the values of modern ruins in terms of their proximity of temporalities and their bizarre closeness to nature with still-very-fresh human living processes. The discussions, however, will not solely focus on the issue of modern society as a “wasteland,” but more on how the role of body can be inspired or rediscovered in the fields with indefinite inner-outer structures. The core lies in the effects of the “texture” of modern ruins on our perception, which seem to be masked or discarded in the time of technology. The “embodied experiences” in modern ruins will be emphatically addressed.

The Merleau-Pontian perspectives initiate from here. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, “The visible itself has an invisible inner framework, and the invisible is the secret counterpart of the visible” (VI 215). Such a concept denotes meaning constructions that require emotional and bodily investments through full immersions into the surroundings, and makes clear that we should not take what we observe for granted or consider things with fixed qualities. To examine modern ruins from such a perspective is thus to reckon with their innate attributes: the collectivity of spatial-temporal absences and presences. Such features then render modern ruins capable of arousing a state of hypersensitivity. For example, I will be naturally guided

to be meticulous, in case of a collapse, or to be curious to the scattered fragments on the corner. The role of the body in modern ruins, therefore, reveals its significance. By re-addressing modern ruins' lyrical qualities of ambiguity, evocation of sentimentality, and layeredness, Chen's reactions toward certain events, especially his journey in the mysterious village of Dangmai (滄麥), can be deemed as essentially hinging on his body's "trust" to the "uncertainty" of the spaces he resides in. In this manner, the explications on the characteristics of modern ruins and the correspondent corporeality will serve as the grounding basis for the later discussions on "situation" and "flesh."

According to Merleau-Ponty, our body is situational, and a situation is individuated. That is, our perspectives toward the world are initiated from a bodily standpoint. However, a "situation" is more implicative than we commonly presume. It refers to more than the outer part of a space and the happenings within that space; it involves our sensory fields that fuse and connect with other objective things. That is, the ontology of situation entails a type of bodily recognition, and such "body image," or "body schema," further demonstrates a manner of being that is more than a collection of sensory data, but the "intuitive understanding of one's own body and its position in space" (Bullington 31). That is, actions and movements are gestures given to a particular circumstance. The adjustment of perspectives to grasp on various situations then further reveals what Merleau-Ponty calls "the phenomenal body," as

relative to the objective body (commonly regarded as a physiological entity.) Unlike an objective body that is derived from empiricism, the phenomenal body calls for synaesthetic perception that is not only engaged with a specific spatial-temporal setting, but also with situations that require imagination. In other words, the phenomenal body, itself as a potentiality, reckons with possibilities.

A situation can elicit more than fixed responses in that our behaviors ultimately generate from a sense of “situation” sedimented through past experiences and future anticipations. We learn to form personal messages and respond to diverse phenomena in modified manners. According to different situations, our emotions and rationality will arrive at a responsive and practical method through innate negotiation. A situation, encompassed with past, present, and future (memory or projection), thus achieves a primordial determinacy via our perceptual experiences within it. From such an aspect, the cinematic spaces of modern ruins in the film can be approached as particular situations that evince a specific type of bodily reactions. Chen’s movements are motivated by such spectacles of historicity, and the significance of modern ruins is also reversely elevated by Chen’s bodily projections. In this manner, Chen’s unique bodily answering to the world represents a form of aesthetic resonance to poetic situations, and it is through such dialectical relationships that the village of Dangmai is indicative of a “fleshy” significance. In Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, flesh is

“a general being, midway between the spatial-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being whenever there is a fragment of being” (VI 139). Our body is constituent of flesh, and so are the world and all other phenomena. It is neither material nor transcendental. It is an “element” that renders all human bodies and the world to co-exist together, suggesting an underlying continuity. The idea of flesh is the ultimate philosophical concept developed from the reversible characteristic of perception. The phenomenon of circularity then contributes to the notion of chiasm, namely, the chiasmic structure of flesh. Merleau-Ponty provides us with no clear definition of flesh (probably due to his untimely death), but its reversibility/ chiasm feature implies the overlapping, or “encroachment,” of our bodies, others and the world. Under such notions, when Chen encounters a woman who looks like his late wife and a teenager that seems to be the grown version of his niece in Dangmai, we should halt at the simple interpretation of the mystery as a time-travel. Rather, Dangmai should be considered as a region of the world, where Chen’s desires are concretized or facilitated through deep involvement in every perceptual contact. Therefore, when the narrative structures and camera works also involve varying degrees of “the visible and the invisible,” Chen’s detour in Dangmai also demonstrates the visual rendition of certain moments in life that give rise to the realization of the latent interconnectedness. All in all, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh

provides a lens to the essence of meaning formations in *Kaili Blues*. From the poetics of modern ruins to that of our bodily manifestations, this thesis aims to highlight a poetic attitude with which we can come closer to the disclosure of “depth” in our daily experiences. To resort to a phenomenological approach in the investigations of *Kaili Blues*, therefore, is to interrogate and contemplate over the humanist value and the essence of things in our mundane confrontations with the varying visages of worldly phenomena. That being said, the thesis focuses do not encompass or address specifically on spectatorship or embodied cinematic experiences, as beautifully elaborated in Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, or Barker’s *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience*, but rest at taking the stories of the characters as ours through the equal sympathy that we have toward ourselves. That is, under Merleau-Ponty’s notion of situation and flesh, it is hopeful that we are guided to recover the lost sensitivity toward the “traces” of life; such visible and invisible footprints fundamentally constitute our personal history and ultimately the cultural and the natural world. The significance of the phenomenological approach applied here lies in the demonstration of human beings’ endeavors and longings for the utmost manifestations to the expressibility and in-expressibility of life’s indeterminacy and ambiguity. In essence, we dwell in the processes of incessant bodily appropriations toward the givenness and the gestures of *Lebenswelt*, and it requires the eye of insight for the changes of perspectives.

IV. Outline of Chapters

In Chapter One, Bi's background and directorial career will serve as the starter; film reviews and interviews will be timely interspersed. The plot summary of *Kaili Blues* then follows, and to facilitate film analyses, Bi's visual and narrative designs through "fragments" will be incorporated into the discussions. In Chapter Two, the investigations into the cinematic spaces of modern ruins, the sense of bodiliness through Merleau-Pontian perspectives, and Bi's camera employment will be explored to showcase the "ruinous" vision in *Kaili Blues*. In Chapter Three, the trajectory along which modern ruins further resonate with Merleau-Ponty's ontology of situation and flesh will be inspected through the "embodied encounters" in the film, especially in terms of Chen's transference of the symbolic fragments. Chapter Three will also make the conclusion of this thesis through the re-accentuations on modern ruins as "ruinous" situations that not only emphasize a bodily attitude, but the genuine understanding and experience of Merleau-Pontian flesh.

V. Expected Outcome

The nucleus of this thesis is to stress the significance of the willingness to restore our primordial experiences with the world, to confront every phenomenon, and to

make constant inquires toward our Being. Such a perspective, however, requires a liberal, imaginative, and daring mindset, with which the continuous flow of associations among places (modern ruins), body-subject (Chen), and others (in his mystic journey) emerge possible. The investigations thus aim at showcasing the multi-dimensionality, reciprocity, chiasmatic constitution, and construction of meanings from Merleau-Pontian bodily embeddedness in the immersive modern ruins.

While we grow closer to the notion that both of the natural/ cultural surroundings and the perceiving subject are enduring entities, we meanwhile realize how our existence forever prolongs and extends into all organic or non-living forms under Merleau-Ponty's theoretical frameworks. In this regard, we should realize that it is from within an open mentality that modern ruins and human sensualities can be poetically associated together. By means of the detailed explorations on the phenomena of ambiguity in the film, this thesis proposes a visage of our lived world where the significance of longing and searching ultimately derive from every dialectical tension in the interweaving fabric of life.

Chapter One

The Ambiguous Phenomena and Bi Gan's Cinematic Visions in *Kaili Blues*

Upon release, Bi Gan's first feature film, *Kaili Blues*, is instantly applauded for its Tarkovskian aesthetics and its narrative intricacy. The recitations of poetry, the non-linear storytelling, the recurrences of symbolic objects, and the composition have altogether contribute to the film's atmospheric landscapes. However, if we are to claim one theme that permeates and potentially accomplishes the film's cinematic achievements, it will be its reigning ambiguity that involves past-present-future correlations. With a closer scrutinization, we can further observe the inherent poetic elements that bring out such a fluidity in the film as the fragments and the responsive bodily activities with them. In this chapter, after the introduction of Bi's directorial career, we should begin the investigations into such attributes of "fragmentation." Then, the ambiguous phenomena will be understood as key to the state of body nomad of the characters. The organic relations with the natural surroundings will be probed into at the end to address the cruciality of Bi's selections of modern ruins as the cinematic spaces, under which Merleau-Ponty's philosophical notion of embodiment will be briefly introduced to point out the inter-connections and pave way for the explorations in the following chapters.

I. Bi Gan's Background and Career

Bi was born in Kaili city, the southeastern part of Guizhou province, in 1989.

Under the administration of Qiandongnan Miao and Dong Autonomous Prefecture,

Kaili provides a unique cultural environment to his upbringing. As a member of Miao

minority, Bi is naturally inclined to insert its cultural images to build up narrative

structures and visual aesthetics for his films, with the overall scenes set and shot at the

locations he often visits. In fact, Bi employs the images of Miao Lusheng players, or

the sound of Lusheng, as the signs of the advent or process of a dream in *Kaili Blues*.

Traditional Miao households can also be observed erecting in between modern,

though damp and dark, buildings as parts of the city views.

Bi majors in television editing & directing in Shanxi Institute of Media.

According to Bi, this phase of life can be considered as highly crucial in terms of the

conceiving and molding of his perspectives in cinema. Along with the massive DVD

storage in school and the internet, Bi immerses himself in not only foreign films, but

Taiwanese and Hong Kong cinema, growing captivated by Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai

Ming-liang's films. It is also one of those casual days spent in the school screening

room that he comes across Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*, an influential movie to his

film philosophy. In fact, the literal Chinese translation of *Kaili Blues* is *Roadside*

Picnic, the name of one of Boris Strugatsky's books that Andrei Tarkovsky's *Stalker*

is based on. At first, Bi considers *Stalker* as an unpleasant viewing experience, and seeks to criticize the work. However, Bi senses a rising of uncompelled feelings beyond expressions afterwards. As stated in his speech for YiXi (一席), his perception toward cinema is utterly overwhelmed, and his films have represented the endeavors to initiate dialogues with those nameless sentimentality. Thus far, Bi's attempts and efforts to envision narrative structures, visual presentation, and camera employment are indicative of his awe and fascination toward Tarkovskian aesthetics.

Bi has produced both feature films and short films so far; among them, *Tiger*, *The Poet and Singer*, and *Kaili Blues* have been respectively invited to film festivals. However, Bi walks a jarring road to achieve as a full-time director in his career. For example, the shooting process of *Tiger* takes a downward turn when Bi goes through a phase of doubtfulness at his hands-on experiences for film-making. It is when the crew purposefully cut the words out of the script, sentence by sentence, that Bi manages to work on one a day. According to Bi, his methodology of a-take-for-a-scene is developed at that particular period of time. At the later stage of production, Bi then discovers that almost half of the materials needed for *Tiger* are deficient with sound and filled with technical errors. Questioning his eligibility as a filmmaker, Bi temporarily deposits the filmed materials aside, and concentrates on other feasible choices for his future. Bi takes a part-time job at a gas station, and he

confesses that such a decision is primarily based on the fact that he can play the video games, Pro Evolution Soccer (PER), with his friend. According to Bi, the map in the game is what aids him to envision the mise-en-scene of the 41-minute long take in *Kaili Blues*. Later, as he returns to Kaili, his somewhat unusual logic leads him to edit the discarded materials for *Tiger* with his own poetry. From Bi's perspective, the loosely-structured *Tiger* demonstrates an exclusive sense of aesthetics with distinct cinematic effects. Half of *Tiger* is still silent and raw, and the bloopers are zoomed in to the point where a lucid panorama is often sutured with a magnified close-up. However, all the up and down tides in life prove to be, at varying degrees, inherent with meanings. *Tiger* is later selected into Nanjing Film Festival.

With *Tiger* settling down as an ended project, Bi founds a studio catering to weddings in Guiyang (貴陽), which closes down within a short period of time. Nourished by the dire living conditions in the worn-out apartment, *The Poet and Singer*, a short film, becomes Bi's second production. Bi's uncle, Chen Yong-zhong (陳永忠), pictured by Bi as carrying an aura of an old soul mixed with a temperament of childlikeness, plays the male protagonist in *The Poet and Singer*, as he does in *Tiger* and later in *Kaili Blues*. This short film conveys special messages in that it is filmed in memory of Chen's deceased friend, Crazy Face (老歪). According to Bi, *The Poet and Singer* represents an official prayer for Crazy Face, hence the Chinese

title as *The Diamond Sutra* (金剛經). Moreover, during the same year of shooting *Tiger*, Bi has already started writing the script for *Kaili Blues*. *The Poet and Singer* thus represents a spontaneously-driven production triggered by his uncle's reminiscence of *Crazy Face*. *The Poet and Singer* is, therefore, not only aesthetically associated with *Kaili Blues*, but logically interweaved with some minor variations; for example, the identity of *Crazy Face* changes from a friend of Chen in *The Poet and Singer* to his half brother in *Kaili Blues*. In sum, from Bi's perspective, the journey from *Tiger* to *The Poet and Singer* showcases his traveling from knowing what filmmaking is to understanding how he genuinely appreciates and approaches it. Later, *The Poet and Singer* earns Bi the Special Mention at the 19th Hong Kong ifva Awards.

Even though Bi prepares for *Kaili Blues* long before the shooting of *The Poet and Singer*, he does not view the project, requiring further investment, as a possibility after returning to Kaili with the ifva Award. Fortunately, with the financial help from his teacher and family, Bi manages to initiate the official filming of *Kaili Blues*. He recruits his friends in Kaili, and the crew will play the game of "Truth or Dare." As stated by Bi, they form close bonds with one another with great intimacy, arriving at a prime condition either in the film production or inter-personal relationship aspect. At every night, they hold meetings, and draw storyboards together on the wall as preparations for each day's shooting. However, after two months of arduous efforts,

they experience immense physical and emotional pressure when the budget runs out. Bi, however hesitant, has to dismiss the team in the long run. The remaining thirty-percent of *Kaili Blues* is later completed under challenging circumstances. After shooting the needed materials, Bi travels to Beijing for post-production, during which the editions are constantly rejected by senior censors and undergo several adjustments. Nonetheless, despite the unsmooth filming process, the final outcome of *Kaili Blues* attains critical acclaims, and is widely commended for its “magical realism visage.”

Tiger, The Poet and Singer, and *Kaili Blues* resonate with one another, but we should be aware that they do not form a chronological sequence. According to Bi, *Tiger* and *The Poet and Singer* present shorter portrayals of a certain aspect of a man’s life. *Kaili Blues*, conversely, delineates a kind of odyssey that entails spiritual and physical strength. As a feature film incorporative of all the visual and narrative elements evident in the previous productions, *Kaili Blues* thus displays the more integral contour of what Bi aspires to achieve so far.

II. The Fragments as Correspondences in *Kaili Blues*

Even though Bi has intended *Kaili Blues* as a more thorough delineation of a man’s troubled mind and his eventual settling-down through a turn of events, his methodology does not offer a clear-cut or linear route to such a cinematic scheme. If

we are to speak of its main concept, *Kaili Blues* sketches a profile more on the absence, the invisibles, the everydayness, and their relations with the characters and the world. However, such impressions on the marginal or residual forms of existence, in the eyes of Bi, are not subjected to a complete reduction to any types of non-presences, but rather develop into the media for the multi-dimensional dispositions of the bodies. That is, the slow pace of *Kaili Blues* turns rather intriguing when Bi adopts “fragments,” objects of history and memories of a person, as a means of correspondence across space and time, stimulating the narrative flow through their metaphorical purposes. Bi then uses such a design to construct the climax for the film, revealing the answer or their inherent significance at the end. It is, nonetheless, due to such qualities that a simple synopsis of *Kaili Blues* presents difficulties, for the correspondences string together the opening, the proceeding, and the end of the film. In this case, in order to offer a more concise summary for the film, the following version covers the reorganizations of the narratives through the considerations of the pivotal “fragments” that propel and intensify the rhythm of the film.

Eighteen years ago, Chen Sheng (陳昇) is married to Zhang Xi (張夕), and works for the gangster boss, Monk (花和尚), with his friend, San (三). Due to Chen's revenge for Monk's son, whose hand has been previously chopped off by Monk's rival, Xu Ying (許英), Chen is sentenced for nine years in prison without turning San

in. It is also during the sentence that Zhang and his mother pass away. The film begins with Chen's current life in Kaili (凱里). After the sentence, another nine years have gone by. Chen and his mother's old acquaintance, Guang Lian (光蓮), run a clinic together. Guang Lian's son is killed in a car accident nine years ago, and the drunk driver is presumably Pisshead (酒鬼), who claims to have been startled by the Wild Man (野人) sitting at the backseat.

During the scenes in Kaili, Chen's marriage is presented through the montage of a discotheque and a small dark room, with a neon ball respectively rolling on the floor and dangling on the ceiling; their faces are temporarily hidden. Then, we can observe Chen's attentiveness to his niece, Weiwei (衛衛), who shares a strained relationship with Chen's half brother, Crazy Face. At other time in Kaili, we can see Pisshead roaming around the village, mumbling on the folklore of the Wild Man, and using the tale to scare Weiwei. Meanwhile, Chen constantly dreams of a pair of blue embroidered shoes in the river, and the dreams are accompanied with the sound of Miao Lusheng or the silhouette of Lusheng players. Later, when Chen finds Weiwei missing, Crazy Face reveals that he has been taken away by Monk to Zhenyuan (鎮遠), while in fact, Crazy Face has bargained his son with a motorcycle from Monk. Therefore, Chen's quest in the film is to bring Weiwei back to Kaili. Before the departure, Guang Lian entrusts Chen with a piece of shirt, a cassette, and a vintage

photo of her old-time lover, Ai Ren (愛人), who remains in Zhenyuan during the Cultural Revolution. Chen's mission thus includes finding Ai Ren and hands over these memorial objects.

On the road, the train seems to stop, and Chen, following several Miao elderly, enters into a village called Dangmai. During the tour-de-force, Chen meets a teenager who offers him a ride to a Miao family. A truck driver named Pisshead also gives Chen a ride to the center of Dangmai, along which Chen finds the teenager bullied on the street for his binocular. The teenager then introduces Yangyang (洋洋) to Chen, saying that he is determined to turn back time by drawing a clock on each compartment of the train so that Yangyang will return to Dangmai from Kaili as she promises. Later, Chen encounters a hairdresser woman. He instantly puts on the shirt meant for Ai Ren, and follows her to the hair salon. Chen recreates the scenario when Ai Ren would put Guang Lian's hands on a flashlight for warmth with the hairdresser woman. At the concert, Chen sings Little Jasmine for her, and we know Chen has been practicing singing in prison for Zhang. Upon farewell, Chen transfers the cassette to the hairdresser woman, while on the ride to the river for Zhenyuan, the teenager reveals his name to be Weiwei and offers Chen an escape plan in case the Wild Man catches Chen. Later, we are quickly given the same small dark room scene, where Chen and Zhang's faces are displayed this time, and Zhang's face is identical

with that of the hairdresser woman. After the detour, Chen and Monk clear the air, and Chen agrees to take Weiwei back a few days later. Inside a traditional red-brick house, Chen uses a binocular similar to that of the teenage Weiwei to watch the little Weiwei from afar. Then, Chen is informed by several Miao elderly that Ai Ren had passed away. On the train back to Kaili, Chen falls asleep again. When the camera presents Chen's profile, a drawn clock connected with different frames looms out of a passing train from the opposite direction, going counterclockwise.

Here, to explicitly identify *Kaili Blues* as a film facilitated by symbolic objects is to emphasize the power of fragmentation. While the term "fragment" may suggest a complete entity in the past, it can also denote a work in progress, or a production that will never be completed (such as the death the writers involved), and so on. They are as alive as the process of fragmentation, and continue to affect and constitute the surrounding fields. The approaches to the idea of the fragments should thus proceed from the ingrained impressions of grief and passivity to those of motivation and development. In the introduction of *The Fragment: An Incomplete History*, Tronzo describes the fragments as a certain type of "embodiment of the explosive power of change" that further represent "the resonance of archetypes" (1). The fragments create the tensions of relations, produced from the unpredictable movement of fragmentation. We should thus "see the fragment not simply as the static part of some once-whole

thing but as itself something in motion ... It is precisely this volatility, this unpredictability, these reverberations that I see in the fragment and in its effects in history” (4). The fragments can exist as broken pieces or can remain in an intact form, but regardless, they perform the element of connectivity in *Kaili Blues* as signs and hints. While the memorial objects suggest a similar wandering existential modality of the characters, they also appear at specific timings to mobilize future events through their accumulated significance in the past. The neon ball can be deemed as a fine example, and we should note that the showing of Zhang’s face is almost approaching the end of the film. From this aspect, these objects are considered as fragments not only because of their status as the left-behind or the broken-off, but their surviving heavy emotional implications. In fact, as proposed by Chapman and Gaydarska in the same book, “To the extent that people in the past made variable uses of objects and places from their past, those people would have developed an appreciation of both the practical and the symbolic potential of broken things” (141). The concept of divisibility has been overturned, and certainly, such a shift invalidates not the wholeness, but signifies the universal process of fragmentation. Thus, to view of the symbolic objects in the film as fragments is to on the one hand, recognize their origin, while on the other hand, examine their flexibility to settle into various assemblages.

Such a mode of correspondence exhibits deeper meanings when investigated

from the inter-connected narrative threads in *Kaili Blues*. First, the piece of shirt from Guang Lian represents a failed promise, as she and Ai Ren make the commitment that whoever leaves first should buy the other one a piece of shirt, and the cassette is written with “Farewell,” a self-evident song of signal by Lee Tai-hsiang. In Dangmai, the subplot of Guang Lian and Ai Ren’s story, then, can be considered as being re-enacted through Chen’s interactions with the hairdresser woman. From the outset of the detour to the terminal riverside, Guang Lian and Ai Ren are constantly introduced into Chen’s mysterious trekking, which on a certain level, reversely alleviates Chen’s distress. In other words, the two pairs of lovers consummate with each other through the transference of those symbolic objects. The items are endowed not only with memorial significance, but through the entrustment, ripen as a means of redemption for Chen (see more in Chapter Three). Second, Bi introduces the character, Yangyang, to further strengthen the emotional intensity. The entrance of Yangyang may seem somehow confusing at the beginning. She appears only in Dangmai, and correlates neither with the scenes in Kaili nor Zhenyuan. However, in the 41-minute long take, the camera follows her for a considerable period of time, and her interactions with the teenage Weiwei manifest mutual caring, despite her seeming impatience. This narrative thread presents its inherent significance when dilemma of Yangyang and the teenage Weiwei appears akin to the other two pairs’ stories:

Yangyang intends to leave for Kaili, and the teenage Weiwei strives to make her stay. Guang Lian leaves for Kaili while Ai Ren remains in Zhenyuan. Chen leaves behind his wife when he is sentenced in jail. The three couples struggle with similar wistful departure. In fact, we can even examine Yangyang and the teenage Weiwei as Chen and Zhang, or Guang Lian and Ai Ren, at their younger age. Thus, while the storyline of Yangyang and the teenage Weiwei represents a more optimistic version, the romance of Guang Lian and Ai Ren provides Chen a very specific manner of communication, such as the items and the flashlight, to garnish the woe with a sense of assurance. The unpredictable process of fragmentation leads to a more pleasing phase of life in the hand of a man who seeks to make right choices from now on. The poetic forces of the fragments altogether “inspire” the narratives. The “breaks” represent the possible and the potential “vibrancy” of life.

In addition to the identity of the hairdresser woman, when the connections relate the two Weiweis together, we can further observe a transformation of Chen and Weiwei’s familial bond. The teenage Weiwei cares for Chen along the trip, a reversal from the relationship between Chen and the little Weiwei in Kaili. The teenage Weiwei no longer dreads the Wild Man, and the binocular carried by him also reappears in the hands of Chen in Zhenyuan. In this dimension, we can view of the binocular as a special token. While Bi does not offer any references as to how Chen

possesses the almost analogous binocular, such a design manifests another circuit movement. As stated by Schager in the review from *Variety*, “Those sights speak to Chen’s recurring confrontation of inescapable old wounds (and attempts to not have Weiwei suffer the same fate he once did) ... ‘Kaili Blues’ affords a view of people, and a nation, caught in between a haunting yesterday and – as implied by the film’s conclusion - a hopeful tomorrow.” From the little Weiwei in *Kaili*, the teenage Weiwei in *Dangmai*, and back to the little Weiwei in *Zhenyuan*, Chen has returned to the start, with something lively permeating in the air this time. In the interview with Wen Tien-hsiang, Bi states that, “In the script, *Kaili* is depicted as a nightmarish place, where mentally-haunted characters dwell. *Dangmai* represents a dreamy village that is otherwise particularly realistic. As for *Zhenyuan*, I still wish it to be a living place for the characters. It has, however, turned to be very serene.” That is, *Zhenyuan* represents a “returning-to-reality” location, where Chen’s ordeals turn lightened after the encounters in *Dangmai*. The drawn clock going counterclockwise on the passing train may indicate the merry ending of the teenage Weiwei and Yangyang in another dimension when Chen is on the train back to *Kaili*. *Dangmai* thus accomplishes as a locale where stories of regrets undergo transformations¹. The changing relations of

¹ The only object that is not symbolically resolved in the narrative lies in the image of the pair of blue embroidered shoes in Chens’ dreams, which, according to Bi, belongs to Chen’s mother. In his interview with Wen Tien-hsiang, Bi states that, “In the script, after the long-take, Chen is supposed to discover his mother making a batik of a man holding his hands back ... His mother completes the batik afterwards. Pisshead then offers Chen a ride. On the way out, they accidentally hits Guang Lian’s son. The stories are actually multi-layered ... However, cinematically, I think Chen’s singing of Little

past, present, and future persons altogether manifest the productive power of fragments, especially when the characters emerge responsive to the situations.

Now, we can observe that not only the narrative threads are interlinked, but through those fragments of remembrance, they cultivate one another into a larger layered structure. While the common opinions toward fragments may suggest a condition of sensual experiences that do not last, the truth is the opposite. As Tronzo further proposes, “It is the fragment and the fragmentary state that are the enduring and normative conditions; conversely, it is the whole that is ephemeral, and the state of wholeness that is transitory ... And precious and freighted thought the fragment may be, it is in reality tough and a survivor” (4). Here, we can notice that the film itself echoes with such recognition of the shattered, the forsaken, and the underscored. The fragments and their reverberations with the characters jointly enter into the realms of renewal, rendering the process of fragmentation vibrant and poignant. Since most of the symbolic objects in the film denote the past of the characters, they reasonably represent a certain phase of the characters’ lives. Nonetheless, they continue to exert influences to the very triviality of everyday experiences, and guide or encourage a modality of dwelling in the world. The fragments from the past of the characters serve no purposes to “resuscitate” the losses, but to reveal the hopefulness

Jasmine suffices. He has undergone too much pain. I don’t want him to suffer anymore, so I delete the remaining 20 minutes.”

of life through their own persistence into our presences and our efforts to re-discover or create versatility out of the hidden agendas. The memorial objects considered here demonstrate the fragments with emotional appeals to personhood and the ensuing perceptual experiences. It is grounded upon such a comprehension to the complexities of the storylines, along with the provocations from the fragments, that we can further consider *Kaili Blues* as charged with personal desires, temporality, consciousness, and the primordial inherence in worldly phenomena.

III. The Body Nomad in *Kaili Blues*

Bi's deployment of memorial fragments proposes the acknowledgment of all phenomena as utterly unstable. In fact, the significance of the process of fragmentation is technically "prolonged" in long takes here and there, while the use of montage reminds us of the inevitable disruptions in the durations of life. The understanding of the visual and narrative qualities of fragments hence guides us to the deeper appreciation of the resonant sustaining background, which not only bears the history of the said items, but contributes to their expansion and unfathomableness.

In *Phenomenology and Media: An Anthology of Essays from Glimpse*,
Publication of the Society for Phenomenology and Media, Sobchack addresses the issue of the "file cabinet" in regards to the problems of the condensation of time and

space when using the computer, especially Quicktime, a multimedia framework, and compares it with the American artist Joseph Cornell's works that contain specific relics in a boxed container. As Cornell himself speaks of the selections of objects for his boxes, the dossiers for him resemble "a diary journal, repository, laboratory, picture gallery, museum, sanctuary, observatory, key ... the core of a labyrinth, a clearing house for dreams and visions." Then, Sobchack considers the database also as a labyrinthine, in which stratified categorization becomes "tenuous threads of association into the endless teleology and texture of desire" (386). Sobchack proposes that in both Quicktime and Cornell's works, we can observe the poetic and phenomenological forces, which

emerge explicitly from their relation to a larger totality of material and memorial possibilities ... Privileging both the fragment and the slightness and ambiguity of their associational links, both Cornell's and QT's memory boxes thus point to their own presence as the poignant and precious visible landmarks of an unseen, lost, and incomprehensible field of experience.

What Carter Ratcliff says of Cornell's memory boxes is equally true of QT's:

"[T]he mode is enchanted by fragmentariness itself, which serves as an emblem of a wholeness to be found in other times and places." (387)

Sobchack inspects the technological invention with the artistic creation. Despite the

divergent attributes as two forms of agency, they display similarities in terms of human perceptual experiences of time, space, memories, and the world. Sobchack's discussions provide a trajectory here in that she points out the tensions between "organized" memories and the paradoxes therein in terms of our genuine lived experiences. As Sobchack suggests, the two different logics are hierarchical classification, such as "file cabinet" and "desktop," and associational organization pertaining to the "psycho-logic" behind every "hyperlink." The confrontation is being "simultaneously framing and framed" (32). In other words, in a situation where the users claim the dominant place of decision-making, the selections in fact declare at once the ungraspable collectivity of unnamed, vanishing, or missing presences.

From such a dimension, while *Kaili Blues* represents the very opposite of technological advancement, it embodies a world activated by imagination through the exact restraining memories of the characters. Guang Lian keeps an antique box that contains only the three entrusted items, and they "hyperlink" to the "file cabinet" of Chen and the hairdresser woman. Such a methodology also explains why Bi describes the use of inter-textual relations to create the sense of surrealism, while simultaneously sticking to the very down-to-earth scenario settings. As Sobchack describes it, "Its search engines driven to the past by a present moment of desire (not utility), this is the eccentric, ever-extensible, yet localized logic of the hyperlink"

(386). It is in this manner that we can further understand the fragments in *Kaili Blues* as essentially contributive to an associative field enriched by the overlaid links.

Kaili Blues is certainly nostalgic in terms of its aesthetics on antiquity. However, we should also detect those fragmental details that not only cast the magic on their own in the said realms of agedness, but deviate as references, signs, or clues through repetitions with differences (the delayed answers through the additions of the content in the same scene). The sense of intimacy firmly interweaves with a certain extent of defamiliarization, which then leads to the wandering, searching, and bodily adjusting in a world of endless choices. In fact, *Kaili Blues* can be considered as a film about “interrelations.” Each of the fragments emerges pertinent to the background of the characters, and yet we can observe Bi’s cinematic visions in the incessant spatial-temporal bodily drifting in and out of the “slow influence” of those selected objects, hence the qualities of fragmentation and corporeality in response to the mystery of memories. The correlations thus proclaim transformatory exchanges and also fractures in the diversity of explorations. In this manner, *Kaili Blues* produces unique characters that embody the nomadic modality of existence. In the realms of ambiguous encounters, Bi inserts the characters’ movement in constant long walks and motorcycle rides, where symbolic objects permeate the physical and spiritual boundaries. While the process of fragmentation involves a human perspective, it is

meanwhile precisely due to such an attribute that the extensibility of things and human perceptibility together enliven the shared spatial-temporal horizons. To put it more precisely, the inherent paradoxes of the fragments emancipate the characters from conventional problem-solution formula. They radiate curious fields that embrace pure perceptual investigations without any default answers, while simultaneously hinging upon the uncanny conjunctures of history and fantasy. It is in this dimension that Dangmai manifests a marvelous form of dialogue between human and the world. The gazes and the touches are immersed, and even expanded, in the landscapes of Kaili, Dangmai, and Zhenyuan. That is, the fragments can be detected in the scenes where Chen strolls along the trails, revisits the shelter attempting to purchase bananas, and rides through the misty mountain roads; these scenarios are further interspersed with constant long takes of the foggy skyline, the acts of smoking and city roaming, and the characters' conversations. The poetics of the fragments thus reveals the narrative and visual profundity through their connotations to the organic bodily relations with the surroundings in the film.

In *Melancholy Drift: Marking Time in Chinese Cinema*, Ma questions the cinematic poetics of temporalities and corporeality through the discussions of movies from Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang, among others. In the words of Ma:

Navigating a landscape of shifting temporalities and mutating identities,

their films eschew the legitimizing assurances of a “search for origins” ...

The indeterminate circuits of this drift among remainders result in open-ended narrative trajectories that elude conventions of closure and rely upon intervals of arrest, inaction, silence. (14)

By addressing on their cinematic signatures of intertextuality, long takes, voice-over, etc., Ma details the power of the spectre and the absence on their overall plot and visual development. Now, even though *Kaili Blues* has not yet been discussed academically due to its comparatively new release, we can detect immense resemblances in their methodologies, not to mention both Hou and Tsai have considerably influenced Bi's film philosophy. In this manner, the poetics of the fragments will further point to the continual constituting-constituted processes that not only affirm what we have already noticed, but unravel the potentiality of the debris. Even more, through creative or artistic activities, the buried or the abandoned may well be added with new significance through the exact indeterminacy and the inexhaustible nature of our identity and the world. Much in the same way Tsai requires the minimum of dialogue in his films and stresses more on the intrinsic flow of the bodies, *Kaili Blues* manifests “traces” voiced by silent objects and the characters' almost-reflective interactions with them. While its narrative openness may give rise to inescapable perplexity, it creates massive rooms for constant

problematization, which is in fact the answer or the ultimate concept behind the film.

One of the cores in the explorations of the film thus lies in detecting the manners through which a modality of poetic dwelling is actualized within the assemblages of varying nomadic activities from the characters. That is, when we approach how the narrative threads form the compensatory and encroaching relations, the landscape of fragments in *Kaili Blues* should be further comprehended not only in terms of the plot entwinement, but its revelation of a universal Being that we all belong to. The parties and objects involved become ultimately enveloped in this cinematic geography of dream, where the gravity of indefiniteness reversely assists us in the completion of an odd wandering trek. The constant walking and traveling of the characters, especially Chen, eventually unveil the cruciality of the land upon which they drift, and by virtue of such a nomadic vision, the primordial relationships with the world reveal their sustaining power to our openness to the multi-faceted structures of worldly phenomena. In this manner, to suggest that the film embodies a landscape of fragments and represents a distinct nomadic style of dwelling is to recognize it as a dynamic and co-structuring field, and such acknowledge comes precisely from the fact that this landscape can not be fully territorialized. That is, *Kaili Blues* conveys messages of unity, sympathy, and connection, albeit in a more elusive fashion, and human participations are equally imperative in this human-object-world unity.

IV. The Modern Landscapes in *Kaili Blues*

Bi selects *Kaili Blues* as the English title for the film for several reasons. In the city of economic despair and perpetual humidity, Chen saunters and observes the state of life as a reformed gangster. He embodies the essences of a blues song when the rejected and woeful sentimentality weaves with a glimpse of hope. Bi once describes his cinematic aesthetics as constant insertions of very realistic elements to create the sense of surrealism by virtue of inter-textuality. In other words, Bi does not aspire to establish the enigma upon an alien or fantastical land, but aims at revealing the sense of wonder in everyday experiences. That is, the elegiac tone of the film ultimately derives from spaces that conjure up the sense of past or the awareness of time. In fact, the immersive urban landscapes in *Kaili Blues* attract no less attention than Chen's mysterious journey. The fragments thus relate not only to the symbolic objects, but also the spaces where we witness their existence: the meandering trails, the fairground, the shelters, the shabby factories, among others.

As aptly put by K. Austin Collins in the review from *Reverse Shot*, "... Kaili is at a crossroads of not only modernity and custom but also industry and nature, with cement caverns and tenements sculpted into the sides and innards of lush, green hills and talk of old rituals and local lore, however mournful or unsettling, striking life into

the film's dark interiors." Kaili, Dangmai, and Zhenyuan are associative with a type of suburban villages under rapid industrialization. Visually, unfinished architectures, suspended constructions, and a number of abandoned buildings erect in a sentiment of mourning to the bygone times. We can thus understand the "magical realism" aspect of the film as coming from the primitive spatial-temporal settings in which the "spontaneous displays" of symbolic objects can be observed. Objects of remembrance foreshadow future events and are revived through the fleeting scenery mixed with buildings from different times and nature. Here, we can notice that while Bi's meticulous adoption of objects strings the narrative threads together, he does not import clear meanings into them. In other words, as the term "fragment" may refer to disruption, discontinuance, or denouement, Bi on the one hand uses its solitary images to establish the filmic composition, while on the other hand utilizes the equal sense of fluidity to weave the characters together in the equally-obscure city landscapes.

As one of the filmmakers that influence Bi's cinematic aesthetics, Tsai similarly establishes his films in dilapidated buildings and emphasizes on the bodily capacities to alterations. As stated by Herzog in her identification of Tsai's movie also as "becoming-fluid" and "corporeal," the bodies in Tsai's films are "bodies adrift in urban landscapes and the architectural bodies that comprise the city itself ... The spaces of the city are similarly addressed in patient detail, and particular types of

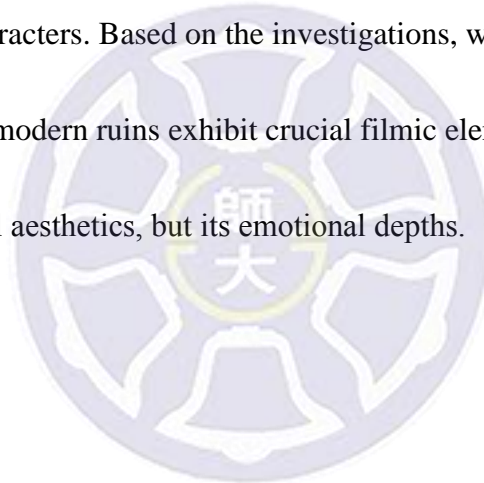
spaces recur consistently ... The pacing of Tsai's approach heightens the connection between bodies and the environment" (188). Here, in terms of the space settings, Bi also intends *Kaili Blues* as a slow exhibition of the cities as layovers, in which the wandering bodies inevitably become the focuses. Moreover, with the narrative functions of the aforementioned fragments, the bodies manifest the attempts to commingle with the world and join forces with the items from the past to construct the future "everydayness." Here, to take Tsai's films as references is to emphatically point out the sense of bodiliness and our daily contemplation in a larger modern space, presented through different lengths of panning and circling shots as the slow expressions of modernity, despite other narrative and visual differences.

Now, it is also in this dimension that Bi's distinct portrayals of the cinematic spaces and the narrative designs open up the opportunity to inspect the film from the Merleau-Pontian notion of "embodiment," a concept detailing the "lived" unity with the world through our body as the agency and through the primacy of perception. The freedom of entering in and out of a realm with undefined boundaries not only showcases that a certain degree of intimacy can be achieved with a mindset of sensitivity, but ultimately the arousal of perceptual interrogations. The potentiality of the fragments and our hold to them for deeper understandings to the world then yield the same non-dualistic approaches toward the modern landscapes in the film. As

proposed by Shelly Kraicer in the review from *Cinema Scope*, *Kaili Blues* brings us “into direct contact with a vividly imagined dream world, but one that’s quite specifically grounded in details of place, biography, and community.” Bi renders the film as highly involved in various forms of “evaluations.” It examines to which extent we can sympathize with the characters and their situations. Despite the seemingly illogical narratives, the film in fact constructs a world where perceptions are encouraged through the temporalization and spatialization of memories. That is, the phenomenon of “exchange” emerges within an underlying continuity where our perception functions to confirm our current stance and questions the pieces of information given by the perceived. Within such a web of irregularly-connected relationships, the wandering visions will oddly solidify our presence by bringing out the confrontations among divergent perspectives.

Otherworldly and strangely intimate, the journey from Kaili to Zhenyuan manifests the geographical and emotional intertwinement that brings up a complex temperament. In the fast-changing world, the objects that speak of possible revitalizations through the downtrodden economy certainly project cinematic potentiality. The ambiguity of the fragments in the larger modern landscape may possibly raise questions in terms of how we confer upon one another the ontological significance together in the process of becoming, and how such a harmony harbors

differences to allow for the mappings of our individual history. The investigations into the fragmentariness of the memorial objects and the traversing bodies should be further juxtaposed in the discussions of modern ruins in the following chapter, along with Bi's editing style and his intentional locale selections. In Chapter Two, modern ruins will be closely examined in regards to how they emerge illustrative of embodied spaces through Merleau-Pontian phenomenology, and how such cinematic spaces itself demonstrate the image of "transitions" along with the psychological development of the characters. Based on the investigations, we should gain a better understanding on how modern ruins exhibit crucial filmic elements that not only deepen the film's visual aesthetics, but its emotional depths.



Chapter Two

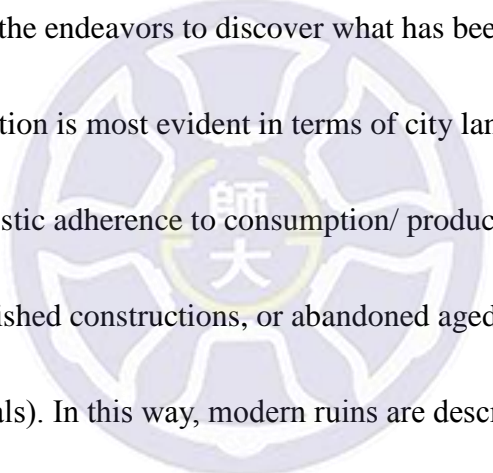
Modern Ruins and Merleau-Pontian Embodiment in *Kaili Blues*

Bi once stated in an interview that “I have a number of ruinous spaces in my film. Ruins render illusions more easily. A living place once enriching is now left with nothing.” In *Kaili Blues*, modern ruins indeed ground the fabric of daily scenarios that join together locality and poetic sensuality. From everyday residences to the overall landscapes, the cinematic spaces of modern ruins in *Kaili Blues* can be understood as imperative in terms of the discussions of the ambiguous phenomena in the film. The following explorations will thus begin with the characteristics of modern ruins to argue for the influence of such space settings. The sensorial openness evident in the film will then pave way for deeper elaborations on the heightened sense of bodiliness in modern ruins. Later, through Merleau-Pontian notion of “embodiment,” the essence and necessity of the role of body in perceptual experiences will be accentuated to bring out the underlying profundity of primitive understandings toward the world. The examinations will incorporate the plot setting, cinematography, and editing style to reveal a form of “ruinous” vision toward self, others, and the world.

I. Modern Ruins and their Cinematic Significance

In a time when transformations, upgrades, and evolutions become the motif or

trend for the human future, stability and permanence seem antiqued and out-of-fashion. With global capitalism establishing a material-oriented world economy, rapid technological advancement meanwhile leads to the constantly changing environment. In this case, it presents no difficulties for us to envision a sight of eliminated objects, outdated equipments, or piles of out-of-season clothes. However, despite the slogan for a more convenient future, there seems to be something buried under all these commercial slogans. That is, such a mentality for higher living standards also signifies the endeavors to discover what has been lost and sacrificed.



The above observation is most evident in terms of city landscapes. Not surprisingly, the capitalistic adherence to consumption/ production results in massive urban derelicts, half-finished constructions, or abandoned aged buildings (as probable targets for urban renewals). In this way, modern ruins are described to be “fast ruins” that have been immediately thrown into “abrupt ruination” (Olsen 6). Uncompleted buildings basically “rise into ruin[s] before they are built” (Smithson 114). Such a temporal proximity of past-present-future essentially brings about approaches to modern ruins much different from those to classical ones. The fact that modern ruins are still in the process of decay leads to their status as “premature” or “untimely,” as proposed by Yablon in his discussions on American urban modernity. The state of ongoing ruination of modern architecture thus challenges the concepts of aesthetics

commonly resorted to in front of ancient monuments or historical sites that blend in with the surroundings and often become tourist attractions. While classical ruins are mainly preserved and labeled as heritages,² modern ruins oftentimes fail to fit into any categorization. They appear formless, valueless, inharmonious, and disturbing in the eyes of the public. The seeming unfitness and ambivalence hence trigger varying attitudes and conflicting responses in and outside of the academic fields.

However, the contended dysfunction and visual displeasure of modern ruins in fact become the exact conditions for resistance, namely, as counter-ideological locations. While certain buildings are quickly replaced with new ones, many remain in a state of suspension, left with previous living traces and scattered residues. The implied existential footprints render modern ruins capable of hoarding and transferring marginalized voices and actions. Regarding economic regression and political transitions or not, the “semiotic ambiguity” of modern ruins (imperial debris or industrial ruins) has ignited multivalent appropriations. Documentary filmmaking, photography projects, installation art, exhibitions, cultural events, or music/ dance performances are common strategies for siding with certain issues. Unlike classical well-kept heritages mostly for passive appreciations, modern ruins invite and

² In the introduction of *Ruin Memories: Materialities, Aesthetics and the Archaeology of the Recent Past*, Bjørnar Olsen and Þóra Pétursdóttir explicate on the concept of heritage: its age value, subjection to a specific aesthetics and curative protection, or elitism, etc. Meanwhile, they call for broader approaches to engage with heritages, for example, to not think of it as in a frozen and “fossilized” state, but to enact actual/ physical contact and reckon with the same decaying process of heritage.

encourage dialogues. In the words of Svetlana Boym, “The pace of modern time precipitates both construction and destruction, sometimes imploding temporal duration. Modern ruins are particularly poignant because they are belated and contemporary at once” (60). The inherent contradictory tensions render modern ruins distinctive places with much greater rooms for negotiations in regards to how the experiences of time are open to different theorizations, and how the signifiers of human civilization may give rise to spatial explorations. In essence, the criterion of usefulness and aesthetics are fundamentally overthrown in modern ruins.

Nonetheless, modern ruins exhibit more than a static or conceptual presentation of the “being-in-the-middle” condition. The mysterious state defying definitions elicits a kind of transgression (越界) that indicates the dynamism of modern ruins in terms of their oscillating identities. Even though modern ruins are not as representative of a certain culture or history as classical heritages, they remain essentially indivisible to the surroundings, albeit in a more uncanny fashion. While they do not specifically stand as a homogenized entity with the land as historical sites usually do, they are not altogether “expelled out” by nature either. This geographical condition resembles the temporal manner in which modern ruins are somehow casted away in a modern time, and yet they remain connected to this era. In this manner, we should bear in mind that when we understand modern ruins as always caught

in-the-midway, multifold forms of “crossings” are already at the scene. The blurred boundaries bring forth reconsiderations on how different eras hallmark in disparate modes, and how modernity produces such anti-dichotomy urban views.

From this aspect, the transformative vitality of modern ruins essentially generates or activates hypersensitive sensual experiences in the perceivers. What we normally assume as “out-of-place” reveals the inclusiveness of modern ruins that demands shifts in perspectives within standardized observations. The inherent paradoxes of modern ruins basically propose labyrinthine routes of searching and exploration that render them spaces for physical or spiritual enrichment. Stepping into a newly-shut-down factory, we roam in pathways that require bodily and mental engagement. More than sight, smell, or sound, the texture of the broken beams and mottled walls altogether present a formless form, inviting communications. In this regard, modern ruins in general trigger instinctive orientations to the deserted objects, and subsequently, the forsaken surroundings. Our desires to touch the shattered glass on the wooden windowpane essentially derive from the interpretive potentiality of the visible and invisible fragments and our human nature to decode riddles. To some extent, modern ruins exist as a kind of free-entry amusement park, in which attendees from different backgrounds stray with varying purposes. Graffiti, experimental projects, or pure solitary meditations induce no reprimand or criticism.

Indeed, scholars or ruin-explorers have pondered over the notion of the pluritemporality of ruins and the interlinked themes on materiality, collective memories, and so on. Here, in accordance with the previous discussions, we may discover that they all pertain to a form of “process” at varying depths. That is, when encouraged to halt at the “thingness” of the remnants, we practice a kind of “materialized aesthetics,” which “acknowledges that things, sites, and ruins hold an integrity that is neither replaced nor exhausted by the constant efforts to ascribe them meaning” (Olsen & Pétursdóttir 17). In this organic movement, the perceiving and the perceived are simultaneously in the mode of becoming. The ruination of the building and the perceiver’s history altogether give rise to a grander form of proceeding. The spatial-temporal relations are thus layered, overlapping, and co-existent during every sensual engagement. In this regard, our attentiveness to the vines spiraling up the roof and the spine-chilling thrill of the rain drops seeping through the walls ultimately couple with the ruined forms to be the repository of significations.

The indeterminacy of “ruinousness” seeds the resilience of associations, and such inarticulateness brings about imagination and creativity in diverse forms. The attribute of “porousness” in modern ruins is especially brought to another level in the insertion of such spaces in *Kaili Blues*. To put it more precisely, the filmed locations can be thought of as “reverberative.” In the first sense, the characters dwell in aged

buildings: the clinic, Pisshead's make-shift bed in the air-raid shelter, Weiwei and Crazy Face's unrepaired house, the pool room, the mahjong store, and the hair salon in Dangmai. Moreover, the living spaces are interspersed with dilapidated factories or buildings in the middle of constructions or suspension. The overall city landscapes seem to be shrouded in an ambience of gloom in the overcast weather, and the film displays an ambience of pensive melancholy at the very beginning. The sense of reverberation emerges when the characters reuse these abandoned architectures. They re-live the left-behinds that are substantially still in the aforementioned "conjunctions." Both of the characters and the time-worn buildings are never fully thrust into oblivion, but vaguely persist. When Bi molds the story within such a background, we seem to witness the synchronic anthropomorphized and mechanized visages of modernity.

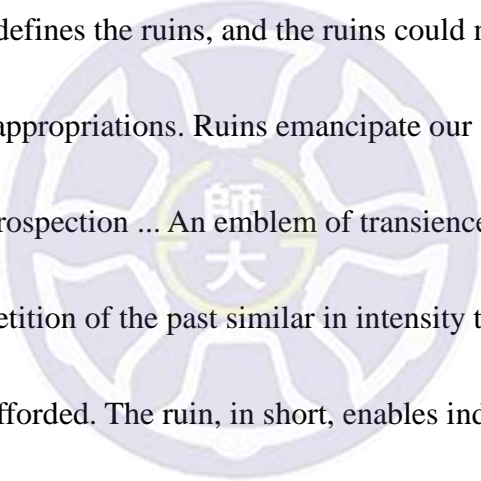
The second form of "reverberation" comes in a narrative aspect. Most of the significant locales mentioned above recur throughout the film. For example, the outdoor pool tables in Kaili link with the similar ones on the second floor of Yangyang's tailor shop in Dangmai, in which the hairdresser woman dries clothes. Or, the clinic where Guang Lian and Chen work at ends up to be the same one in the deathbed wish of Chen's mother. In this manner, locations geographically extend throughout the film as the intricate skeins of the narrative. It is as if the invisible swaying status in modern ruins has been visually concretized as propellants for story

development. Moreover, the reverberation permeates into a deeper level when Chen's reminiscence of his late mother transfigures from the recurring attempts to purchase bananas in Kaili to a local ancestral red-brick house painted with the words of "Banana Selling" in Zhenyuan, the village where Chen's mother used to live. In this regard, abandoned architectures become signifiers of Chen's personal history, though in a subtly connotative manner, and such a narrative device further contributes to the emotional profundity for the film. The natural land, the melancholic locales, and the characters cultivate and infiltrate one another in that none of the three are essentially eliminated from culture, history, space, and time. Bi's methodology, therefore, in one way sets the flow of the film, while in another way exemplifies a form of visual and narrative resonances to the layered, ambiguous, and simultaneously fragmentary attributes of modern ruins.

As described above, the ruined forms blur exterior-interior boundaries through an inherent "porousness" that allows for the interplay among the seen and the unseen. However, one of the main reasons why modern ruins can exhibit such momentum for communications lies in we no longer perceive them as passive products. We learn to recognize the affordance of things³ that calls for our re-accentuation on the primitive and always-evolving state of being. Instead of ascribing discarded objects with

³ Among the academic researches on (modern) ruins, there is a "turn to things" that focuses on their material aspect, either as sites for cultural/ economic appropriations or agencies to relate to history. Here, we should focus more on the recent advocate on the innate richness of materiality, especially when things are in their "abandoned being" (Pétursdóttir 339).

cultural significance etc., we are open to the experiential experiences of how things were, how things are, how things may become, and eventually how we contrive creative interactions with them in the purest form. It is under a kind of respect, however oddly private, that we experience a realm of utter individuality and indulgence. Our perceiving body comes close to demonstrate a nomadic existential status, in which both the condition of modern ruins and our freedom are ontologically appreciated. As Julia Hell and Andreas Schönle suggest in *The Ruins of Modernity*:



The beholder defines the ruins, and the ruins could not exist without such creative appropriations. Ruins emancipate our senses and desires and enable introspection ... An emblem of transience, ruins facilitate an imaginary repetition of the past similar in intensity to the original sensations it afforded. The ruin, in short, enables individual freedom, imagination, and subjectivity. (8)

What guides us in the realm of modern ruins rests in certain objects or spectacles that seem to refer to our own history. The process of recognizing our connections with them then sheds light on how our imagination and the ability of decision-making, both shaped by our past experiences, respond to the reservoir of meanings. Such perceptual experiences hence explain why personal contacts with modern ruins always involve a vortex of transfigurations.

The film showcases the evocative power of modern ruins toward memories and poetically exposes the characters' physical and emotional involvement with space and time. Through recognizing the dynamism of the residues themselves, we are bestowed with deeper sensory experiences in face of the presence-absence assemblages based on our instinct and desires. In *Kaili Blues*, modern ruins are thus not only constituent of people's living territories, but are sites sending out invitations. It is under such a viewpoint that the role of body, or corporeal experiences, comes into view.

II. Merleau-Pontian Embodiment

In recent decades, a revival of aesthetic interests in Merleau-Pontian phenomenology of body-subject and embodied perception has extended into fields including neuroscience, performance art, cognitive science, and studies on mind, among others. Such a turn to the body may partly root from the digitalization of civilization. Our sensual experiences are usually analytically dichotomized, or they simply vanish without notice. However, the sought-after bodily "encounters" are highly observable in *Kaili Blues*. Through Bi's directorial manoeuvres, the film displays the possibilities to restore our primordial engagement with the world through "ruinous" forces. In this regard, before we delve further into the heightened sense of bodiliness in modern ruins, we should begin with how Merleau-Ponty contrives the

notion of “embodiment,” and the significance of the role of body in it.

For Merleau-Ponty, both scientific and intellectualist accounts put us under risks of mistaking our surroundings as subjected to theoretical explanations. Traditional dichotomy supposes that our bodily capacities involve in no way with our daily experiences, and that our mind represents the omnipresence commanding our behaviors. The mode of our interactions with the world resembles that of a stimulus-response mechanism, and the surroundings are always passive and exterior to us. As the rejection to such Cartesian thoughts, Merleau-Ponty emphasizes an elemental cohesion among all the living and non-living forms, proposing the co-existence of body and mind as the constituting subject (not body as a physiological object). Our body should be understood as the “lived body,” which is “necessarily ambiguous, since it is both material and self-conscious” (Carman 25), and it remains in a “lived” relation with the world that is not taken for granted. Merleau-Ponty later describes such latent connections through the notion of “flesh” in *The Visible and the Invisible* (see Chapter Three). Thus, to hold cognitive processes or biological functions accountable for our perceptual experiences is to deny the innate paradoxes of human existence. The word “embodiment” demonstrates an ontological modality referring to the body-mind unification and its primordial inherence within the world.

The notion of embodiment, therefore, calls for the attentions to the innate

ambiguity of our body and the world, and the natural connections therein.

Merleau-Ponty's vision of embodied human experiences thus refers to a diversity of dissolving oppositions between inter/ outer, subject/ object, etc. Through the elaborations, Merleau-Ponty constantly revisits and accentuates on the role of the body. He argues that the experience of one's own body actually

reveals to us an ambiguous mode of existence ... [it is] always rooted in nature at the very moment it is transformed by culture; it is never self-enclosed but never transcended ... I have no other means of knowing the human body than by living it, that is, by taking up for myself the drama that moves through it and by merging with it. Thus, I am my body, at least to the extent that I have an acquisition, and reciprocally my body is something like a natural subject, or a provisional sketch of my total being. (204-05)

Here, Merleau-Ponty reiterates the fundamental obscurity prevailing in the everyday contact with the world. The crude differentiation of perception and consciousness does not indicate our lived experiences, but only diminishes or restricts the potentiality we can bring into full play. What renders the notion of "I am my body" comprehensible lies in, for instance, how we are not required to locate my left hand to reach a book on my left side. Merleau-Ponty describes the pre-reflective knowledge

as our “body schema,” and explains how our body, at the exact instant when we have an intention, tacitly forms a bodily movement responsive to the present tasks. At this primitive level, we can understand that Merleau-Pontian body-subject exerts an ontological significance, for our body possesses equal power for understanding a meaning through the organic inter-sensory synthesis (the field of vision and touch etc.) that is always in connection with the present. Such a concept explains how body schema represents “a way of stating that my body is in the world” for Merleau-Ponty.

As Merleau-Ponty suggests, the body establishes “levels” through everyday perceptual experiences. Or, in the case of space, our spatial orientation through bodily intentionality manifests “a certain possession of the world by my body, a certain hold my body has on the world ... the constitution of a spatial level is only one of the means of the constitution of an integrated world” (261). An objective space and a lived space are always in a form of “dialectics.” However, we should not recede to the intellectualist side and negate the realist positions of objects in a place. Instead, what Merleau-Ponty argues for is to enliven the primitive mode of existence by full bodily immersions into the milieu through perceptual acts. Such a phenomenon also explains why Merleau-Ponty describes the body as “an expressive space” because our actions or expressions fundamentally exhibit our body as residing in transitions with the transformative world. The primacy of perception should hence be considered as the

route to what Merleau-Ponty claims to be the real phenomenal world. Or, as Dillon describes it, "... the primacy of perception invites us to attend to the phenomenon as it appears in its richness and multi-determinability," which "underlies Merleau-Ponty's thesis of the intrinsic ambiguity of phenomena" (53). For Merleau-Ponty, it is by devoting to this perceptual world that all knowledge can be attained, and we can interpret the process of every perceptual contact as explicit or implicit expressions that display the qualities of our existence and the world. Such interactions then further explicate on the collaborative structure lying under. In this way, we can continue to state that through perception, our body indicates a certain viewpoint toward the world, and the world equally expresses itself through our body. For example, standing at a windy levee with our eyes closed, we still seem to "see" the sound of the ocean waves. Depending on each individual, we may later compose a song, write a poem, or draw a painting with different approaches. Such phenomena not only explain how subjectivity sets in and becomes a personal style, but also how the world is always "inexhaustible" for Merleau-Ponty. The pieces of information presented within a space represent not simply targets of tasks, but oftentimes appear "affective" in dialogue to our phenomenal body.

In *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty repetitively turns to the theme of our pre-cognitive interactions with the world to emphasize a "bodily attitude." In

the words of Merleau-Ponty,

If I draw the object closer to me or turn it round in my fingers in order
 “to see it better,” this is because each attitude of my body is for me,
 immediately, the power of achieving a certain spectacle, and because
 each spectacle is what it is for me in a certain kinaesthetic situation. In
 other words, because my body is permanently stationed before things
 in order to perceive them and, conversely, appearances are always
 enveloped for me in a certain bodily attitude. (316)

The notion of a bodily attitude uncovers the communicative relations between the
 perceived and the body-subject, and the flexibility and variation we see is indebted to
 the essential paradoxes of our body and the world. The visceral connectivity, therefore,
 reveals the significance of perception and a bodily perspective, by virtue of which we
 do not need to wholly depend on laws or theories to grasp a certain circumstance.

Meanwhile, it is imperative to bear in mind that our body can not be approached
 as without limitations. As Dillon addresses it, “This is the mistaken thought that the
 body functions for Merleau-Ponty as the transcendental ego does for Kant and Husserl,
 that it is to be conceived as the agency underlying the organization of experience”
 (146). We should be attentive that our lived body itself also exists as a phenomenon
 placed among all other phenomena in the world. Our bodily occupation in a specific

location undeniably indicates a type of limitation. Merleau-Ponty emphasizes the functions of the body that are oftentimes attributed to consciousness. For instance, in order to gain a fuller observation of the extraordinary flower in the dark forest, I move, through what Merleau-Ponty describes as corporeal reflexivity, in response to the appearances of all the phenomena around me, which exist not only as invitations or demands to my entrance, but also as possible hostility to my intrusion. I cut down the thorns, dodge the snares, or build up a wooden bridge to cross the river as if the flower “requires” the same attention from me. What Merleau-Ponty proposes is the recognition of the transcendental dimension of our body, namely, its power to arouse investigation and to constitute meanings. That is, Merleau-Ponty calls for the incarnation of consciousness (perceptual consciousness), which operates as the “complicit” mode of perceptual experiences in the phenomenal world. The sense of bodiliness thus falls neither at the end of pure internal sentimentality, nor outer physicality, but lies in between. The body certainly has limits, but reflection would not construct the whole content of our perceptual experiences either.

Therefore, to examine the concept of embodiment in a certain space entails our openness to the opaque existential and natural boundaries. Such an emphasis in fact gives rise to the recent surge of interests on the embodied sense of space in the research fields such as interior design, architecture, and urban landscape. Influenced

by Merleau-Ponty, the Finnish architect Juhani Pallasmaa suggests that an ideal building “renders possible an intense experiential and existential self-knowledge” (91). A place, therefore, offers the perceiver opportunities to (re-)experience joy, anxiety, desires, or fears. Through specificities on texture, lighting, color, and spatial utilization, the embodied dimension of a place can be revived through its built expressions reciprocal with human elements. In this aspect, to resort to a phenomenological treatment to a certain space is to understand that lived spatiality fundamentally demonstrates our Being in the world in that we are already “shapes” in a space, as Merleau-Ponty will name it. We are not required to consciously envision a point-by-point route from top to bottom or left to right to “see” a house because our body and the world share the same uncertain “kinship” of interiority and exteriority. To achieve an embodied level in the experiences of a place, we simply need to remind ourselves the significance of primordial pre-theoretical bodily contact with it.

III. Modern Ruins as Embodied Spaces

As Merleau-Ponty suggests in *Phenomenology of Perception*, “Inside and outside are inseparable. The world is wholly inside and I am wholly outside myself” (474). For Merleau-Ponty, perceptual experiences and the world itself constitute a meaningful whole, and to come into touch with something always involves the

indeterminate constituting-constituted perceptual processes. It is in this regard that the diffusions of exteriority and interiority correspond to the aforementioned motifs of modern ruins as border-crossing. Modern ruins per se demonstrate the perspective-shifting dimension similar to that of the synergy between the perceptible and the perceptive. In this aspect, modern ruins can be considered to exhibit higher potentiality of enriching our perceptual experiences.

The emergence of modern ruins as embodied spaces can be observed in several aspects, and the multi-temporality of the sites themselves can be considered as a proper entry point. Modern ruins display a sense of estrangement new and dissimilar to the stabilized atmosphere in classical ruins. Situated in a fastly-abandoned place, we are bound to interrogate and question in a more spontaneous way since we live in an era so close, or even the same, to that of the visited modern ruin. Past, present, and future seem to collapse at the very moment of our entrance. It is as if the exact flow of time, or the course of being, has been visualized through the ongoing process of ruination. In this dimension, modern ruins actually induce the co-presence of the former users, the current perceivers, and the future guests. The un-definability of modern ruins gives rise to the expectation of what has been here and what is yet to come. It is under such a prospect that we can further examine the sensorial catalyzation as partially generating from our awareness to the absent presences of

others through the gestures of certain objects. Or, as Merleau-Ponty suggests in his discussions on “cultural objects” in *Phenomenology of Perception*:

... several ways of being or living can fit over the ruins or the broken instrument that I find, or the landscape that I travel across... In the cultural object, I experience the near presence of others under a veil of anonymity ... The very first of all cultural objects, and the one by which all the rest exist, is the body of the other person as the vehicle of a form of behavior. (364-65)

For Merleau-Ponty, our encounter with the world is always pre-reflective, and it is because the world is never fully transparent and does not unfold in front of us all at once. While such unclassifiability may equally render uncertainty, we can in fact interpret it as the manifestation of the interrelations among the percept, the sensible, and the world. Such phenomena then lead to how much in the same way in which subjectivity is self-transcending for Merleau-Ponty, the perceiving body and the perceived self are also “transcended by the world” and surely “transcended by each other”⁴ (369). The notion can be understood as founded upon the fact that body-subject, others, and the world are “incomplete” and paradoxical in essence.

⁴ While Merleau-Ponty describes the body as never “self-enclosed” and “transcended,” we should comprehend his idea of transcendence in terms of how our body and the world is always incomplete, mobile, and evolving. For Merleau-Ponty, the paradox of transcendence is pertinent to the paradoxes of all phenomena that co-exist in the world with “shadows and opacity.” It is within the realm of identity oscillations between the natural and the social, in which projection and imagination become possible, that the issue of transcendence can be explored.

Therefore, once we refuse to reduce the ontological status of others as pure corporeality or mental activities, the ever-evolving relations between the process of sedimentation and the new significance added to cultural objects becomes evident. Here, we can take the notion further and realize that the experiences of the discarded objects lie not in how we attempt to discern the previous inhabitant's identity or the objects' functional purposes, but in how my perspective "slips" into the other's perspective in the "opaque mass." Such a mentality is additionally amplified in the experiences of modern ruins in that the aforementioned "transgression" essentially roots from their un-transparent state of heterogeneity. Or, we can describe the mysterious realm of modern ruins as the micro-version of the lived world, where we are drawn closer to the primordially of Being through perceptual restorations.

Our explorations in modern ruins resemble constant inquiries beyond what is exhibited to us. We embody a form of Being acting "inside out" while being simultaneously influenced from the outside. The sensory conjointly rests on the perceived objects as their "autonomous characteristics, which can then invade the body as perceptual experience" (Seremetakis 6). As Merleau-Ponty argues, our body understands the world because it is understood by the world in the meantime (the same applies to Others). In other words, the interactions with the fragments heighten our significance as a historical and transformative being in return. In this manner,

modern ruins manifest their “experiential” aspect that allows for a perceptual reciprocity through the intervention of imagination. Thus, to say that we sense pre-personal connections in modern ruins is to also recognize the possibility of extra-personal communications. We “inhabit” such dialogues, and the springing “embodied encounters” will always manifest our continuous interrogations toward the ambiguity of existence.

IV. The Ruinous Vision (廢墟視野) of *Kaili Blues*

Based on the above elaborations, we can now obtain a deeper comprehension on how and why the cinematic spaces of *Kaili Blues* render intensely-immersive filmic experiences. It is as if the “texture” of modern ruins and our bodily “opinions” toward them form a field of visual and emotional associations. Such responsiveness, nonetheless, can be considered as part of Bi’s directorial achievement. A crude insertion of modern ruins, without any attentions to their “ruin effects,” would not elevate or benefit the overall filmic sentimentality.

Aside from the aforementioned “reverberative” elements, Bi adopts different lengths of long take in the film. For example, at the beginning, the camera initiates a circular movement around the clinic, during which Guang Liang and Chen make their debut. The camera slowly passes Chen, and at the end of the take reveals Guang Lian

burning paper money at the balcony outside. Another example can be observed when the scene shifts to a worn-out factory in daytime. Crazy Face speaks to the man in charge that Monk has sent him to fetch the motorcycle. The camera pans from left to right in a slow pace, following the movement of Crazy Face. The character Monk is introduced into the plot for the first time (but only appears in the later scene). Through the take, we are given a period of time to ponder over the significance of Monk and his relationship with Crazy Face. During a deliberately loitering kind of movement, the scene and the characters are presented in a coupling and connective relation.

The following two examples represent the variations in that the panning and the circling further demonstrate narrative and visual designs with referential significance. First, at the scene when Crazy Face returns to the damp and dark house, the camera continues to follow his movement. While the camera takes us leftward, a strange man enters the house from the right side. Intrigued by the watch the man brings, Weiwei agrees to leave for the man's place, which is said to be stored with a diversity of watches. The camera does not pause when the conversation takes place; it continues to the left, passing the three of them. We start to hear the sound of a coming train, and a train, presented by digital effect, is seen coming upside down toward the left side of the camera, as if the wall is hidden with a tunnel. In this particular scene, the strange man makes his first appearance. Here, we can not relate the man with Monk yet, but

Bi has presented clues (living in Zhenyuan and owns a plentitude of watches). The digital train later leads to Chen's sleeping profile, which reveals his dream with a zoom-in. Such a portrayal not only paves way to Chen's future trip to Zhenyuan, but also indicates the distant relationship between Weiwei and Crazy Face. In the last example, the circular movement is further embedded with image of "life as a circle." After Chen visits his mother's grave, the view cuts to a pool room, where paint peels off from the fabric of concrete and expose the unattended cracks in insufficient lighting. Crazy Face emerges from the door at the left, and the take, following him and slowly making a circle, reveals Chen at one pool table aside. When they begin to argue, the scene abruptly switches to another mahjong room. Chen enters and questions Xu Ying if she has chopped off the hand of Monk's son. The camera continues leftward and pauses at a drinking glass. After the recitation of the third poem, the sound of brawling emerges, and the camera restarts to lead us leftward. Several people are seen trying to mediate the disputes between Chen and Crazy Face in the previous pool room. During this particular shot, we can observe that Chen's current anger is fused with his past regret. The identity of Monk as Chen's old-time boss is also revealed. The scene basically strings together two respective long takes to accomplish a wider circular examination in a fuller picture of Chen's personal history.

Such camera maneuvers cooperate with Bi's non-linear storytelling method,

which can be viewed as a resonance to the “transgressions” among the visible and the invisible in modern ruins. As if situated in a ruinous world, we gather clues and hints scattered here and there throughout the juxtaposition of the narrative threads.

Meanwhile, none of the presented objects convey complete messages, and sometimes, we may even be thwarted by the lurking symbolic complexity. Such a methodology requires us to observe things from their varying facets, much in the same way when we wish to walk further down to the end of the broken hallway in a dilapidated building. Through Bi’s editing and narrative design, we are presented with a “style” of investigation. It is as if Bi guides us in this realm of ambiguity. At some points, he intentionally stays at a place for a longer period of time, while at other moments, he leads us across a pile of discarded metal sheets without any elaborations. He simply takes us to the view as a kind of reminder or sign. The recitation of Chen’s poetry hence resembles the mumbling to the presented scene, bearing similarities to the way we are perceptually engaged in modern ruins. Different lengths of long takes indicate the amount of time we are drawn to a particular place. The unbroken long take of Dangmai especially manifests a kind of continuous perceptual experiences when the camera basically circles the village by following Yangyang.

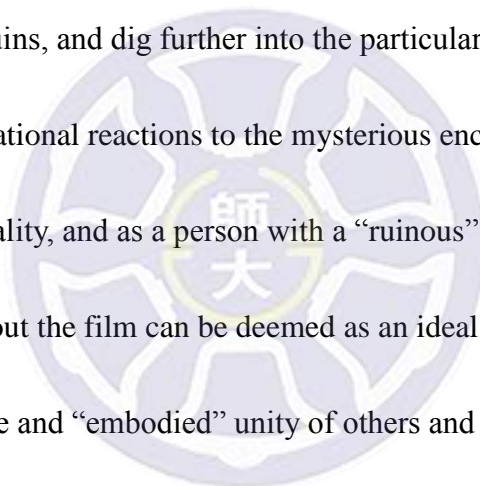
The world in *Kaili Blues* equals with a world of modern ruins. When they further become the characters’ dwelling spaces, doubled poetical and sensual experiences

unfold. The organic and “irregular” dimension of the former collides with the human affective aspect of intimacy of the latter, hence the calling for re-evaluation and reconciliation. In the words of Merleau-Ponty, “... the sensible does not merely have a motor or vital signification, but is rather nothing other than a certain manner of being in the world that is proposed to us from a point in space, that our body takes up and adopts if it is capable ...” (219). Genuine contact with the sensible generates from sympathy. To examine our life from such a respect is thus to halt the concept of stepping back from the sensible to attain the knowledge of it. In this regard, Chen’s tour-de-force will manifest a similar ontological modality, of which Chen lets himself filled with wonder, and “offers” his gazes and touches to the “anticipation” from the sensible. The filmic spaces of modern ruins thus build up a type of ruinous vision itself that is lyrically effective for the provocation of perceptual experiences.

Developed upon the border-fusing characteristics of modern ruins, *Kaili Blues* demonstrates the uncovering of the lived unity in a slow motion.

From Kaili, Dangmai, to Zhenyuan, Chen remains sensitive to the fragments of life. The journey in Dangmai particularly manifests the process of attempting eloquence in the never-ending narratives. Nonetheless, while modern ruins establish the general atmospheric elements in the film, the emotional trajectory does not stay at the mere hypersensitivity, but travel farther to some rare moments of “awakening” or

“revelation.” In other words, the filmic ruinous spaces are intricately laced with the psychological landscape of the characters. The events of their lives and the tasks to be coped with all manifest the constitution of the meanings of life through the interchangeability of cultural and natural world. Therefore, in the following chapter, the investigation will develop from such guided sense of fluidity and reciprocity in the film. The explorations into Merleau-Pontian notion of situation and flesh will serve as the purport to re-iterate the theme of heightened perceptual experiences in response to the fabrics of modern ruins, and dig further into the particularity of Chen’s redemptive and somehow improvisational reactions to the mysterious encounters. Possessing a “ruinous” state of mentality, and as a person with a “ruinous” past, Chen’s dealing with the world throughout the film can be deemed as an ideal medium to understand the mutually-implicative and “embodied” unity of others and the world.



Chapter Three

The Meaning of Life in *Kaili Blues* and Merleau-Pontian Situation and Flesh

In Chapter Two, we have re-assessed the multi-dimensionality of modern ruins with emphasis on their experiential aspect. From the obscured dichotomies to the invocation of Merleau-Pontian embodiment, modern ruins exemplify the dialectic of the visible and the invisible open to experimental and imaginative explorations. Moreover, Bi has constructed *Kaili Blues* as a world of ruination with intricate details from city landscape to character cultivation. The “reverberation” of particular places and the compensatory functions of the narrative threads have conjointly facilitated the transfiguration of meanings in modern ruins from public/ impractical to private/ functional. Therefore, in this chapter, we will proceed from the investigation of modern ruins as ruinous situations (廢墟情境) through Merleau-Ponty’s ontology of situation. Then, Chen’s mystic encounters will be examined through Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh to probe into his equally-symbolic bodily gestures. With the explorations on the case of Dangmai, a deeper understanding on how we are existentially structured from within and from without may be hopefully achieved, and the poetics of fragments can be eventually unveiled.

I. Modern Ruins as Merleau-Pontian “Situations”

So far, we have understood our body as equally “intelligent.” For Merleau-Ponty, body schema demonstrates the “motor cognition” that guides us to a set of bodily responses as our original grasp of a certain situation, and such a pre-reflective grip derives from the process of “sedimentation” that renders our body “habitual”. Unlike a mechanistic system, our body possesses the pre-personal kinesthetic awareness of our confrontation with the environment, and the unnecessary to call for contemplative decisions is indebted to this bodily power to digest previous experiences. In

Phenomenology of Perception, Merleau-Ponty illustrates how we are immediately capable of knowing the way around in a dark house and how we do not need to retrace previous conversations with a friend in reference to his or her personality.

However, while the phenomenon of sedimentation seems to “contract” knowledge for our way around the world, Merleau-Ponty reminds us that “my acquired thoughts are not an absolute acquisition; they feed off my present thought at each moment ... The acquired, then, is only truly acquired if it is taken up in a new movement of thought, and a thought is only situated if it itself assumes its situation” (132). Here, Merleau-Ponty addresses how our phenomenal body truly exists among all regions that are familiar, certain, strange, or confusing, and how sedimentation must simultaneously involve acquisition so that the two reciprocally “generate” each other. In fact, our worldly experiences point to constant revisions of ourselves, and the

layeredness of our lived body then explains the genesis of “a physiognomy of questions, and intellectual situations such as research, discovery, and certainty” (131).

For Merleau-Ponty, we are situational individuals in that the modality of existence allows for alterations from the sedimented principles. Thrown into the mystery of life, we mold ourselves to locate the optimal expressions to the problem, and to prepare ourselves for interrogation and projection. Such a phenomenological notion further sheds light on the way our body-subject varies from other people, for when each one of us possesses different history, we adopt different methods to adapt to different situations. While human bodies occupy the same space and temporality, there are ultimate differences as in “how (and whether) certain syntheses are performed, and thus, the perceptual norms that human beings develop will vary as well” (Weiss 213). The disparities explicate certain situations where some people fail to complete a task despite the full awareness of all possible solutions. That is, even if we reside in a similar place, we are still perceptually engaged at varying levels. An embodied space is not necessarily experienced within the same set of standards.

The term “situation” in the contexts of Merleau-Ponty’s elaborations thus no longer simply refers to the factual analysis on the external factors in a specific location. As Mallin states it, “... when Merleau-Ponty says that a man is in a particular situation ... he means that the subject or some state of the subject is thoroughly

intertwined with the object, body, other person, or general milieu that is indicated” (8), and “... thoughts, meanings, emotions, and actions, as well as sensations, properties, objects, and space are ultimately situational” (10). To attain an adequate grasp of the issue at hand, therefore, is to determine something out of the objective/ subjective relations of our present involvement with the circumstance. The practical dimension influences the affective one, and the two resides in a field of collisions where different levels of judgment can be made, depending on the subject. The significance of the Merleau-Pontian “situation” thus rests at the correlation and oscillation between the objective and subjective aspect of everything involved⁵. The sense of equilibrium in our daily experiences indeed emerges from the collaboration and mutual-affirmation of our bodily operations and self-consciousness.

The indefiniteness of such a modality consequently implies our Being as perspectival, acquisitive, and transcendent. As Merleau-Ponty argues, it is primarily because both the perceiving and the perceived possess a “style” of existence that they allow for mutual elicitations and inquiries. That is, the corrigibility of a situation does not originate solely from subjective manipulations. In fact, the body-subject “couples” with the “landscape” of the sensible, and they reciprocally condition each other.

Merleau-Ponty’s concept of embodied experiences thus takes into consideration the

⁵ See Samuel B. Mallin’s *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy* for more detailed discussions on the subjectivity and objectivity of “situation.”

diverse “levels” where the multi-dimensionality of body-subject reversely uncovers the same variant appearances of things. Or, in the words of Monika, “The thing’s objectivity is inseparable from its open-ended nature and hence also from that fundamental ambiguity which is involved in the richness of perception” (96). In other words, when Merleau-Ponty addresses perception “as our inherence in things” (366), he also argues for the disclosing power of perception to enliven our bodily potentiality to act and to be “summoned” by things. The underlying inseparability hence renders the world as composed of “situations” that not only recognize the autonomy from the parties involved, albeit the different nature, but exhibit the very creating-created processes of perception itself. Thus, Merleau-Ponty’s discussions on our situatedness suggest the body-subject’s capabilities to claim a responsive viewpoint toward a particular circumstance through our bodily combinative force of sedimentation and spontaneity. The strength to initiate dialogues represents the “enactive” dimension of perceptivity to react to the thingness or affordances of the surroundings. Meanwhile, since there is always something to understand, and the things we encounter always points to something extra (or already there), our grasp toward the world are never complete, absolute, or flawless, but always aims for the maximum.

In *Merleau-Ponty’s Philosophy*, Samuel B. Mallin has noteworthy described Merleau-Ponty’s philosophy as the “ontology of situation.” While Merleau-Ponty

does not specifically address it with such a statement, and focuses more on the primacy of perception and the role of body, the notion of our embeddedness in the world can be easily comprehended as the crucial reasoning behind his overall philosophical thinking. It is in this regard that modern ruins in *Kaili Blues* can be further explored as a type of distinctive realms that bring about certain bodily reactions. As a world composed of modern ruins, *Kaili Blues* presents “ruinous situations” that harbor the characters’ ruinous physical and mental status. The spatial-temporal proximity and the evasive inner-outer structures of modern ruins induce an uncanny atmosphere in which the unusual hypersensitive engagement with the surroundings resembles the confrontations to our own existential unpredictability. In this dimension, modern ruins exemplify the ontological paradoxes in the architectural form of the convergence of the seen and the unseen, and it is from such a perspective that we continue to envision modern ruins to “permit” the equally-intriguing responses from the perceiver. Or, we can also say that certain actions almost only occur in modern ruins (or in places with similar attributes).

As discussed in Chapter Two, a diversity of “transgressions” abounds and lurks all over the spectacles in modern ruins, leading to the instantaneous modifications of viewpoint. Moreover, the fact that modern ruins are being reused by the characters suggests the intersections between the historicity of the ancient buildings and the

memories of the inhabitants. Past, present, and future emerge less in the form of successive points, but interrelations with the dwellers and the surroundings. A sense of oddity is laid bare from the bodily closeness to the “texture” of temporalities when modern ruins turn to be “intimate” spaces. From this aspect, ruinous situations in *Kaili Blues* imply not only the labyrinthine topographical intricacy, as in the arbitrariness of the entrance and exit, but also desires, struggles, and personal growth. The reuse of the dilapidated buildings and their adjacency to the natural environment have collectively modeled the everyday ruinous situations in the film, and appear to guide Chen toward a way of life in resonance with this process of becoming.

The observations we should make in the ruinous situations of *Kaili Blues* thus lie in the uniqueness of certain bodily operations that can justify themselves as ruinous responses. As a starting point, it is from within an equally non-dualistic mindset that embodied spaces like modern ruins can be recognized and that their potentiality can be aptly appropriated. Here, the mysterious encounters in Dangmai can be considered as one prime example, the significance of which will be explored later through the notion of flesh. Chen puts on the promised shirt from Guang Lian when he notices and hairdresser woman. Later in the hair salon, he firstly holds his hands back in the way of a sinful person will do (based on the hairdresser woman’s statement), and then reenacts the flashlight scenario between Guang Lian and Ai Ren. Later at the concert,

Chen proceeds to perform Little Jasmine for the hairdresser woman, for, in the disco scene with his wife, Chen once sternly refuses to sing. When they are bidding farewell after the performance, Chen makes the final symbolic gesture as he transfers the cassette to the hairdresser woman. Wearing the piece of memorial shirt, finalizing the unsung song, and relaying the cassette, Chen seems to depart for Zhenyuan with some angst settled, some concerns soothed, and some hope to carry on with.

The transference of the items indicates Chen's optimal grasp to the mystic situation. Upon the first encounter, the hairdresser woman does not seem to think of Chen as someone she knows of (but she appears to care for Chen based on some of her expressions). The encounter, therefore, bears connotative significance only from Chen's subjective perspective. However, Chen proposes no intention to inquire her identity, nor does he seek to carry himself as someone she should pay attention to. Instead, it is as if Chen has sedimented a multitude of ways to compensate his late wife's suffering, for his reactions emerge as highly instinctual and spontaneous. While the singing may appear as a direct attempt to recover what has been lost in the past, the entrusted items become special agencies: he not only "completes" Guang Lian's love to Ai Ren by wearing the piece of shirt and by giving the cassette to the hairdresser woman, but "relives" a memorial part of their story. In this dimension, Chen's taking up of the conundrum displays the ruinous attributes in terms of his

recognition and responsiveness to the non-discursive aspect of the memorial fragments, his instinctive reflex of letting his bodily movement speak for his mind, and his conversion of the times past to the episodes impending.

Another example from which we can examine the elements of the ruinous situations, along with its narrative significance, lies in the employment of the neon ball. The neon ball appears as a reminder of Chen's marriage, appearing in Weiwei's house and Chen's balcony in Kaili. Since Chen is positioned in the film as a man who once serves in prison and loses his mother and wife during the sentence, the neon ball represents an element that introduces Chen's despairing past during the first half of the film. However, after the encounters in Dangmai, the neon ball makes its iconic climactic entrance in the prolonged shot that reveals the appearance of Zhang (which is not presented to us previously in the flashbacks). At this instant, Chen's actions turn from nonsensical to comprehensible. His employment of the entrusted items manifests his responses that echo with the massive signifying system of modern ruins embedded with figurative and elusive fragments. The insertion of the neon ball at different timings demonstrates not only the metaphorical narrative purposes of the film, but implies the image of life as a circle, referring to the impression of "starting over."

From such an aspect, the neon ball, as a fragment of Chen's ruinous past, further represents the poetic expression endowed with deeper meanings through his nomadic

bodily attempts to “understand” the situation. It is within such a realm of hybridity that we can comprehend *Kaili Blues* as a perceptually-engaging world, where the landscape unexplored and the things invisible continue to “assemble” our being.

Such entangling mutual implications provide us to examine the case of Dangmai further through Merleau-Ponty’s notion of flesh. As Merleau-Ponty suggests, perceptual experiences serve as drives for us to (re)gain the primordial hold of the world through situations taken up, especially in our very ordinary life. It is such emphases on the triviality of our daily experiences, the appreciation of the richness of our surroundings, and the human ventures to seek ideal articulations in life that *Kaili Blues* can be considered as connotative of “fleshy” significance.

II. Merleau-Ponty’s Notion of Flesh

Earlier in *Phenomenology of Perception*, Merleau-Ponty has employed the example of the right hand touching the left hand to address the subject-object shifting phenomenon. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, he extends from tactility to sight, using the seeing-seen analogy to reiterate the reversible characteristic of perception. That is, with our comprehension on the primacy of perception and the role of the body, we should further recognize the two interactive roles as constantly reversing and never truly coinciding. In the thesis of reversibility, Merleau-Ponty reveals our perceptual

experiences further as latent with a chiasmic paradigm:

The chiasm is that: the reversibility ... realized by the doubling up of my body into inside and outside - and the doubling up of the things (their inside and their outside). It is because there are these 2 doublings-up that are possible: the insertion of the world between the two leaves of my body and the insertion of my body between the 2 leaves of each thing and of the world. This is not anthropologism: by studying the 2 leaves we ought to find the structure of being. Start from this: there is not identity, nor non-identity, or non-coincidence, there is inside and outside turning about one another. (263-64)

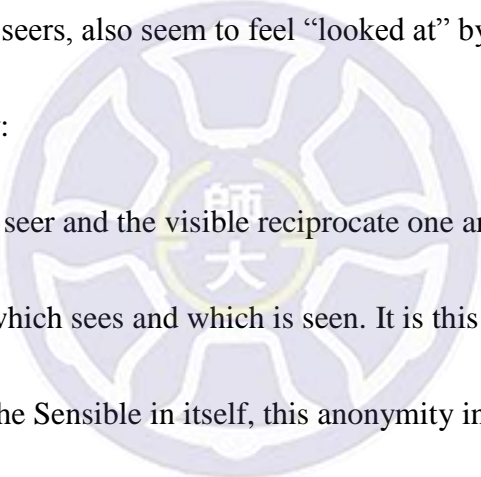
First, the doubled-up phenomena delineate the folding-back of perception during every encounter, a “return” that simultaneously allows a percipient to be an equally sensible being, and vice versa. Secondly, the opening-up of these dimensions renders every perceptual contact with a chiasmic structure. Merleau-Ponty clearly intends it that without the to-and-fro proceedings, perception becomes incomprehensible. Therefore, since vision, sound, and haptic experiences usually occur conjointly (when we see something, we intrinsically move our hands toward it), the reversibility of perception ultimately demonstrates our existence as a chiasm, enriched by the interchangeability of “I-the world” and “I-the other.” For Merleau-Ponty, the chiasm

pertains to “an exchange between me and the world, between the phenomenal body and the ‘objective’ body, between the perceiving and the perceived” (214). The term “encounter,” therefore, indicates the spectrum of chiasm from the most personal aspect (inter-sensory envelopment) to the unity of body-mind –other-world.

However, we need to be aware that Merleau-Ponty’s idea of reversibility does not imply a perceived thing “seeing” us in turn. Instead, reversibility demonstrates the same Visibility we all share, and the fact that when we see, we are meanwhile visible from the side of the perceived. Or, as Dillon addresses it in the case of touching, “... I cannot experience the table touching me in the same way the hand touched can taken up the role of touching. The plain fact of the matter is that the table is neither part of my body nor sentient in the way my body is” (159). What Merleau-Ponty proposes lies in reversibility (chiasm) as an enfolding process that exhibits a natural harmony. Encroaching upon one another, the perceiving and the perceived manifest the existential relations of transgression, announcing the interrogative process of perception to worldly phenomena. Merleau-Ponty later names such an interweaving reciprocity as “flesh.” As a new philosophical concept in *The Visible and the Invisible*, flesh is described as an element, “in the sense of a *general thing*, midway between the spatio-temporal individual and the idea, a sort of incarnate principle that brings a style of being wherever there is a fragment of being” (139). In this manner, flesh represents

what sustains the chiasmic constitutions of body-mind-other-world uniformity. Now, we should delve into the notion of flesh further through Merleau-Ponty's later discussions of visibility in *The Visible and the Invisible*.

According to his statement, vision occurs when a visible "turns back upon the whole of the visible" (139). Visibility resembles the two mirrors facing each other, where two series of images belong to neither one of them, but always rejoin with one another. We are "caught up" in the visible, and through "a fundamental narcissism of all vision" (139), we, as seers, also seem to feel "looked at" by the visible. In the words of Merleau-Ponty:



... so that the seer and the visible reciprocate one another and we no longer know which sees and which is seen. It is this Visibility, this generality of the Sensible in itself, this anonymity innate to Myself that we have previously called flesh ... The flesh is in this sense an "element" of Being. [Flesh is] Not a fact or a sum of facts, and yet adherent to *location* and to the *now*. (139)

The Visibility that implies the "commerce" of the seer and the visible, and the latent linkage by virtue of the generality and anonymity of perception, manifest the significance of flesh. By means of reversibility, flesh possesses a natural chiasmic structure indicative of the ground of communion such as Visibility, Tangibility,

Audibility, etc. In fact, we can observe the notion of flesh as an ontological re-thinking that strengthens what Merleau-Ponty has already brought forth in *Phenomenology of Perception*. It not only demonstrates or makes thorough the multi-dimensionality of the lived body, but also extends from our body, as the exemplar, to the world as it is, for flesh also constitutes the “fabric” of the world. Merleau-Ponty’s elaborations on the notion of flesh thus contribute to the sensible-sentient dynamism that clarifies or unleashes the communicativeness of our body. The shared act of perception eventually exhibits how the perceived “inserts” into the “two leaves” of my body (vice versa), and how our body is meanwhile “prolonged” to the open perceptual fields through the same opening of our body. Merleau-Ponty’s thesis of reversibility in perception and its chiasmic framework bring to light a process of temptation and evocation that allows for appropriation and enactment. Neither the percipient nor the percipere occupies a privileged stance. The entwining relationship can be further comprehended with the picture of “one sole movement in its two phases” (138). In this simultaneous co-functioning, we can understand the two leaves of our body and the sensible working not in separate modes, but together molding the meaning of the encounter.

The self-mirroring flesh thus implies that we exist no longer in space, but “of” space, and through vision, we are essentially “of” the visible. According to

Merleau-Ponty, if the body-subject “touches them [the visibles] and sees them, this is only because ... it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other, because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh” (137). The interconnectedness can thus be understood not only in terms of how Merleau-Ponty describes the body’s organs to “envelop each other,” but ultimately the same entwinement among worldly beings through this “inter-corporeality” sustained by flesh. At each perceptual moment, the crisscrossings reveal a form of inclusion that accommodates confirmations and compromises, belongingness and isolations, as well as similarities and divergencies. As Madison addresses the body-subject and the perceived world, “... [they] are the differentiations of the same fabric ... this can only be because they are both derivative expressions of a more profound reality which binds them together and which guarantees their cohesion as well as their (relative) opposition” (175). That is, Merleau-Ponty not only emphasizes the mutual referential significance between percipient and percipere, but points out their ultimate linking relations. The notion of flesh, therefore, refers to the idea of the interplays in the realm of commonness that brings to light the cruciality of the process of becoming, during which we can hopefully achieve the natural/ pre-predicative unity of human existence and the world.

However, as suggested above, the reversibility of perception indicates an

incomplete process. Such a notion on the one hand identifies flesh serving as the “formative medium” lying under, while on the other hand denotes the inevitable and necessary in-between spaces in the chiasmic relations. In fact, for Merleau-Ponty, the reason why we should not consider a certain phenomenon with a settled-down presentation lies in the “thickness” of our body, things, others, and the world, a distance-within-proximity that reversely supports the chiasm. In this manner, when we speak of thickness, we meanwhile suggest the thickness of flesh. In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty describes it not as a hindrance, but the “means of communication” between the seer and the thing. More importantly, the thickness of flesh is constituent of “the thing of its visibility as for the seer of his corporeity” (135). In this regard, contrary to how we normally relate distance with the impression of alienation or indifference, Merleau-Ponty considers it as a crucial vehicle by which the understanding of ourselves and the world can be possible. Here, we can approach such a necessary distance as a form of existential mutual respect, or sympathy, to recognize autonomy in harmony. It is within this realm of spacing that we can understand the desire to transcend the indefinability of the exterior-interior opacity. For Merleau-Ponty, a Visibility always involves a “non-visibility.” It is as if we are in an ambiguous realm of enigmatic expressions, where the utmost human attempts rest in self-revelation and the uncovering of the sensible in the name of flesh.

The thickness of flesh and the resultant enfolding processes in perception then demonstrate the medium with fissures, gaps, or *écart*. When the “dehiscence” opens my body and the sensible in two, the dimension of depth in flesh further unveils. Such an aspect in flesh first explains why Merleau-Ponty rejects the view of the world “from above,” and then how he later proposes the overlapping and encroachment in terms of the things “pass[ing] into us as well as we into the things” (123). The reversible perceptual contacts and the simultaneous “bursting-forth” of the body toward things (vice versa) indicate the inter-communications in the most basic regard of our life. It is in the folds and the gaping-open that we are rendered beings with depth and that the embodiment of the paradox of expression becomes possible. Or, as Cataldi puts it, “These ‘folds’ in the ‘fabric’ of Flesh are also openings to which we ... ontologically belong. It is because of the percipient side of our flesh - this sensitive ‘other side of our body’ and its distancing from the depth of perceptible flesh - that we are ‘incomplete’” (66). The idea of incompleteness signifies a modality of existence that throws incessant questions to Being. It exhibits the nature of our “situational” grasp, and the ontological fluctuations in the ambiguity of all embodied encounters. Situated in various forms of circumstances, we always strive for a present balance to human conditions and the natural world in hope for a more desirable future.

When Merleau-Ponty describes depth as a dimension of flesh where the

“impossibles” are brought in unity through the crossovers in perception, he meanwhile emphasizes on the flexibility of perspectives that calls for the attentions to the “embeddedness” of our surroundings⁶. As stated above, in the midst of the visibles, we are constantly lured by the sight, and it is when we always “eclipse” one another that the “springing-forth” of Being emerges. That is, when the innate thickness of the sentient and the sensible renders the activity-passivity dynamism, the in-between distances also empower the dimension of depth and its opening-up to be the access to the primordial world. Or, as Merleau-Ponty puts it, “... carnal being, as a being of depths, of several leaves or several faces, a being in latency, and a presentation of a certain absence, is a prototype of Being, of which our body, the sensible sentient, is a very remarkable variant, but whose constitutive paradox already lies in every visible” (136). The notion of flesh should thus be understood as multi-dimensional, enfolding, and gaping-open to all worldly phenomena. With the diverse forms of perceptual “fissions,” which ground the proceedings of our becoming and our relationships with the world, Merleau-Ponty emphatically calls for the attentiveness to what we normally ignore: absence, invisibility, a bodily attitude, and the primacy of perception.

In *The Visible and the Invisible*, Merleau-Ponty does not provide a definition of

⁶ As briefly suggested in chapter Two, Merleau-Ponty’s notion of embodiment have gained wide academic interests in recent decades, such as architectural design and performance art. His notion of flesh acquires similar attentions in ecological studies. In *Merleau-Ponty and Environmental Philosophy*, Hamrick states that “This felt sense of obscurity is an experience of depth; it is evocative of the depth of deep ecology movements and our deep, intercorporeal belonging to the sensible. Merleau-Ponty tries to capture with his claim that visibility and invisibility are intimately entwined in the ‘flesh’ of the world” (7).

flesh. With different accentuations, flesh is described as “elemental,” “for itself the exemplar sensible,” “a general manner of being,” and innate with a latent chiasmic structure that sustains “breaks” and “in-betweenness” to allow transcendence in the dialectical movements. From the flesh of our body, the flesh of the sensible, and the flesh of the world, we can contrive the novel notion as a connective tissue that dissolves the dichotomy of materiality and non-materiality. More importantly, the re-doubling of flesh renders possible each perceptual experience as self-emptying and self-fulfilling, since each phenomenon we encounter already represents its presencing of flesh to us. Taken these features of flesh into account, we can obtain a comprehensive understanding of it as an never-ending opening-up process of Being that is as much alive as all phenomena. As a “medium” and a “principle,” flesh possesses the polymorphous resilience that incorporates things and incarnate beings with their depth and “leaves.” The dehiscent and chiasmic status of flesh represents what Merleau-Ponty states as the co-existent structure of human and the world and the transcendental moments from the “hollows.” His explications present a framework where our being and others’ bodies together form an inter-subjective system. Our fields are overlapping and doubly-articulated, and the situations that are truly lived through human embodiment can be finely called the world.

As Merleau-Ponty once states that “there is a germination of what will have been

understood” (189), the notion of flesh represents a similar process to rediscover or uncover what has gone amiss in our pursuit of life. In this manner, what we formerly grasp as opacity can now be perceived as dimensionality, which renders all the sensible as veiled with layers and “insights”. It is through such a perspective that we can literally describe ourselves as dwelling in conversations (verbal or silent). A diversity of landscapes unveils in front us in the form of time, space, things, others, civilization, and the natural world. In this regard, as a mysterious space where reality and dream seem to coexist in a shared structure, Dangmai can be further approached from its ruinous situations to its inherent significance from Merleau-Pontian flesh.

III. Revelation: The Meaning of Life in *Kaili Blues*

The encounters in Dangmai are indicative of flesh in that they refer to the very personal desires, affections, and sufferings in a communal and recuperative form. As elegantly put by Amelia Jones, flesh can be interpreted as

definitely *not* a determinable, impermeable border between the self and the world (or the self and the other) that fixes this self in a final way.

As a physical membrane that sheds and reconstitutes itself continually, the flesh is never always the same material but always a contour in process; the flesh exists provisionally both as a permeable, shifting

physical perimeter, a limbic surround of virtual containment, and as the visible trace of the human body (whose contours are never stable in one's own or an other's visual field). Metaphorically as well as materially, the flesh is an envelope, a "limit" inscribing the juncture between inside and outside but also the *site of their joining*. (206-07)

The thickness of the sensible and our body produces the necessary "eclipses" that render reversibility as never-coinciding and always ongoing. The significance of flesh accordingly exists in its convergence of the perceiving and the perceived through the very chiasmic relations. By means of the enfolding processes, the incompleteness of our grasp of a certain event leads to constant renewals of our understanding of the paradox of Being. The flesh of the world, the flesh of our body-subject, the flesh of others, and the flesh of things do not causally produce or explain one other because for Merleau-Ponty, they are simultaneous and already interdependent. We normally miss a proper phenomenological attitude for the appreciation of the "shape" of the invisible or its mysterious working behind the visible.

When Merleau-Ponty describes the flesh of the world as "a pregnancy of possibles" (250), he also makes it clear that it is by the percipi that one understands the percipere, and it is by the flesh of the world that one comprehend the flesh of the lived body: "they are in a relation of transgression or of overlapping" (248). The

experience of flesh thus rests at the very moment of awakenings, or realizations that the longings for visual, auditory, or tactile experiences ultimately display our inherence in the phenomenal world and our latent connectivity, filled with necessary breaks, to other sensible beings. The epiphany uncovers a contour of the world that is invisible to a prejudiced and assumptive mind. From this dimension, Dangmai bears a “fleshy” significance in that it not only exhibits a very visual presentation of chiasm, but delineates the “labors” and “birth” from the aforementioned “pregnancy.” We can observe such creative proceedings in Chen’s own poetry and his overall artistic visions coupled with bodily movement. The transference of the objects represents Chen’s communication with the curious encounters, and more profoundly, it manifests the paradox of articulations. The items no longer refer to only Guang Lian and Ai Ren’s history, but Chen’s personal yearnings that subtly connect with Yangyang and the teenage Weiwei. At this point, the issue of whether or not the hairdresser woman and the teenager are truly the loved ones of Chen ceases to matter. The core eventually lies in the progress of determining something out of the confounding situations. In *Merleau-Ponty and the Face of the World: Silence, Ethics, Imagination, and Poetic Ontology*, Mazis describes Merleau-Ponty’s notion of depth as “key to making sense of the links between silence, the world’s gestures, felt solidarity, the imaginal, the poetic, and the kind of space and time into which we are drawn by the

planet and history (xvi)". The so-called "imperfections" derived from every ambiguous phenomenon should be viewed of as the sole means by which we can transcend in our pursuits of life through the confrontations to dichotomized thinking. Thus, the "coming-together" in depth not only pertains to Merleau-Ponty's ontology of flesh, but refers to the existential concept of how each moment demonstrates a process of emergence with no closures. The "enlacements" among worldly phenomena bring to light the very frivolity of our daily experiences, as well as its enlightening effects on us as long as we value what commonly remains underscored.

Certainly, we should not discredit or deny any possible "incommunicability," since in this way, Merleau-Ponty's notion of chiasm may be wrongly understood as another philosophical concept that withholds conversations. In fact, incommunicability well represents another form of communication, and the novelty of the notion of flesh recognizes and maintains the precise phenomena of alterity and impossibility. Merleau-Ponty simply highlights the unnoticed or the in-progression structural openness lying under. Here, the significance of the ambiguous phenomena and the mysteriousness therein in the film can be understood further through the insertion of a passage from *The Diamond Sutra*⁷ at the beginning, shortly after the

⁷ Merleau-Ponty's notions of ambiguity and intertwinement have been discussed in relation to Buddhism, and we can find in-depth investigations in *Merleau-Ponty and Buddhism*, in which the connections are further explored with other phenomenological thinking. Here, I only intend to focus on the theme of "formlessness" in the excerpted passage to re-accentuate the impropriety or impossibility to dichotomize our life experiences through the ambiguous phenomena in *Kaili Blues*.

clinic scene. The main concept lies in “The past mind can not be attained. The present mind can not be attained. The future mind can not be attained.” One of the philosophical cores of *The Diamond Sutra* can be grasped as “wu xiang (無相),” or “formlessness.” To perceive the state of wu xiang is to understand that all appearances are not appearances. We should abandon different forms of attachments (執) precisely because such an emptiness is the real characteristic of phenomena. From such a perspective, the adoption of the passage produces layer effects in *Kaili Blues*. First, as spectators, we are heartfelt to the characters’ attachments to the past. Second, somewhere along the course of Chen’s journey, we become aware of our own attachments to analyze all the signifiers and the signified. In this manner, while Bi intends to underscore the meaning of “non-attachment” (去執) by way of the characters’ plights, he meanwhile employs his narrative style to lull us into a state of pure film appreciation and to convince us to eliminate all the assumptions. Bi utilizes Chen’s experiences in Dangmai to render past, present, and future undifferentiated, a state of formlessness. Chen does not come close to being a saint, but rather understands the spirit of non-attachment in the ontological encounters where worldly phenomena co-arise and intertwine. Bi once states in an interview that “For me, inspiration is founded upon three years or five years of experiences. Three years or five years equal one moment to me.” Dangmai, therefore, represents the “one moment”

in the dimension of depth that seeks to call for the gentle approach to the seemingly impossibles, and is thus profoundly revelative of Chen's emotional "depth." To summarize, to explicitly address Dangmai as "fleshy" is not to simplify the encounters as time-traveling on the surface level, but to demonstrate Chen's existential and intrinsic openness to the body-mind -world chiasmic constitutions, in which certain unavoidable events turn to be potential opportunities to rediscover the kinetic energy dormant in the invisible dimension of day-to-day phenomena. We can comprehend the pre-personal aspect of perceptual experiences to be resonant with the temporal significance of the fragments; the encounters themselves and Chen's responses all exemplify the searching and practicing of present desires in correlations with past and future. Such interpretations then ultimately point to the issue of "disclosures," regarding our daily reactions to the world's invitations. Through the recognition of the evocativeness of space and a visionary mindset, the poetics of flesh are experienced through Chen's concrete and suggestive bodily manifestations.

In *Eye and Mind*, Merleau-Ponty attributes painters with the strengths to depict the secret "style" of Being of the invisible: "It is by lending his body to the world that the artist changes the world into paintings" (123). As a poet, Chen's responses demonstrate the same creative and aesthetic dimension of human capabilities. While a painter uses brushes and paints, Chen employs his own movements to solve the

mystery and interacts with the indirect articulations of the world. His poetry then showcases the strengths to the “finding” and “founding” of truth. The uniqueness of Chen’s reactions rests in the refreshing poetic attitude he carries, and the manner he adopts his body to form opinions toward the special fragments. The particularities of his responses then further indicate that our perspectival views upon a thing are never independent from those of others. Chen exhibits his body as an open theater: simultaneously public and private in the interweaving and multi-dimensional co-existence with the world. The experiences of flesh can be thus understood as certain gestures or expressions that seek to enrich the perceptual processes despite the inevitable distances. Certainly, the enfolding circuits of flesh do not suggest a clear and accurate understanding of ourselves and the world. Rather, the perceiver and the perceived represent the “two vortexes” that encompass the ontological tensions. The vitality, therefore, lies in the perceptual experiences toward what is given, as well as the undertakings to observe the advent of the invisible. Hence, our relationships with others and the world are not only encircling, but resistant. In this dimension, we can further propose that the 41-minute long-take of Dangmai represents a piece of artwork, in which the emotional and bodily responses extend from the very intention or mindset to make the mystery as the exact means to constitute the meaning of life.

IV. Conclusion

Combined with Bi's constant camera employment of panning and circular shots, the film has established "surfaces" with "depths" that take in each individual history and the "opening" and "belonging" to the world with equal "sides" for percipience. Taken together the explorations in the previous chapters, we can now understand the significance of what Merleau-Ponty describes as "symbiosis" in the human-world interplay. Moreover, among all daily embodied encounters, we not only witness but partake in the emergence of the Wild region, where "each fragment of a visible spectacle satisfies an infinite number of conditions, and it is of the nature of the real to compress into each of its instant an infinity of relations" (141). The reciprocally-intrusive horizons of modern ruins elicit diverse forms of confrontations, and the memorial fragments ultimately facilitate, rather than hinder, a new acquisition that contributes to another ontological "level" or affirms our coherence with the world. The innate paradoxes render worldly phenomena simultaneously ruptured, fluid, and interweaving in the voluminosity of flesh. In this regard, *Kaili Blues* manifests a similar form of flowing inclusiveness, in which our bodily embeddedness in daily situations also displays the necessary fragmentariness, alienation, and disturbance for the vibrancy of subjective-objective dialectic. It is under such circumstances of transgressions that they guide us to galvanize the invisible, the unnoticed, and the

silent, for which Merleau-Ponty has been advocated. In the case of Dangmai, the marginality of modern ruins “cooperates” with Chen’s perceptual acts in an experimental fashion. The transference of the items, therefore, pertains not only to a symbolic level, but ultimately an existential one. From such a perspective, the notion of “transcendence is identity-within-difference” (225) becomes a type of motto so approachable that we seem to experience “dehiscence” from “folds” in everyday scenarios⁸.

Such an understanding is thus pivotal and resonant with the idea of “revelation” in contribution to the meaning of life, since for Merleau-Ponty, transcendence always points to “the passage, not to the superhuman (as it has often done in its metaphysical sense) but to the fully human” (Smith 36), and to come close to be fully human is to “assume a situation, and define, though not in total freedom, the way in which a set of circumstances are to be lived” (38). The decisions then ultimately concern the extent to which we let others, things, and the world take up our perceptual experiences, even in the most trivial sense. This elemental realization further reveals that our communication with the world may lack profundity due to the neglected or unfulfilled

⁸ Here, we should bear in mind that Merleau-Ponty’s notion of situation does not propose fixed proceedings or outcomes. On the contrary, the underlying interchangeability among worldly phenomena always involves the unpredictable sedimentation/ spontaneity fluctuations, the bodily inclination for projection, and the innate ambiguity of perception. In other words, the investigation of ruinous situations in Dangmai by no means aims at any generalizations or standardizations of the consequent ruinous responses. The issue rests at the specificities of Chen’s handling of the mysterious encounters with the people, which should be understood as only one type of responses to ruinous situations.

needs for self-actualization and the inter-connected nomadic community which is Merleau-Pontian intersubjectivity. In other words, the rare moments of “awakenings” involve the (re)discovery of a more primordial participation with the sensible, and in turn a more genuine mode of expression that appreciates its ingrained ambiguity.

As enlighteningly put by Mazis, “... it remains the task of being human to fully look, perceive, and hearken ‘by awakening to the world’ ... To become ‘awakened’ in Merleau-Ponty’s sense, to be a participant witness, is owing to the distinctive human ability to interweave with the world. It requires a sense of the miracle of perception” (15). The miracle occurs when we cease to consider the world as the sum of connected dots, and unearth “a totality that surpasses what one thinks to be its conditions or its parts” (VI 8). To be “awakened,” therefore, is to be open to the wonders of the world and to realize the silent manifestations of others, things, and the world in our field of presence and their cultivating influences, visibly or not, on our history. It is thus essential that we have faiths even in the moments of pressure, distress, and hopelessness, for once we heed, we are also allowing these ontological strains to blossom into a set of future opportunities for us to practice even more embodied relations with worldly phenomena. Such a belief does not propose immoderate optimism, but our bodily capacities for the disclosures of “visions” in the multifarious skeleton of existence, hence the evolving of our competence in the world.

Both *Kaili Blues* and Merleau-Ponty's philosophy can be considered as the rejection to the dogmatic view from upfront. On the very contrary, they call for a perspective that situates itself within depths and fissures. While such exposures may reveal the vulnerability of humanity in unpredictable situations, these elicitation render the moments of letting-in and giving-in forceful to bring inert things back to life. From the significance of fragments, bodily explorations, to the recognition of the chiasm, we should understand that the body-subject, the sensible, and the world are always in the loop of capturing and escaping one another, and such paradoxes reversely become the means for transitions and transcendence. The openness for diverse interpretations in modern ruins, our bodily projective power to stage situational maneuvers, and the flesh as the texture shared by all living and inorganic beings contribute to what we comprehend now as the primordial lived experiences. The experience of flesh thus lies in certain occasions where we realize the richness of perceptual processes, or where we embrace and allow the world to "occupy" our visions. In other words, *Kaili Blues* demonstrates a poetic manner of living that brings out the ruinous psychological landscape of the characters, which points less to the despondency of living with a sorrowful past, but more to a set of potential metamorphosis. As Merleau-Ponty puts it, "... the presence of the world is precisely the presence of its flesh to my flesh" (127). To achieve a fuller comprehension of such

a notion is to concentrate on the mystery of the “scattered visibility” that our body does not explain, but represents the ambiguity of existence, for our meaning of life equates with the exact dialectical and un-bordering processes of worldly explorations. It is the equal inexhaustibility of our existence, things, others, and the world that consummates our life as a continuance of self-organization, and ultimately a perpetual quest for freedom.



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