



Visible Absences

Cinematic experience with Empty shots, and the embodied visuality of Taiwanese Identity

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(“There are too many people to thank, so let us thank the heavens instead.”)

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Abstract

This thesis examines how absence in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* (1989) becomes an embodied viewing experience for a diasporic Taiwanese viewer. Rather than treating absence as a simple lack of visual or narrative information, the thesis understands it as a cinematic condition shaped by Taiwan's historical trauma, unstable national identity, and geopolitical suspension. Through the analysis of long takes, aesthetic distance, off-screen sound, and empty shots, the study explores how the film does not directly dramatize the February 28 Incident and the White Terror, but allows history to emerge through restraint, silence, and indirectness. The thesis combines close visual analysis with a first-person phenomenological method. Drawing on Vivian Sobchack's phenomenology of film experience, Mark Hansen's concept of affectivity, Henri Bergson's understanding of memory and duration, and Laura U. Marks' theories of intercultural cinema and haptic visuality, it proposes the concept of spectatorship labour. This concept refers to the viewer's active participation in completing the cinematic experience through perception, affect, memory, and bodily response. By beginning from my own situated viewing experience as a Taiwanese viewer living abroad, this thesis argues that the empty shots in *A City of Sadness* open a space of drifting, in which historical absence and personal memory fold into one another. The film's absence does not simply represent Taiwanese identity, but allows it to be felt as a suspended and unfinished condition.

Keywords: *A City of Sadness*, absence, embodied spectatorship, Taiwanese identity, phenomenology

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Introduction

Moving to Sweden to pursue my master's degree, I have repeatedly encountered a seemingly simple question: 'Where are you from?' or 'Who are you?' These questions are not difficult linguistically, yet they always seem to happen first in the body. My palms begin to sweat, my mind goes blank, and sometimes I even briefly forget to breathe. This is not because I do not know the answer. On the contrary, I am quite aware of the correct or acceptable ways to respond. What truly unsettles me is what comes after the question. I anticipate that more questions will follow — questions that are harder to answer, questions that carry the weight of politics, history, and emotion. In these moments, anxiety does not come from ignorance, but from the condition of being unable to give a stable answer. No matter how I choose to respond, I am aware that my answer may satisfy some people while making others uncomfortable. Naming myself becomes a negotiation, and this negotiation is not fully within my control. This feeling does not disappear when the conversation ends. It always remains, lingers, and echoes in some form.

I was born in Taiwan in 1998, three years after Taiwan's first direct presidential election and shortly before its first peaceful transfer of power between political parties. Taiwan ended martial law in 1987, and after thirty-eight years of martial law, democracy began to develop rapidly.¹ As I grew up, Taiwan's two major political parties alternated in power roughly every eight years. Their different positions on historical narratives, policy, and national identity could be clearly felt in my living environment, and national narrative has always been one of the central battlegrounds.²

If seen from the history of the Republic of China, Taiwan's current political regime is the Republic of China; therefore, I am a citizen of the Republic of China.³ Yet geographically, we call this island Taiwan. Taiwan itself carries multiple historical layers: Indigenous histories, colonial histories, migration, martial law, democratization, and ongoing geopolitical uncertainty.⁴ Therefore, whenever we speak of Taiwanese people, this name carries an island

¹ Roy, D., *Taiwan: A Political History*. Ithaca, NY, Cornell University Press, 2003.

² Wachman, A.M., *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*. Armonk, NY, M.E. Sharpe, 1994., p.18-20.

³ Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*

⁴ Wachman, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*.

memory formed through an entangled multicultural system. Returning to the contemporary *I*, when I am asked ‘What is Taiwan?’ while living abroad, the expected answer is usually nationality. Yet within that short moment, many of the questions mentioned above have already flashed through my mind. How can I explain, in only a few words, a question that still has not been properly answered? In the midst of complexity and hesitation, as someone abroad, I seem to represent my country. My passport cover says Taiwan, while the inner pages say Republic of China. Then should I answer as a Taiwanese person, or as a citizen of the Republic of China?

When I watched the empty shots in the film, *A City of Sadness*(1989),⁵ I noticed a similar state. What emerged was not a meaning that could be immediately understood, but a delayed and still undetermined feeling. Because the empty shot did not give me a clear narrative focus, I first tried to search for a visual center within the image, but eventually I gave up this search. Instead, I began to stay within this image that did not clearly point toward anything. In this act of staying, certain memories began to surface. I recalled the moments when I could not answer questions about national identity. Those moments of anxiety and hesitation returned not only mentally but physically. These feelings were not explained or resolved by the image, but they were allowed to exist.

After reading Laura Marks, I gradually began to understand this experience. She points out that, in intercultural cinema⁶, cultural memory often does not appear directly within the image, but exists in the gaps between images — emerging through silence, absence, and hesitation. These gaps are not simply a lack, but come from the difficulty of fully articulating one’s own history and culture.⁷ From this perspective, the empty shot opens up a space in which feeling can appear. What I experienced was not no content, but a delayed experience. This experience also led me to rethink viewing itself. As Vivian Sobchack argues, perception is not only cognitive understanding, but a bodily way of being.⁸ In watching images, the body

⁵ *A City of Sadness*[《悲情城市》]. Directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien. Era International, 1989.

⁶ Marks, L.U., *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham, Duke University Press, 2000, p.24.

⁷ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, Chapter 1.

⁸ Sobchack, V., *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*. Princeton, NJ, Princeton University Press, 1992, chapter 1.

is not a passive medium that receives information, but a source through which feeling and meaning are generated. Viewing is not a single linear process, but a state in which perception, memory, and understanding operate at the same time.

In this sense, when I watch these empty shots, I do not merely *see* the image; I experience it through the body. The feeling of sweaty palms and linguistic hesitation does not come from any clear message transmitted by the image, but from the relation between myself and the image. Returning to the experience itself, I began to realize that these images do not aim to provide answers, but to sustain an unresolved state. What responds to this cinematic experience is the bodily memory of my unstable identity, a state that is continuously delayed and suspended. This state comes both from the image itself and from my encounter with the image. It is within this experience that I begin to formulate the central question of this thesis: when absence in the image cannot be directly explained, how is it experienced through the viewer's body and perception? And how does this experience relate to an identity condition that cannot be stably named?

Aim and Research Questions

This thesis aims to situate absence within cinema. Rather than arguing that Taiwan New Cinema can be reduced to a singular aesthetic of absence, this thesis approaches certain cinematic strategies emerging within the historical turn of Taiwanese cinema as historically situated forms that shape my embodied viewing experience as a diasporic Taiwanese spectator. Starting from cinematic embodied experience, this thesis examines how Taiwan's political and historical conditions, together with the instability of national identity, construct a particular condition of experience, and how this condition is transformed in *A City of Sadness* into perceptible forms of distance, emptiness, and absence.⁹

Absence, in this thesis, is not understood simply as lack, concealment, or invisibility. It can be understood as a structured aesthetic arrangement. However, my main focus is not only on how absence is formally constructed, but on how this visual language affects the viewer's

⁹ Hong, G.J., *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen*. New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.

experience. Historical traumas that cannot be directly spoken, and anxieties of identity that cannot be easily located, are not conveyed only through direct representation. Rather, they emerge through the absence of the image, requiring the viewer to supplement, respond, and participate in the formation of meaning.¹⁰ In this sense, absence is transformed into an embodied experience: a perceptual process triggered by the image and completed through the viewer's own bodily and affective engagement.

In order to discuss this observation, this thesis seeks to answer the following three research questions:

1. How does *A City of Sadness* construct absence through distance, empty shots, and off-screen space?
2. How do these cinematic absences shape embodied spectatorship?
3. How does this viewing experience resonate with diasporic experiences of suspended Taiwanese identity?

Background and Relevance

Over the course of just a few hundred years, Taiwan has experienced several regime changes, layered colonial histories, and successive waves of migration. As a result, Taiwanese people today often carry different pasts, different historical memories, and different forms of forgetting. In the contemporary international political order, Taiwan has also long occupied a contradictory and awkward position. Since the passing of United Nations General Assembly Resolution 2758 in 1971, the Republic of China (Taiwan) has been excluded from the United Nations system, and most countries, based on their One China policies¹¹, do not establish formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan.¹² This institutional exclusion places Taiwan in a condition of existing without being fully recognized within international organizations, diplomatic contexts, and global political narratives.

¹⁰ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, pp. 44-48

¹¹ The "One China" policy refers to the diplomatic position through which states recognize the People's Republic of China as the sole legal government of China, while maintaining varying degrees of unofficial relations with Taiwan.

¹² Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, p.128-137.

This situation is not merely a legal or diplomatic issue, but a structural problem of visibility. In international sporting events or official occasions, Taiwan often appears under the name Chinese Taipei. The rupture between name and sovereign identity makes national identity unstable and constantly subject to negotiation. This geopolitical structure of presence/absence produces a ghostly condition of ambiguity— a state that is difficult to explain.¹³ Such a condition can be used to understand the uncertainty and anxiety involved in the construction of Taiwanese self-understanding and identity. In other words, Taiwan does not simply not exist. Rather, it exists in a suspended state: present yet erased, visible yet unable to be fully named. Identity, whether externally in relation to the international order or internally within society, remains in an ongoing and unstable process of formation. It is not yet completed; it is still in progress.

Of course, this condition is not unique to Taiwan. However, Taiwan offers a particularly intense case because of its repeated regime changes within a relatively short period of time, and because of the repeated forced resetting of its political and historical narratives. What is especially significant is that this condition continues into the present. For many Taiwanese people, it is therefore not an abstract theory, but an affective reality repeatedly triggered in everyday life. Compared with people from countries with more stable and widely recognized national status, when Taiwanese people are asked “Where are you from?”, most of the time the answer is often neither direct nor self-evident. It requires an immediate response, while also reopening a process of political and identity negotiation. In this process of self-positioning, certain bodily and psychological reactions may be triggered.¹⁴

Based on this, this thesis does not reduce geopolitics to a causal explanation for film aesthetics. It proposes that, within this structural condition of visibility and invisibility, certain cinematic strategies — such as distance, indirect narrative, and empty shot — may resonate perceptually with this suspended condition of existence. Cinema does not need to directly represent or explain Taiwan’s diplomatic situation. Instead, through its arrangement

¹³ Lin, F.M., ‘Ghosting’, in *Taiwan lilun guanjianchi* [Keywords in Taiwan Theory]. Taipei, Linking Publishing, 2019.

¹⁴ Wachman, *Taiwan: National Identity and Democratization*, p.3-14.

of time and space, it may construct a perceptual dimension through which a “suspended identity” can be experienced.

This study focuses on Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *A City of Sadness* (1989), as the first work to publicly address the historical events from 1945 to 1950. And Hou Hsiao-hsien is also a key director influencing Taiwan New Cinema. Before the release of *A City of Sadness*, the film reforms that took place in Taiwan during the 1980s were later understood as a form of soft resistance, and came to be known as Taiwan New Cinema. The temporal boundaries and film corpus of Taiwan New Cinema are still debated by scholars. However, Taiwanese film critic Chiao Hsiung-Ping’s definition is often cited: she describes Taiwan New Cinema as a group of films made in the early 1980s by young directors around the age of thirty, whose works differed from mainstream cinema in terms of form, content, production mode, and narrative style. Chiao also emphasizes that the *newness* of New Cinema is closely related to its reformative character.¹⁵

Taiwan New Cinema emerged at a time when Taiwan’s authoritarian system was beginning to loosen, and when economic development and social transformation were accelerating. This reformative quality can be seen in the shift of historical narration. The release of *In Our Time* in 1982 marked a new creative direction.¹⁶ Earlier state-led healthy realist films and the Kuomintang (KMT) government propaganda narratives were largely shaped by government policy and ideology, often emphasizing anti-communism, moral instruction, and the legitimacy of Chinese cultural orthodoxy. In contrast, New Cinema began to turn toward personal memory, everyday life, and local experience. A new generation of directors, including Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, and Tsai Ming-liang, approached Taiwanese experience through more intimate, fragmented, and historically reflective forms. Their works no longer provided a singular and complete national narrative, but instead presented layered historical memories and multiple positions of identity.¹⁷

¹⁵ Chiao, H.P. (ed.), *Taiwan xindianying* [*New Taiwan Cinema*]. Taipei, Shibao, 1990, pp. 15–17.

¹⁶ *In Our Time* [《光陰的故事》]. Directed by Tao Te-chen, Ko I-chen, Chang Yi and Edward Yang. Central Motion Picture Corporation, 1982.

¹⁷ Hong, *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen*, chapters 4–5.

Formally, Taiwan New Cinema gradually developed stylistic features such as long takes, fixed camera positions, and distant framing. In this sense, it can also be understood as a transformation in both industrial practice and artistic form. This aesthetic style reduces direct dramatic manipulation and constructs a renewed atmosphere and mode of viewing experience through a changed approach to historical narration. In *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen* (2011), Guo-Juin Hong emphasizes that New Cinema marked a “historical turn.”¹⁸ After the lifting of martial law in 1987, historical traumas such as the February 28 Incident and the White Terror gradually entered public discussion. New Cinema became a way of re-viewing the past. For Taiwan, which was also facing diplomatic difficulties at the time, the success of New Cinema in international film festivals carried particular significance. Together with Taiwan’s internal movement toward democratization, increasing economic prosperity, and wider access to global information, New Cinema touched a younger generation and offered a sense of possibility.

Empirical Material

This thesis selects Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *A City of Sadness* (1989) as its main object of analysis, with particular attention to its empty shots. The film is chosen because of its historical context, Hou’s directorial background, and its distinctive cinematic aesthetics. Hou Hsiao-hsien, as one of the founding figure of the Taiwan New Cinema, is renowned for his unique filmmaking style and his pioneering approach to historical exploration. *A City of Sadness* is often regarded as one of Hou Hsiao-hsien’s most significant works. The film not only received widespread international praise, but also played a pivotal role in advancing the study of Taiwan’s history and culture.

The film depicts the period from the end of Japanese colonial rule to the early years of the KMT government in Taiwan. It was the first Taiwanese film to publicly address this politically sensitive history, focusing on the years between 1945 and 1949. Through the story of the Lin family, the film reflects the impact of the February 28 Incident and the subsequent White Terror on Taiwanese society. The February 28 Incident refers to a violent political

¹⁸ Hong, *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen*., chapter 4.

conflict that began with civilian protests against Kuomintang corruption and oppression, and escalated into a brutal military crackdown.¹⁹ The subsequent period of political repression, including arrests, disappearances, military trials, and martial law, left deep scars on Taiwanese society and identity.²⁰

Narratively, rather than directly dramatizing major historical events, *A City of Sadness* reveals large-scale political transformation through close attention to the lives of ordinary people. Through non-linear narratives, the film involves conflicts between different ethnic and social groups, reflecting the internal tensions of early postwar Taiwanese society.²¹ Yet these tensions are not fully resolved by state power. Instead, they remain as historical ruptures and unfinished conditions. Moreover, Hou Hsiao-hsien's work is often rooted in local Taiwanese experience, with particular attention to rural life, everyday existence, and historical memory. As one of the representative directors of Taiwan New Cinema, his aesthetic style also had a significant influence on the movement. Due to low-budget production conditions, Hou's films often relied on location shooting and non-professional actors. Long takes and long-lens shots allowed him to capture more natural performances, and gradually became central features of his style.²² On this basis, Hou's shots are generally longer than those in classical Hollywood cinema, allowing the image to emphasize the continuity and flow of time. And this aesthetic style also became one of the defining characteristics of Taiwan New Cinema.

This is why *A City of Sadness* matters in this thesis. The film does not simply represent the February 28 Incident; it approaches a historical wound that has long been mediated through silence, absence, and delayed articulation. Moreover, it is also because of this cinematic aesthetics that this thesis approaches *A City of Sadness* through *mise-en-scène* and camera movement, in order to examine the particular mode of viewing it constructs. For this thesis, the empty shots in *A City of Sadness* provide an entry point for analyzing the perceptual experience of time and duration. The extension of shot duration, together with the film's

¹⁹ Chen, F., '228 Incident and the Power Consolidation of the KMT Government in Taiwan', *Bulletin of Taiwan Historical Research NTNU*, 8, December 2015, pp. 27–64.

²⁰ Lai, T., *Ereba shijian yanjiu baogao* [Research Report on the February 28 Incident]. Taipei, China Times Publishing, 1994.

²¹ Chen, J., 'The Interaction of Narrative and Visual Style with Time, History, Memory, and Ethnic Identity in *A City of Sadness* (1989)', *Educational Innovation Research*, 3(1), 2025, pp. 44–49.

²² Bordwell, D., *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005, chapter 5.

refusal to directly present certain historical events, lays the foundation for the later discussion of suspended spectatorship.

Theoretical Framework

To examine how cinema allows the viewer to perceive the ambivalent feeling of Taiwanese identity through cinematic experience, this thesis proposes the core concept of *spectatorship labour*. By this term, I refer to the active perceptual, affective, and embodied work through which the viewer responds to cinematic absence. This labour is not simply the act of filling in missing narrative information, but a process in which the viewer's body, memory, and affect participate in the formation of cinematic experience.

This theoretical framework is constructed through three layers. First, I draw on Vivian Sobchack's concept of embodied film experience to explain how images are experienced. Sobchack's phenomenological approach emphasizes that cinematic experience is co-constituted by the film-subject and the viewer-subject.²³ In this sense, the viewer is not a passive receiver of images, and the image is not merely an object waiting to be interpreted. Rather, film experience emerges through the relation between image and body, reducing the unequal division between active image and passive spectator.

Second, I use Henri Bergson's theory of memory and Mark Hansen's concept of affectivity to discuss the affective energy involved in viewing, as well as the operation of time and memory. Hansen draws on Bergson's understanding of perception, Bergson helps explain how perception is always mixed with memory, and how the past continues to act within the present experience of viewing. His theory allows me to understand memory not only as mental recollection, but as something that has a material and bodily dimension in the viewing experience. Hansen's concept of affectivity, on the other hand, helps explain the force produced between cinematic images and the viewer's body. This affective force becomes the energy that activates the viewer's participation and forms the basis of spectatorship labour.²⁴

²³ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, p.21-26.

²⁴ Bergson, H., *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. London, George Allen & Co., 1911, chapter 1-2; Hansen, M.B.N., *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004, p.130.

Finally, I draw on Laura U. Marks' discussion of intercultural cinema and haptic visuality to identify what kind of memory is activated in this viewing process, and how the viewer's body feels it beyond visual perception. Marks' work is especially important for this thesis because she shows how cultural memory often appears through gaps, silence, hesitation, and sensory experience.²⁵ Her concept of haptic visuality allows me to consider how cinema may be felt not only through sight, but also through bodily memory, atmosphere, and sensory response.²⁶

Together, these theories allow this thesis to understand absence not as a lack, but as a condition of embodied spectatorship. Sobchack helps me ask how the image is experienced; Bergson and Hansen help me explain how time, memory, and affect operate within that experience; and Marks helps me understand the cultural and diasporic nature of the memory activated through cinematic absence. These concepts will be developed in greater detail in Chapter Two.

Methodology

This study adopts a method that combines close visual analysis with a first-person phenomenological account of cinematic viewing, in order to examine how absence in the film is transformed into an embodied experience through the act of viewing. This thesis does not treat film simply as a text of historical representation, nor does it analyze cinematic meaning only from a formalist perspective. Instead, it focuses on the encounter between image and viewer: how the viewer perceives the image, how they are affected by the time and space constructed by the image, and how memory and affect are called forth during the viewing process.

First, this study uses close visual analysis to analyze specific cinematic strategies in the film, including empty shots, long takes, distant framing, off-screen space, the disjunction between sound and image, and the relationship between figures and space within *mise-en-scène*.²⁷

²⁵ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p.24-30.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, p.162-170.

²⁷ Bordwell, D., *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging*. Berkeley, University of California Press, 2005.

Building on this, I argue that these elements are not merely formal stylistic choices, but cinematic methods that construct specific conditions of viewing. Through a close reading of these shots, this thesis analyzes how “absence” is constructed through cinematic form, and how it changes the viewer’s perception of time, space, and history.

Second, this thesis draws on Vivian Sobchack’s phenomenological method of film analysis, particularly her three stages of description, reduction, and interpretation.²⁸ Description refers to the attempt to describe the viewing experience as faithfully as possible, remaining at the level of how the image is perceived and experienced, without immediately moving into symbolic or ideological interpretation. Reduction involves temporarily bracketing existing interpretive frameworks, and shifting attention toward how the experience is generated: how the image acts upon the body, and how the viewer feels hesitation, distance, pressure, drifting, or stillness in the act of viewing. Finally, interpretation is not an abstract analysis detached from experience, but a rethinking, based on the previous two stages, of how these embodied experiences relate to memory, identity, and historical conditions. Through these three stages, it is profoundly useful to see as close as possible to cinematic experience itself.

Third, this study uses first-person viewing experience as part of its method. The *I* in this thesis is not simply personal expression, nor does it treat personal feeling as universal truth. Rather, it functions as a situated viewing position. Drawing on Marks’ understanding of diaspora²⁹, I approach my own position as a Taiwanese viewer watching Taiwanese cinema from abroad. My body, memory, and identity position therefore form part of the viewing experience itself. This thesis begins from my own cinematic experience in order to analyze how absence in the image calls forth bodily responses related to Taiwanese identity, historical memory, and geopolitical instability. However, this does not mean that my experience represents all viewers.

Therefore, the concept of spectatorship labour proposed in this thesis does not refer to a fixed or universally identical viewing result, but to an active mechanism of participation in the viewing process. Through this method, the act of filling in cinematic absence is not

²⁸ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience.*, p.42-49

²⁹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p.9.

necessarily a rational explanation. It may also be a bodily act of enduring, remaining, or situating oneself within the image.

Previous Research

The White Terror period and Taiwan's later historical transformation have been widely discussed in the fields of history, political science, and sociology. In film studies, Taiwan New Cinema has often been approached through the frameworks of historical representation, national narrative, and political allegory. However, this thesis does not treat film simply as a text that represents historical events. Instead, it shifts attention toward the structure of blankness and absence within the image. More specifically, by focusing on empty shots in *A City of Sadness*, this thesis investigates how these seemingly silent and withdrawn cinematic strategies generate a particular viewing experience.

Existing scholarship on Taiwan New Cinema has often approached the movement through the frameworks of national cinema, historical representation, and cinematic style. Studies of Taiwan New Cinema frequently emphasize its historical significance in relation to Taiwan's postwar political transformation, the lifting of martial law, and the gradual re-emergence of previously suppressed histories. From this perspective, *A City of Sadness* is often understood as a work that revisits Taiwan's traumatic past and participates in the reconstruction of national and historical memory. Scholars such as Guo-Juin Hong, for instance, frame Taiwanese cinema as a contested site in which questions of nationhood, history, and identity are negotiated.³⁰

Another important strand of scholarship focuses on the formal characteristics of Taiwan New Cinema. Hou Hsiao-hsien is often discussed through his use of long takes, distant framing, restrained editing, location shooting, and attention to everyday life. David Bordwell's discussion of Hou's *mise-en-scène*,³¹ for example, provides an important account of how meaning is organized within the frame rather than through classical continuity editing. Such studies are useful for understanding how Taiwan New Cinema departs from conventional

³⁰ Hong, *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen*.

³¹ Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, p.186-237.

narrative cinema and develops a distinctive visual language. However, formal analysis often remains focused on how cinematic meaning is structured by the film, rather than how such structures are experienced by the viewer.

This thesis builds on these discussions, but shifts the focus from representation and formal structure toward embodied spectatorship. Rather than asking only how *A City of Sadness* represents history or constructs national memory, I ask how its cinematic strategies are experienced through the viewer's body. In this sense, my study is informed by phenomenological approaches to film, particularly Vivian Sobchack's account of cinematic experience as embodied and situated.³² Sobchack's work allows me to approach spectatorship not as a detached act of interpretation, but as a lived encounter between image and viewer. At the same time, Laura U. Marks' work on intercultural cinema, cultural memory, and haptic visibility is central to this thesis. Marks argues that cultural memory often emerges not through direct representation, but through gaps, silence, hesitation, and sensory forms of memory. Her discussion of intercultural cinema is especially useful for thinking about images that cannot fully articulate history, culture, or identity in a stable cinematic form. While Marks does not focus specifically on Taiwan New Cinema, her concepts provide a way to understand how absence in cinema may activate memory, affect, and sensory engagement.³³

The contribution of this thesis lies in bringing these fields together. It connects the historical and formal concerns of Taiwan New Cinema studies with phenomenological film theory and intercultural cinema. By doing so, it examines absence not only as a representational or stylistic strategy, but as an embodied viewing condition. More specifically, it asks how absence in *A City of Sadness* can be experienced by a diasporic Taiwanese viewer as a form of suspended identity — one shaped by memory, affect, and geopolitical instability.

Disposition

Chapter One examines the historical and cinematic conditions through which absence and distance emerge in Taiwan New Cinema. It situates the films within Taiwan's postwar

³² Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*.

³³ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*.

political history, geopolitical instability, and shifting national identity, while also analyzing cinematic strategies such as empty shots, distant framing, off-screen space, and *mise-en-scène*. Through these elements, the chapter argues that the films construct a state of incompleteness that is not simply a lack, but both a narrative and visual condition. This condition requires the viewer to participate actively in the process of perception and meaning-making.

Chapter Two develops the theoretical and methodological framework of the thesis. Drawing on phenomenology, affect theory, memory, and haptic visuality, this chapter explains how cinematic viewing can be understood as an embodied process rather than a purely intellectual act of interpretation. It shows how the viewer encounters the time and space of the image through perception, memory, and affect, and how this encounter forms the basis of what I call spectatorship labour.

Chapter Three turns to close analysis of *A City of Sadness*. Through selected scenes, it examines how absence operates differently in the film, where it opens a space of drifting and temporal suspension and continues to affect the viewer. The chapter then discusses how these embodied viewing experiences relate to diasporic identity as a suspended and unstable condition.

Chapter 1: Historical Conditions and the Emergence of a Cinema of Distance

The reactions I experience when I am unable to answer questions related to my identity and national belonging have led me to recognize that identity is not something that can be clearly defined. If this sense of suspension is not merely a personal or incidental experience, but is instead connected to broader historical and cinematic conditions, then the question shifts. It is not simply about how I feel, but about how these feelings are constituted through the image itself. Therefore, the following chapter turns to the historical context and visual language of Taiwan New Cinema, examining how distance and absence take shape under specific political and historical conditions.

1.1. Ghosting, Ambivalence, and Taiwanese Identity

Taiwan's history and identity have long existed under conditions that are difficult to define in stable terms. In *Keywords of Taiwan Theory*³⁴, many authors point out that the ways in which Taiwanese people understand themselves and the nation are closely related to Taiwan's frequent regime changes, layered colonial experiences, and constantly shifting political conditions over the past several centuries.

In one of the essays, Lin Fang-mei uses 'ghosting' as a keyword for understanding Taiwan.³⁵ This concept is particularly important for the present study. In Lin's explanation, a ghost is not entirely absent. Rather, it is a form of existence that has been excluded, yet continues to remain. It comes from the past, but continues to disturb the present. It cannot be fully named, but it has not truly disappeared.³⁶ I understand this ghostliness as an in-between condition: neither fully absent nor fully present, but remaining as a trace that continues to disturb the present. This condition, to some extent, corresponds to Taiwan's historical situation. From

³⁴ Wang Chih-ming, Michael Berry, and Ming-yeh T. Rawnsley, eds., *Taiwan lilun guanjianchi [Keywords of Taiwan Theory]*, Taipei, Linking Publishing, 2019.

³⁵ Lin, F.M., 'Ghosting', in *Keywords in Taiwan Studies*, ed. (Taipei: National Taiwan University Press, 2019), Chapter 29.

³⁶ Lin uses the term ghosting not simply to describe ghosts themselves, but a condition of lingering or haunting presence: something excluded yet not fully gone, absent yet still affecting the present.

Qing rule, to Japanese colonial rule, to the postwar relocation of the KMT government, Taiwan has repeatedly moved between different regimes and cultural orders. This repeated movement between regimes can also be understood through the keyword of ‘ambivalence’ (*hunmei*)— a condition of ambiguity, opacity, and unsettled mixture.³⁷ Taiwan’s history is not simply a sequence of regime changes, but a layered condition in which different colonial memories, languages, and political orders overlap without being fully reconciled. Moreover, after the end of Japanese colonial rule in 1945, the KMT government took control of Taiwan, and large numbers of migrants from different provinces of China — later referred to as Mainlanders — arrived on the island. Yet at that time, Taiwanese people who had already lived through fifty years of Japanese colonial rule were deeply shaped by Japanese language, culture, and everyday systems. Their ways of living were therefore different from those of the newly arrived population from China.³⁸

During the early years of the KMT government rule, the government’s attention was largely focused on the Chinese Civil War. Under conditions of political disorder, economic collapse, and ethnic tension, Taiwanese society gradually lost trust in the new government. The broader social atmosphere became increasingly unstable and pessimistic. By 1947, tensions between ethnic groups, and between the people and the authorities, reached a critical point. Residents of Taiwan lashed out against the KMT and other immigrants from the mainland. On 27 February 1947, a conflict broke out in Taipei after officials attempted to confiscate contraband cigarettes from a woman vendor. The following day, large-scale protests erupted in Taipei, and government forces opened fire on civilians. The protests quickly spread across the whole island of Taiwan. In response, the KMT government sent armed forces from China to Taiwan and carried out a large-scale crackdown. Many intellectuals, local leaders, and members of the social elite were arrested or executed.³⁹

After the incident, in 1949, the KMT lost control of the mainland to the Communists, and between one and two million civilian and military refugees retreated to Taiwan. Holding onto

³⁷ Su, S.B., ‘Hunmei’, in *Keywords in Taiwan Theory*. Taipei, Linking Publishing, 2019.

³⁸ Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, p.55-60

³⁹ Lai Tse-han, *Ererba shijian yanjiu baogao* [Research Report on the February 28 Incident]; Chen, F., ‘228 Incident and the Power Consolidation of the KMT Government in Taiwan’, pp. 27–64; Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, p.67-79.

the goal of recovering the mainland, the Nationalist regime initially regarded its stay in Taiwan as temporary. Before the rule of KMT government, Taiwanese people had already repeatedly experienced shifts in political rule. After the February 28 Incident, Taiwan then entered the martial law period, marked by long-term political purges, military trials, ideological censorship, and surveillance, which lasted for nearly forty years. The earlier expectation of returning to the motherland was transformed into disappointment and anxiety. Once again, Taiwanese people entered a drifting state in relation to belonging and identity. Without properly addressing the political violence of the February 28 Incident, the following decades of martial law further made many experiences difficult to record or speak about directly. Taiwanese people were placed in a condition in which they had not yet fully understood what had happened, but could not ask questions and could not receive answers. Under such conditions, many things could not be defined in a singular or stable way.

This state of seeming to exist and not exist at the same time also extends into Taiwan's contemporary international political situation. After the Republic of China withdrew from the United Nations in 1971, most countries, following their One China policies, did not establish formal diplomatic relations with Taiwan. Since then, Taiwan has remained in a condition of existing without being fully recognized.⁴⁰ It has territory, a government, and a people, yet it continues to be excluded, displaced, or replaced within international politics and diplomatic discourse. This condition of both existing and not fully existing also means that Taiwan and the Republic of China can never fully overlap with one another.

In discussing Taiwanese identity, it is important first to clarify that national identity cannot be reduced to ethnicity, language, culture, or place of residence alone. As Alan Wachman argues, nationhood is a profoundly political concept: it involves not only shared cultural affinity, but also a sense of political solidarity that goes beyond community and suggests a tie between social order and political power, perhaps even power tied to territory.⁴¹ In this sense, national identity is not simply a matter of where one lives, but of how one understands one's relation to history, community, governance, and belonging. This distinction is particularly important in the case of Taiwan. Wachman points out that identification in Taiwan is often shaped not

⁴⁰ Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, p.128-137.

⁴¹ Wachman, *Taiwan: national identity and democratization*, p24-.25

only by attachment to the place where one currently lives, but also by ancestral origins and histories of displacement.⁴² Moreover, even in modern times, Taiwan continues to grapple with internal issues related to its own nation-building, a definition shaped by the turmoil and chaos of its multi-layered history.⁴³ On the one hand, we must also face changes and threats in the surrounding world situation. For this thesis, Wachman's discussion is useful not because it provides a final definition of Taiwanese identity, but because it shows why such a definition is difficult in the first place. Yet Taiwan's identity is shaped by overlapping histories of colonization, migration, authoritarian rule, democratization, and geopolitical instability. Under these conditions, these instabilities have made national identity a field of ongoing tension.

1.2. Cultural Trauma and the Afterlife of February 28

However, this thesis does not aim to organize Taiwanese history, nor does it aim to discuss Taiwan's political dilemma in full. By explaining the February 28 Incident and its later impact on Taiwanese society, I understand this tragedy as a historical wound that is difficult for Taiwanese people to erase, and also as a small but important example of Taiwan's collective cultural trauma. This thesis argues that the February 28 Incident and the White Terror should not be understood only as historical events that belong to the past. Their significance also lies in how they continued to shape Taiwanese society through silence, fear, censorship, and delayed public memory. Therefore, this section does not focus on giving a complete history of the February 28 Incident. Instead, it focuses on how the incident became a form of cultural trauma that continues to shape the perception of Taiwanese identity.

Judith Herman writes in *Trauma and Recovery* that 'trauma is the affliction of the powerless.' Trauma is not only a matter of being wounded. It is also a condition in which people lose agency when they face violence and disaster that exceed their ability to control. ⁴⁴ This thesis does not try to reduce the whole of Taiwanese society to a traumatized subject. Instead, I

⁴² Wachman, *Taiwan: national identity and democratization*, p.15-27

⁴³ The Kuomintang's yearning to counterattack the mainland and its ideological manipulation, as well as the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP) founded by Taiwanese people who support Taiwan's independence, have caused the ruling power to fluctuate between the two, influencing Taiwan's relationship with China.

⁴⁴ Herman, J., *Trauma and Recovery*, NY Basic Books, 1992, p. 33.

borrow Herman's understanding of powerlessness to explain how, under regime change and political violence, people were forced to endure a situation they could not control. This idea is useful for understanding Taiwan after 1945.

The most direct violence of the February 28 Incident came from the army and military police, who suppressed and killed civilians. However, the incident was also connected to the subtle and tense ethnic relations after the war. At the beginning of the incident, the conflict was also pushed toward ethnic struggle. As the crisis spread, the authorities increasingly relied on military force to suppress resistance and restore control through violence⁴⁵ — a way respond to people's resistance and dissatisfaction with violence. In this context, after Japan's surrender, many Taiwanese people first expected that the end of colonial rule would mean a return to the motherland. However, the arrival of the Kuomintang government soon brought new forms of oppression, inequality, and political violence. When the expectation of return was transformed into disappointment, fear, and a deeper questioning of belonging: where, then, do we belong?

After the incident, the government suspected the loyalty of the Taiwanese people and worried about the hidden presence of Chinese Communist members.⁴⁶ For these reasons, it used intelligence networks, arrests, and interrogations to pursue, investigate, and clear out people who had participated in the incident. At the same time, under the threat of conflict across the Taiwan Strait, the government imposed martial law and restricted freedom of the press, freedom of speech, and freedom of assembly.⁴⁷ As the Chinese Civil War changed, the Republic of China government moved to Taiwan in 1949. Under one-party-state rule, because of political restrictions, the February 28 Incident became one of the greatest historical taboos in Taiwanese society.⁴⁸ It could not be openly discussed for a long time, and historical materials were also difficult to research. The government also controlled historical interpretation through fixed official explanations. As a result, the authorities did not truly face the problem, and the truth of the incident remained unclear for many years. It was not until

⁴⁵ Chen, F., '228 Incident and the Power Consolidation of the KMT Government in Taiwan', *Bulletin of Taiwan Historical Research NTNU*, 8, December 2015, pp. 27–64; Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, p.72.

⁴⁶ Roy, *Taiwan: A Political History*, p.78.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p.74.

⁴⁸ Chen, F., '228 Incident and the Power Consolidation of the KMT Government in Taiwan', p.29.

almost fifty years after the incident, after the lifting of martial law, that the government began to deal with compensation for victims, using the healing of historical wounds and the promotion of ethnic reconciliation as its main principles.⁴⁹

Precisely because the February 28 Incident could not be openly discussed for a long time, its impact did not remain only at the moment of the event itself. Through silence, delay, and later retelling, it gradually became a form of cultural traumatic memory. Jeffrey C. Alexander's concept of cultural trauma further helps us understand why this historical wound cannot be seen only as individual suffering.

Cultural trauma arises when members of a group experience a catastrophic event, leaving indelible memories embedded in the collective consciousness. These memories shape the group's identity and, if reinterpreted and retold, become a collective memory of suffering.⁵⁰

For Alexander, trauma becomes cultural when members of a group begin to understand a painful event as something that has marked their collective identity. Cultural trauma is therefore not only about what happened. It is also about how the event is narrated, remembered, transmitted, and internalized over time. In the case of Taiwan, the February 28 Incident and the White Terror became a shared history of loss, silence, and interrupted articulation. These memories do not remain only in official history. They also continue to appear in family memory, public commemoration, artistic representation, and in the everyday difficulty of naming Taiwanese identity. In this sense, trauma does not simply stay in the past. It continues to haunt the present as a condition of uncertainty and powerlessness. What the February 28 Incident and the White Terror caused was not only political harm, but also an interruption of identity narrative. When a history cannot be explained for a long time, when different groups hold different memories of the past, and when official narratives try to suppress these differences, those questions about one's national identity become difficult to answer in a stable way.

⁴⁹ Chen, Y. and Hsueh, H. (eds.), *Report on the Truth and Transitional Justice of the February 28 Incident*, 2 vols. Taipei, Memorial Foundation of 228, May 2021.

⁵⁰ Alexander, J.C., *Cultural Sociology: The Meaning of Social Life*. Trans. Wu Zhenhuan. Taipei, Wunan, 2008, p. 153.

When this thesis discusses Taiwanese history, it does not see historical events as a linear chain of cause and effect. Rather, it understands history as something formed by many events happening at the same time, influencing and weaving into each other, and gradually accumulating together. This kind of history is not only a simple transfer of political power. It is also an overlap of multiple times and memories. Different ethnic groups and different generations have different attachments to, and losses from, the past. For some people, China was the homeland. For others, the Japanese colonial period formed a familiar order and memory. These historical feelings cross each other, but they cannot be fully integrated into one single narrative. This makes Taiwanese identity remain in a state of drifting and incompleteness.

For me, this instability is not an abstract political problem, but a perceptual experience that is repeatedly triggered in everyday life. After repeatedly experiencing this situation, the sense of not being able to fully explain gradually becomes an internalized habit and response. I understand this condition as both ghostly and ambivalent (*hunmei*): ghostly because it is never fully visible, and *hunmei* because it is formed through layered and unsettled mixtures of history, memory, and political belonging. I see it as a scar—one that reopens every time someone asks me about my country and my national identity. The wound, though faint, has never fully healed and continues to ache.⁵¹

1.3. Taiwan New Cinema as Historical Turn

As discussed in the previous section, Taiwanese identity has been shaped by colonial legacies, regime changes, migration, and geopolitical uncertainty. These conditions do not only belong to political history; they also enter cultural forms, including cinema. Film plays a dual role here: it is both a cultural medium through which history can be reflected upon, and a space where the contested nature of Taiwanese identity can be negotiated. This section

⁵¹ However, this thesis does not attempt to define a universal Taiwanese identity. Rather, it discusses the context that produces this question in the first place. The question is not only “What is Taiwanese identity?”, but how the difficulty of answering this question becomes embodied: how it produces hesitation, anxiety, suspension, and a sense of incomplete articulation.

therefore turns from the question of Taiwanese identity to the development of Taiwanese New Cinema.

By July 1987, when martial law was lifted in Taiwan, discussions of the February 28 Incident and the White Terror had long been restricted under censorship, and Taiwan New Cinema had played a part in opening up the authoritarian culture. Benedict Anderson's concept of 'imagined communities' is useful here, as it reminds us that the nation is not a natural or self-evident entity, but something imagined, narrated, and represented through shared cultural forms.⁵² As the political atmosphere gradually moved toward openness, the question faced by filmmakers was not only how to represent Taiwan, but how to deal with histories and experiences that had long been fragmented, suppressed, or difficult to express directly. Film, in this sense, can participate in the making and questioning of national imagination. It does not simply reflect historical facts; it also shapes how history is remembered, felt, and understood.

Scholars still hold different definitions and opinions regarding the time frame and the works encompassed by the Taiwan New Cinema. However, Taiwanese film critic Chiao Hsiung-Ping's definition is often discussed. She describes Taiwan New Cinema as a group of films made in the early 1980s by young directors around the age of thirty, whose works differed from mainstream cinema in terms of form, content, production mode, and narrative style. Then, what does the new in Taiwan New Cinema stand for? If new means innovative, it suggests the birth of something entirely new, as if it emerged from nothing. However, Chiao also emphasizes that the newness of New Cinema is closely related to its reformative character.⁵³ If we understand it in this sense, then it already acknowledges that there was something old to be responded to or transformed. Chiao identifies four important ways in which Taiwan New Cinema was new.⁵⁴ Hong summarizes Chiao's understanding of Taiwan New Cinema through four major characteristics.

⁵² Anderson, B., 'Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism', in S. Seidman and J.C. Alexander (eds.), *The New Social Theory Reader*. London, Routledge, 2020, pp. 282–288.

⁵³ Chiao, H.P. (ed.), *Taiwan xindianying [New Taiwan Cinema]*. Taipei, Shibao, 1990, pp. 22-23.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 15-17.

‘First, like new literature or theater, New Cinema played an important role in developing and reexamining Taiwanese culture. Second, through its continuous success in international film festivals, New Cinema broke diplomatic barriers and became one of the most powerful vehicles for promoting Taiwan’s image. Third, New Cinema reestablished confidence among local audiences, making them aware of the artistic, historical, and cultural significance that cinema could carry. Finally, a new system of film criticism was formed, one that rejected being merely an agent of dominant Western culture and instead worked to create and advance a distinct cultural identity.’⁵⁵

These four forms of newness can also be reflected at the level of production. Compared with earlier models of Taiwanese filmmaking that relied on studio systems and genre formulas, Taiwan New Cinema gradually developed an anti-studio aesthetic in the early 1980s. Location shooting, low-budget production, and the frequent use of non-professional actors became important production strategies outside the large studio model.⁵⁶⁵⁷ Under these conditions, directors had to rethink how to capture performances and atmospheres closer to everyday life. Long takes and distance therefore became practical solutions that allowed more of the scene to be observed.⁵⁸ In this sense, long takes and long-lens shots were not only formal choices, but also practical responses to production conditions.

At the same time, Taiwan New Cinema uses a narrative mode different from classical Hollywood cinema. In classical Hollywood narration, montage often guides the viewer’s attention. For example, in dialogue scenes, the common structure of shot-reverse-shot or close-up clearly tells the viewer who is speaking, where the focus of the frame is, and where the emotion is located. Through the cuts between shots, editing captures the viewer’s attention and, to some extent, already sets up the process of understanding for the viewer.⁵⁹ By contrast, in Taiwan New Cinema, shots tend to last longer. While many classical Hollywood shots last around two to ten seconds⁶⁰, works of Taiwan New Cinema often use

⁵⁵ Chiao, *Taiwan xindianying* [*New Taiwan Cinema*], p. 15–17, quoted in Hong, *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen*, p.110.

⁵⁶ Chiao, ed., *Taiwan xindianying* (*New Taiwan Cinema*), p. 25-27.

⁵⁷ Zhan Hongzhi also analyzed that there were three major reforms in the Taiwan New Cinema (Chiao, 1990: 25-7), including: (1) having a sense of form; (2) adopting standard screen specifications and using ordinary or non-professional actors as production tools; and (3) changing the concept of drama and pursuing lifelike acting.

⁵⁸ Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, p. 194-198

⁵⁹ Although montage and *mise-en-scène* are often distinguished as different formal strategies in analysis, they are not opposing techniques but coexist in film. The difference between them lies not in their relative importance, but in which mechanism dominates the viewing experience within different visual languages.

⁶⁰ The average lens length values in this series are based on measurements taken by James Udden.

longer durations, such as *The Sandwich Man* (1983) with an average shot length of seventeen seconds, or *Dust in the Wind* (1986) with an average shot length of thirty-five seconds.⁶¹

On the other hand, from the perspective of foreign scholars, different interpretations of Taiwan New Cinema can be found. In *Film History: An Introduction*, Thompson and Bordwell suggest that Taiwan cinema only began to show artistic value around 1982, and that before this period, film largely functioned as a tool of political propaganda. They also describe Taiwan as becoming one of the most exciting areas in international film culture by 1986.⁶² Overall, this is not entirely wrong. Before, Taiwanese film industry was dominated by the Central Motion Picture Company (CMPC), initially a vehicle for the ruling Kuomintang party, were often shaped by state policy and ideology. Many of these films followed healthy realist or nationalist propaganda narratives, emphasizing anti-communism, moral instruction, and Chinese cultural orthodoxy.⁶³ By contrast, a new generation of directors, including Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, and Tsai Ming-liang, did not choose to reconstruct history through dramatic interpretation or clear narrative closure. Instead, they began to explore cinematic forms capable of carrying ambiguity, duration, and distance.

Guo-Juin Hong challenges Thompson and Bordwell's view arguing that this perspective tends to understand Taiwan New Cinema as if it had suddenly entered world film history. Through a national film's lens, he traces the history and development of Taiwanese cinema from before the 1980s into the early 1990s, seeking to recover the past that Thompson and Bordwell leave aside and to address Taiwan's absence within dominant accounts of world film history. He mentioned Taiwan New Cinema not only turned toward focusing on personal memory, everyday life, and local experience, but also approached Taiwanese history through intimate, fragmented, and reflective forms. Rather than providing a singular and complete national narrative, these films present layered historical memories and multiple positions of identity. Hong emphasizes that the emergence of New Cinema was not accidental, but was formed through multiple political and cultural pressures, both internal and external. It can be

⁶¹ *The Sandwich Man* [《兒子的大玩偶》], directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tseng Chuang-hsiang, and Wan Jen (Central Motion Picture Corporation, 1983).

Dust in the Wind [《戀戀風塵》], directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien (Central Motion Picture Corporation, 1986).

⁶² Thompson, K. and Bordwell, D., *Film History: An Introduction*. New York, McGraw-Hill, 1994, p. 779.

⁶³ Hong, *Taiwan Cinema*, p.114.

understood as a form of soft resistance, a reformatory response produced within a complex historical context.⁶⁴

Before turning to Bordwell's discussion of Hou Hsiao-hsien, it is necessary to clarify the scope of this section. I do not use Hou's style to stand for Taiwan New Cinema as a whole. Taiwan New Cinema contains diverse directors, styles, and thematic concerns. However, because this thesis focuses on *A City of Sadness*, Hou's work becomes the central case through which I examine a specific aesthetic tendency within the movement: long takes, distance, restrained narration, and the suspension of direct dramatic action. In this sense, Hou is discussed not as a total representative of Taiwan New Cinema, but as a crucial example for understanding how cinematic distance becomes historically and affectively meaningful.

Although Bordwell provides a relatively limited account of Taiwanese film history as a whole, his analysis of the visual language of Taiwan New Cinema, particularly Hou Hsiao-hsien, remains highly detailed. In particular, he identifies long takes and distant framing as among the most representative stylistic features of Taiwan New Cinema. Bordwell also carefully traces the development of Hou Hsiao-hsien's style, arguing that Hou's cinematic aesthetics occupy an important position within global film history.⁶⁵ In *Figures Traced in Light*, Bordwell points out that, in the context in which New Cinema emerged, meaning in long-take cinema is often organized not primarily through editing, but through *mise-en-scène*. *Mise-en-scène* includes spatial arrangement of the frame, the positioning and movement of figures, camera movement, and depth of field etc. And these elements form a complete narrative structure within a single shot. In long-take shot, narrative information is integrated within a single shot. Because the image lacks clear editing transitions, the viewer cannot rely on cuts to receive key information. What stimulates the viewer is instead the change within the shot itself. At the same time, long-lens shots create a relatively flat spatial field.⁶⁶ For instance, since the long lens diminishes the apparent distance between foreground and background planes, making apparent size and familiar size primary cues to depth. This makes

⁶⁴ Hong, *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation on Screen*, p.107-137

⁶⁵ Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, p.186-237

⁶⁶ Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, p.195-196

all different elements within the same shot are captured more evenly. And unlike close-ups or distant shots do not clearly indicate which character or action the viewer should focus on.

Hou Hsiao-hsien has stated that his understanding of distance differs from that of many contemporary European directors. Some European filmmakers, drawing on Brechtian theories of alienation, understand distance as a way to block emotion and lead the viewer toward rational reflection. Hou's use of distance, however, is not about removing emotion. As he explains:

‘Suppose you are standing on the street and see a group of children standing at a corner, or a child suddenly running into the road to pick something up and then running back. Even from a distance, you can still feel the tension. That is the kind of feeling I wanted to capture in my shots.’⁶⁷

Hou has also said in interviews that he simply wants to capture ‘what is happening to a character in a particular place.’ He also cites Confucius: ‘Watch but don’t intervene; observe but don’t judge.’⁶⁸ Hou’s style can therefore be understood as a sympathetic but detached gaze, an *invisible observer* taking in a rich and dense reality. In general, Taiwan New Cinema is understood as a movement led by a postwar generation of filmmakers who, in the early 1980s, used a series of films to challenge existing film institutions and modes of production. This movement not only shifted its themes toward personal memory and lived reality, but also showed clear differences from mainstream cinema in terms of form and production practice. Building on this, Bordwell argues that, at the theoretical level, the concept of the invisible observer presents many challenges, the most significant being that it obscures the shaping role of *mise-en-scène*.⁶⁹ Admittedly, in almost all narrative films, we can sense that the camera is observing events from our own perspective, seemingly reflecting reality. However, this invisible observer effect is actually the result of coordinated filming and *mise-en-scène*. The action is always sculpted from within, angled to or from the camera in order to mold our moment-by-moment experience.⁷⁰

⁶⁷ Rayns, T., ‘The Sandwich Man’, *Monthly Film Bulletin*, no. 653, December 1988, p. 164.

⁶⁸ Burdeau, E., ‘Rencontre avec Hou Hsiao-Hsien’, in J.M. Frodon (ed.), *Hou Hsiao-Hsien*. Paris, Cahiers du cinéma, 1999, p. 79.

⁶⁹ Argument against the invisible observer see Bordwell's *Narration in the Fiction Film*, p.9-12

⁷⁰ Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light*, p. 191.

To conclude, the 1980s were a period of major historical and political transformation in Taiwan. The reformatory energy produced by this broader environment changed production methods and shooting strategies, while also giving filmmakers more creative freedom and space for reflection. Taiwan New Cinema can therefore be understood as a movement that encouraged Taiwanese filmmakers and audiences to reconsider how local culture, history, and memory could be represented. However, this thesis does not claim that Taiwan New Cinema has one unified aesthetic. Rather, through the specific case of Hou Hsiao-hsien and *A City of Sadness*, I focus on one particular strand of this movement: a distance-based visual language built through long takes, restrained narration, and observational spectatorship. Hou's images do not emphasize a rhythmically segmented narrative style. Instead, they guide the viewer through the continuity of time, attempting to capture an emotional tension that can only emerge through distance.

1.4. *A City of Sadness* and Historical Narrative: Distancing and Gentleness

Released in 1989, *A City of Sadness* came shortly after Taiwan lifted martial law. After fifty years of repression and restrictions, historical traumas such as the White Terror and the February 28 Incident were gradually entering the public discourse. The film also first entered the Venice Film Festival and won the Golden Lion, receiving major international attention before being released in Taiwan. In this sense, echoing Guo-Juin Hong's understanding of Taiwan New Cinema as a historical turn, *A City of Sadness* was not only a political turning point in terms of public discussion, but also an aesthetic one. Its treatment of history continued both the reformatory impulse of Taiwan New Cinema and Hou Hsiao-hsien's own restrained, local, and indirect cinematic style.

A City of Sadness depicts the years between the end of Japanese colonial rule and the early period of martial law in Taiwan, reflecting the impact of the February 28 Incident and the subsequent White Terror on ordinary people. This history involved political repression, arrests, disappearances, censorship, and long-term silence, leaving deep traces in Taiwanese society and identity. And set during the transition from Japanese rule to Kuomintang governance, the Lin family's experiences mirror Taiwan's collective journey from hope to

disillusionment. As the February 28 Incident unfolds, the family suffers tragedy after tragedy, symbolizing the societal turmoil and pain inflicted by this period of history.

The narrative revolves around the four Lin brothers, whose fates suggest different social positions, identities, and political conditions in postwar Taiwan. Wenxiong, the eldest brother and the pillar of the family, manages a bar called Tian Hai, but is eventually killed in a conflict involving mainland Chinese gang members. Wenlong, the second brother, was a local doctor conscripted as a military medic in the Philippines during World War II; he disappears and is presumed dead. Wenliang, the third brother, once worked as a translator for the Japanese in Shanghai. After the war, he is accused of treason by the Kuomintang and arrested, leaving him psychologically scarred after imprisonment. Wenqing, the youngest brother, is deaf and mute. Although his disability distances him from political discourse, he still expresses a desire to participate in resistance. Eventually, he is also arrested, and his fate remains uncertain. As the February 28 Incident unfolds, the Lin family suffers repeated losses, symbolizing the broader social turmoil and pain of this historical period.

Hou tells this complex history not through a linear narrative, but through fragmented time, multiple character lines, everyday conversations, and different ethnic and social positions. The film does not directly present history as a single official account. Instead, history appears through fragments of dialogue, family life, letters, diaries, photography, radio broadcasts, and spatial arrangements. In this sense, the film does not simply narrate what happened; it explores how history is remembered, mediated, and felt. The storytelling not only emphasizes the tension between personal memory and official history, but conveys tension and fear through the characters' fragmented dialogue and everyday life.⁷¹ This narrative technique allows the audience to feel the profound impact of historical events on the lives of ordinary people. Historical transformation acts not only upon the main characters, but also through the broader social atmosphere surrounding them. Visually, Hou's cinematic style also corresponds to this indirect historical narrative. Two strategies are especially important here: first, the use of long shots and long takes that keep violence at a distance; second, the use of

⁷¹ Chen, J., 'The Interaction of Narrative and Visual Style with Time, History, Memory, and Ethnic Identity in *A City of Sadness* (1989)', *Educational Innovation Research*, 3(1), p. 45-46.

off-screen sound, voice-over, radio broadcasts, letters, and other indirect media to suggest historical events that are not directly shown.

In *A City of Sadness*, most scenes of violence or conflict are filmed through distant long takes. One example is the scene in which Ah-Jia ambushes someone on the road. At the beginning of the shot, we see a medium shot of Ah-Jia standing in the middle of the road, smoking, surrounded by dense grass. A horse cart approaches from the distance. The camera slowly pans left and shifts focus toward the cart. Ah-Jia continues to smoke calmly. After the cart stops and the people inside get out, Ah-Jia takes his final puff and puts out the cigarette. He then slowly walks toward the cart, and only at this moment do we notice the Japanese sword hidden behind his back, suggesting the conflict that is about to happen. Holding our breath, we hear Ah-Jia shout, and the fight begins. (See Fig. 1) The shot lasts sixty-five seconds without a cut. (Fig. 2) Another example appears after the February 28 Incident breaks out. Wenqing sits inside a train carriage, while outside the carriage a crowd begins to retaliate against Mainlanders. The camera remains outside the train, filming from a distance as a man is chased by the crowd and eventually beaten. In both scenes, violence is presented from a distant perspective. violence is not entirely avoided, but the director often chooses to portray it with subtlety and restraint. Scenes are shot from a distance, placing the camera far from the action and holding static, almost as if the viewer is observing from afar.



Figures 1 and 2. Ah-Jia gets involved in a fight. Screenshots from *A City of Sadness*, captured by the author.

Instead of representing violence directly and closely, this approach shows one way in which filmmakers can deal with historical events and trauma. By placing the camera at a distance and in a space away from the viewer, and keeping it still, the film not only shapes visual experience, but also changes how the viewer experiences the time captured by cinema. he

violence is still felt, but its impact is mediated through a balance of rational thought and emotional resonance. Instead of zooming in for close, intimate shots, the camera maintains a physical and emotional distance. This restrained approach creates a space and invites contemplation rather than shock, allowing viewers to engage with the trauma in a more thoughtful and nuanced manner. This approach also presents a way of how directors dealing with historical events and traumas. Leaving space and distant for viewer unavoidably not only puts influences on viewer' experience visually but also a way how viewers' experience the time cinema captured.

Another form of distancing can be found in the way the film handles major historical events. Under the political atmosphere in which the film was produced and released, many important events are not directly shown on screen. Instead, they are often conveyed through radio broadcasts, voice-over narration, letters, or indirect references. In this sense, distance is not only visual, but also narrative. For instance, after the February 28 Incident, the scene captures a static, long shot from a hillside overlooking a small town and coastline, with the broadcast playing as a voiceover. a government broadcast. One moment the broadcast says the situation has been calmed down and advocates peaceful coexistence. Shortly after that, with the intertitle, the reality that a large number of people had been killed in Taipei was exposed to the audience, shocked and saddened, which to some extent reflects a kind of irony towards the government. And the second time, when the government broadcast the announcement of martial law, the camera focused on the sky above the town's rooftops.

These two shots of empty space with voice-overs are the only two instances in the film where the power of the KMT government can be heard, but only through sound. A similar strategy appears in the prison sequence. Soldiers come to bring prisoners to trial. Even before the shouted name of the prisoner fully fades, the sound of gunshots is heard. The execution itself is not directly shown, yet the violence becomes even more intense because it is displaced into sound.⁷² In these moments, the film's indirectness does not weaken the historical force of violence. Rather, it allows violence to be felt through absence, sound, and the viewer's own imagination. And this narrative technique does not dramatize the environmental shift with

⁷² Ling, C., 'A City of Sadness: Historical Narrative and Modern Understanding of History', *Asian Social Science*, 4(12), December 2008, pp. 22.

overt emotional force but subtly conveys the profound changes imposed upon ordinary people and the land itself.

This historical narrative strategy has also been debated. Some critics argue that the film's indirect and fragmented treatment of the February 28 Incident may limit its educational clarity, especially for viewers unfamiliar with Taiwan's history. Chen, for example, notes that although the film's narrative technique is artistic, its vagueness may make key historical events difficult to grasp for some audiences.⁷³ And Liao Ping-hui has also complained that 'whenever issues of politics are about to appear, the camera quickly turns away from real political oppression and violent event to mountains, oceans and fishing boats, which is an attempt to displace and misplace the actual problems with the beauty of mountains and rivers and static scenery.'⁷⁴ However, other scholars have argued that this indirectness is precisely what allows the film to approach historical trauma differently. Chao Ling notes that earlier critics complained that Hou often turns away from direct political violence toward mountains, oceans, fishing boats, or static scenery, but later readings have understood this as part of the film's historiographical method: rather than giving an accurate or complete reconstruction of history, the film conveys the emotional and affective weight of a long-suppressed taboo.⁷⁵

In my view, this gentle and distanced technique is especially important when dealing with cultural trauma. Especially, when such trauma is still ongoing, this approach may be more appropriate. Direct and realistic depictions of violence can sometimes risk turning trauma into spectacle, or even repeating a form of violence upon already traumatized subjects. In this sense, by reducing the use of graphic imagery and instead adopting varied techniques, the film avoids re-inflicting trauma. In dealing with the cultural trauma of the February 28th incident and the subsequent White Terror, this narrative technique does not dramatize the environmental shift with overt emotional force but subtly conveys the profound changes imposed upon ordinary people and the land itself. Hou not only avoids the possibility to bring a secondary trauma to the already traumatized audiences, but also provides a distance to

⁷³ Chen, J., 'The Interaction of Narrative and Visual Style with Time, History, Memory, and Ethnic Identity in *A City of Sadness* (1989)', *Educational Innovation Research*, 3(1), 2025, pp. 44–49.

⁷⁴ Liao, P.H., *Modernity in Re-vision: Reading Postmodern/Postcolonial Theories*. Taipei, Rye Field Publishing Co., 1994, pp. 330–331.

⁷⁵ Ling, C., 'A City of Sadness: Historical Narrative and Modern Understanding of History', *Asian Social Science*, 4(12), December 2008, pp. 19–26.

reflect, think, and feel to audiences. This is why *A City of Sadness* matters in this thesis. Therefore, this thesis argues that *A City of Sadness* avoids dramatizing historical events directly and instead transfers part of the work of historical understanding to the viewer. Its distance-based visual language allows viewers to engage with violence and cultural trauma in a more reflective and embodied manner.

In *A City of Sadness*, when depicting violent scenes, the use of long-focus lenses avoids an aggressive cinematic language. Instead of zooming in for close, intimate shots, the camera maintains a physical and emotional distance. This objectivity and observational stance create space for the audience to reflect. The violence is still felt, but its impact is mediated through a balance of rational thought and emotional resonance. This restrained approach invites contemplation rather than shock, allowing viewers to engage with the trauma in a more thoughtful and nuanced manner. Hou's distance-based visual language also lays an important foundation for the later use of empty shots. When narrative action is further suspended in an empty shot, the viewer's perception of time and space becomes more prominent, and viewing itself becomes a more active process of perception and reflection.

To conclude, the previous sections have shown that *A City of Sadness* emerges from a historical condition marked by political violence, cultural trauma, and unstable identity. They have also shown that the film does not approach this history through direct representation, but through distance, fragmented narration, off-screen sound, and empty shots. In this sense, absence in the film is not simply a lack of visual or narrative information. It is a cinematic condition shaped by history. However, to understand how this absence works, it is not enough to ask what the image represents. The question must also shift toward how the image is experienced. After tracing the historical and aesthetic conditions that make absence meaningful, the next chapter turns to the viewer's body. It asks how a viewer senses, responds to, and stays with these empty images. This requires a methodological pause: rather than moving immediately toward interpretation, I first suspend the demand for meaning and return to the process of viewing itself.

Chapter 2: Theoretical and Methodological Framework

*It is at the same time true that the world is what we see and that, nevertheless, we must learn to see it—first in the sense that we must watch this vision with knowledge, take possession of it, say what we and what seeing are, act therefore as if we knew nothing about it, as if here we still had everything to learn. — Merleau-Ponty, *The Visible and the Invisible*⁷⁶*

Chapter One established the historical and aesthetic conditions through which absence becomes significant in *A City of Sadness*. Yet my main concern in this thesis is not only how absence is constructed by the film, but how it is experienced by the viewer. In order to approach this question, I need to slow down the movement from image to meaning. This chapter sets out the theoretical and methodological framework through which I apply to approach my cinematic experience. Rather than treating theory as an external lens applied to film, I use it as a way to articulate how meaning emerges in the encounter between image and viewer which is the movement I describe as *spectatorial labour*. I use phenomenology not as an abstract theory detached from the film, but as a way to suspend immediate interpretation and return to the moment of perception. Before asking what the empty shot means, I ask how it is felt, how it acts upon the body, and how memory and affect begin to move within that encounter.

2.1. Method: Phenomenology

We can begin from a simple formulation: cinematic viewing appears to consist of two basic elements: an image and a viewer. At its most immediate level, *watching* seems to be the act of looking at an image. However, what I am concerned with here is not merely the act of viewing, but the experience of viewing.

⁷⁶ Merleau-Ponty, M., *The Visible and the Invisible*. Evanston, Northwestern University Press, 1968, p. 4.

To speak of experience is to suggest that the viewer does not simply see the image, but undergoes it. The viewer encounters, senses, and responds to the time and space that the image constructs. In this sense, cinematic experience is not a one-directional act, but a process that emerges through the interaction between image and viewer. As W. J. T. Mitchell suggests, images can be understood not as passive objects, but as entities that actively engage the viewer. His biological metaphor — in which images are similar to living organisms — highlights how meaning does not reside solely in the image itself, but emerges through a relational process between image and spectator. The image affects the viewer, while the viewer, in turn, interprets and reconfigures the image through their own cultural and perceptual framework.⁷⁷ When applied to cinematic images, this perspective establishes an important premise: cinematic experience is co-produced. However, it still leaves open a crucial question — what happens between the moment an image appears and the moment it is understood?

It is precisely this gap that this thesis seeks to examine. To approach this, I turn to phenomenology, particularly Maurice Merleau-Ponty's understanding of perception, as a core theoretical foundation. For Merleau-Ponty, perception is not the passive reception of information, but a bodily mode of access to the world — a way of being-in-the-world.⁷⁸ In other words, viewing is not simply a relation between *seeing* and *being seen*. It presupposes the existence of a perceiving subject: the lived body as a field within the world. Perception is therefore always situated, embodied, and relational.⁷⁹ This suggests that the act of viewing is not simply a cognitive process, but one grounded in the lived body.

In order to articulate this process more precisely, I draw on Vivian Sobchack's phenomenological framework of film experience, as developed in *The Address of the Eye*. Building on Merleau-Ponty's account of three reflections, Sobchack proposes three interrelated phases: description, reduction, and interpretation.⁸⁰ The first phase, description, attends to the viewing experience as it is immediately given, remaining at the level of

⁷⁷ Mitchell, W.J.T., *What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 2005, pp. 89–95.

⁷⁸ Sobchack, V., *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, p.10-12.

⁷⁹ Ibid., p.13.

⁸⁰ Ibid., p.42, Merleau-Ponty, M., 'What is Phenomenology?', trans. John F. Bannan, *Cross Currents*, 6 (Winter 1956), pp. 59–70.

perception without imposing interpretation too quickly. The second phase, reduction, brackets pre-existing meanings and interpretive frameworks, shifting attention away from what the image signifies toward how the experience itself is constituted. Finally, interpretation emerges from this process, but remains grounded in the embodied experience of viewing, rather than in detached conceptual analysis.⁸¹

To engage this process, I adopt a mode of suspension. Rather than immediately interpreting what the image represents, I momentarily suspend the demand for meaning, and attend instead to how the image is felt. This involves shifting focus away from the image as an object of analysis and toward the viewer's embodied response — the moment in which the image acts upon the body. These embodied responses are often subtle and difficult to register, emerging in dispersed and fleeting ways. For this reason, it becomes necessary to slow down the pace of viewing and attend more closely to this process. It is precisely here that the movement of reduction and suspension becomes significant.⁸²

Importantly, these phases are not linear or sequential. Perception, affect, and interpretation operate simultaneously and continuously. The body is not a passive surface upon which meaning is inscribed, but an active site of meaning production. As Thomas Csordas suggests, the body is not merely an object of culture, but a source of it. In this sense, the body functions both as a mediator and as a precondition of experience. It is not a passive object inscribed with meaning, but a source through which meaning emerges.⁸³ At the same time, phenomenology reminds us that experience can never be fully captured or exhausted. As Merleau-Ponty argues, perception is always partial, and description can never be complete.⁸⁴ However, this incompleteness is not a limitation, but a condition of experience itself. As Sobchack writes,

‘This act of viewing, this *‘address of the eye,’* implicates both *embodied, situated* existence and a *material* world; for to see and be seen, the viewing subject must be a body and be

⁸¹ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience.*, p.42-49.

⁸² See Sobchack's discussion of the *prereflective source* of phenomenological reduction, developed in relation to Merleau-Ponty: Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 45; Merleau-Ponty, ‘What is Phenomenology?’, p.65.

⁸³ Csordas, T.J. (ed.), *Embodiment and Experience: The Existential Ground of Culture and Self*. Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1994, p. 7.

⁸⁴ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p. 43, Merleau-Ponty, ‘What is Phenomenology?’, p. 64.

materially in the world, sharing a similar manner and matter of existence with other viewing subjects, but living this existence discretely and autonomously, as the singular embodied situation that makes this existence also a unique matter that matters uniquely.’⁸⁵

In other words, because the body is a perceiving subject, the state of perceptual experience also depends on the position from which it takes place. Cinematic experience, therefore, is not a fixed or stable event, but an ongoing process — one that unfolds through the continuous interaction between image and viewer. In this sense, each viewing experience is singular. Even when encountering the same image, different viewers will respond differently, shaped by their own embodied histories and perceptual conditions. What this thesis proposes, therefore, is not a universal account of cinematic meaning, but a situated approach: one that begins from the lived experience of viewing.

2.2. Affectivity and Body

After outlining Sobchack’s phenomenology of film, I further draw on Mark Hansen’s concept of affectivity to deepen the second stage of her framework — reduction — in order to examine how the viewer’s body participates in the viewing process, and how this embodied engagement contributes to the third stage, interpretation, as part of an embodied experience. Hansen’s concept of affectivity is influenced by Henri Bergson. Therefore, in this section, I also briefly compare Bergson’s understanding of perception with Merleau-Ponty’s. Although Hansen draws on Bergson’s theory and develops his argument mainly through examples of digital art, his concept of affectivity also resonates with Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body in certain ways.⁸⁶ This section therefore clarifies how I bring these ideas together: Bergson’s temporality of perception, which is closely related to memory; Merleau-Ponty’s and Bergson’s different understandings of the body; and Hansen’s affectivity, which I use to explain the force that activates embodied perception.

⁸⁵ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, p.23.

⁸⁶ While Hansen draws on Bergson to conceptualize affectivity, I do not fully adopt Bergson’s understanding of the body as a center of selection. Such a view risks framing the body as a kind of filtering mechanism, which suggests a more instrumental role. Instead, I align more closely with Merleau-Ponty’s understanding of the body as a relational and affective field — not something that processes perception from a distance, but the very condition through which perception takes place.

Although cinema is often understood as a visual experience, it is not purely so. Hansen argues that moving images activate the perceiving subject's sensory capacities, generating something experimental, unpredictable, and new. In this sense, the experience of cinema exceeds the level of sensory perception and gives rise to what he terms affectivity: a deeper bodily force produced through the viewer's engagement with technical images. I understand affectivity here as the force that activates embodied perception.⁸⁷ Hansen's thinking is influenced by Bergson's theory of perception. Bergson proposes that the image, a term he uses to replace matter, is a form of existence situated between matter and representation.⁸⁸ It is neither fully external nor purely mental, but exists across both domains at the same time.⁸⁹ From this perspective, the body itself can also be understood as an image. However, unlike other images, the body not only receives external stimuli, but also generates internal affect. It functions as a site where perception and emotion converge.

Bergson further describes the body as something that actively selects, transforms, and responds to what surrounds it. It is precisely this capacity that allows the body to generate new forms of experience.⁹⁰ Building on this, Hansen conceptualizes the body as operating like a filter or interface. It selects and processes images from the surrounding environment based on embodied experience.⁹¹ For Hansen, because affect functions as a vehicle of embodied heterogeneity, the encounter with moving images allows affective force to move from the image toward the body. This means that the key element is not the image alone, nor the body alone, but the dynamic interaction between them.⁹² In other words, through this process, external forces are *folded* into the body, where they are transformed and intensified. Affect, in this sense, becomes the force that enables this transformation. It allows the body to convert external stimuli into new experiential forms.⁹³

This understanding provides a way to conceptualize what I refer to as spectatorship labour. In the process of viewing, the time and space constructed by cinematic images are folded

⁸⁷ Hansen, M., *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge, MA, MIT Press, 2004, p. 7.

⁸⁸ Bergson, H., *Matter and Memory*. Trans. N.M. Paul and W.S. Palmer. London, George Allen & Co., 1911/1991, p. 10.

⁸⁹ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*. p. 7–17.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, p.36.

⁹¹ Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge, p.3.

⁹² Hansen, *New Philosophy for New Media*. Cambridge, p.130.

⁹³ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p.17.

together with the viewer's own embodied experience. It is through this folding that a specific kind of force emerges — one that is not located solely in the image or solely in the viewer, but in their interaction. The body, through its affective capacity, becomes the site where this interaction takes place. It actively engages with the temporal and spatial conditions of the film, generating an embodied experience that is not predetermined, but emerges through the act of viewing itself. This process opens up an affective dimension, a kind of emotional landscape, that unfolds through the accumulation of perception, memory, and sensation.

In this sense, spectatorship labour is not simply a cognitive act of interpretation, but an embodied process in which the viewer participates through the activation of affect. The viewing experience is therefore not something that simply happens to the viewer, but something co-produced through the body's engagement with the image.

2.3. Memory, Haptic Visuality, and Intercultural Cinema

Following Sobchack's third stage of interpretation, meaning does not precede experience but emerges from it. It is not imposed onto the image from outside, but grows out of the perceptual and embodied encounter established through description and reduction. While Sobchack provides the methodological grounding for this thesis by framing cinematic experience as an embodied and perceptual process, Marks allows me to further articulate how this experience becomes culturally and historically meaningful.

In *The Skin of the Film*, Marks suggests that intercultural cinema is driven by a search for a language capable of expressing cultural memory — a memory that cannot be fully represented. Instead, it appears in the gaps between images, marked by silence, hesitation, and absence. These gaps do not simply indicate a lack, but point to the difficulty, or even impossibility, of fully articulating one's own history and cultural position.⁹⁴ Marks claims that 'the disjunctions within the kinds of information offered by a film can evoke other sorts of memory that slip from both official history and the audiovisual record: namely, memories

⁹⁴ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p. 21, 46-47.

encoded in senses other than the auditory and the visual.’⁹⁵ In this sense, cultural memory is not simply remembered as information, but is reactivated through the viewer’s embodied and sensory encounter with the image. Marks also reminds us that diaspora is not simply about origin or location, but about being positioned between multiple cultural and historical coordinates.⁹⁶ This condition of in-betweenness resonates with the instability of meaning described above: both are structured by partiality, discontinuity, and the impossibility of completion. This is where I begin to situate my own experience with Taiwanese cinema as a diasporic viewer.

Marks’s understanding of memory is deeply influenced by Bergson’s philosophy of perception and duration.⁹⁷ For Bergson, perception is never pure, but always intertwined with memory. He distinguishes between two forms of memory: habit memory, which is bodily and action-based, and pure memory, which belongs to the past and is not immediately directed toward action. More importantly, Bergson breaks away from a linear understanding of time. For him, the past and the present do not exist as separate, closed moments. Rather, they coexist and continuously fold into one another.⁹⁸ In this sense, the present is never independent. It always appears together with certain memories of the past. The past that is called forth is also a section of the world — it may be childhood memory, socialized experience, or other fragments of lived history. When we experience the present, past memory enters the body through its encounter with present perception. At the same time, the body returns again to the present, and the world once again gives itself to be experienced. Thus, memory does not simply represent the past, but acts upon the body in the present.⁹⁹ This suggests that what is experienced in the present image is always already layered with memory.

Building on this, I extend Marks’s notion of haptic visibility to further develop the role of the body in this interpretive process. She suggests that cinema does not only recall visual memory, but also evokes other sensory registers, such as touch and atmosphere.¹⁰⁰ If, as

⁹⁵ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p. 26.

⁹⁶ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p. 108.

⁹⁷ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p. 26-28.

⁹⁸ Bergson, *Matter and Memory*, p.89-93

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, p.93

¹⁰⁰ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p. 162-164.

discussed in the previous section, the body functions as a site through which images are completed, then haptic visuality offers a way to understand how this completion takes place. For Marks, haptic visuality does not refer to the simulation of physical texture, but to a mode of perception in which vision itself becomes tactile.¹⁰¹ Rather than mastering the image from a distance, the viewer is drawn into a closer, more intimate relation with it. As Marks notes, such images often diminish visual clarity and disrupt the viewer's sense of control, compelling the eye to *touch* the image in a different way.¹⁰² This is also why I adopt a phenomenological, first-person approach in this thesis. My viewing experience is not presented as an example, but as a method. Rather than separating film and spectator into two distinct entities, I understand viewing as a co-constituted process between cinematic images and the viewer's body. I focus on how perception, memory, and affect respond to the image, and how meaning emerges through this interaction. In order to approach the viewing experience as closely as possible, this thesis begins from my own situated experience as a viewer.

In many of Marks's examples, haptic quality is usually achieved through close-up textures and material surfaces.¹⁰³ However, the scenes I examine in this thesis operate differently. The images I analyze, particularly the empty shots in *A City of Sadness*, are often distant rather than intimate, composed through long takes and spatial distance. Yet despite this visual distance, they still evoke a form of sensory engagement. This recalls Hou Hsiao-hsien's own statement that his intention is simply to capture 'what is happening to a character in a particular place.'¹⁰⁴ What is activated in these moments is not proximity in a physical sense, but a different kind of closeness that emerges through memory and embodied response. In the presence of absence, my sensory memory is reactivated and merges with my immediate bodily perception. The image, rather than being completed on the screen, is co-constituted through my body.

Although this thesis begins from my own viewing experience, I do not present it as universal. Rather, I use it to examine a broader structure of spectatorship: one in which viewers engage

¹⁰¹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p. 130.

¹⁰² Ibid., p.133, 173

¹⁰³ Ibid., p. 129-137, 154-159.

¹⁰⁴ Bordwell, *Figures Traced in Light: On Cinematic Staging*, p. 191.

with cinematic absence through their own embodied, cultural, and historical positions. From this perspective, my own position as a diasporic Taiwanese viewer is not external to the analysis, but forms part of its condition of possibility. What differs is not the existence of spectatorship labour itself, but the ways in which viewers fill, negotiate, and respond to cinematic gaps according to their own situated experiences.

Chapter 3: Embodied Labour: Absence as Cinematic Address

The absence I employ in this thesis is not a singular concept, but a set of conditions experienced simultaneously during the act of viewing. At the level of history and national narration, it refers to histories, memories, and subjects that remain difficult to speak of directly. At the geopolitical level, it echoes Taiwan's unstable and partially unrecognized position in the international order. At the formal level, it appears through empty shots, distanced camera positions, off-screen events, and moments of visual withholding in *A City of Sadness*. Rather than separating these into different layers, I understand them together as a condition of viewing, one that affects both the image and the viewer. Building on the previous chapter's discussion of embodied viewing, affect, memory, and haptic visuality, this chapter turns to my viewing experience of absence. The analysis focuses on selected empty shots in *A City of Sadness*, asking how absence opens a space of drifting for the viewer, allowing one to pause, breathe, and remain within the flow of time. Since each viewer's experience is situated and different, I do not present my response as universal. I begin from what I myself have felt, in order to examine how a situated viewer may encounter absence as an embodied and affective condition.

3.1. Empty Shots, Suspension, and Historical Pressure

As discussed in Chapter One, *A City of Sadness* does not approach history through direct dramatization or explicit representation of violence. Instead, Hou Hsiao-hsien's film works through distance, restraint, off-screen sound, fragmented narration, and silence. Within this wider aesthetic structure, I understand the empty shot as one of the most extreme forms of indirectness in the film. If long shots create distance from historical violence, and off-screen sound allows major events to take place outside the frame, then the empty shot goes even further: it removes characters and direct action from the image almost entirely. What remains is space, time, objects, sound, and the trace of something that has happened or is about to happen.

An empty shot, as the term suggests, refers to a shot without characters or direct narrative action. It may show only objects, space, while allowing the duration and atmosphere of a place to emerge. Because there is no direct narrative event happening within the single shot, I cannot analyze the empty shot only through *mise-en-scène* within one frame. It is necessary first to examine the shots before and after it, to understand the narrative context, and then to analyze how the empty shot allows the viewer to perceive time, space, and even imagine events outside the frame.

Empty shots are often used as transitional shots, setting up the space in which the next scene will take place. However, in *A City of Sadness*, they do more than provide transition. After organizing the empty shots throughout the film, I noticed that shots lasting around ten to fifteen seconds often function mainly to indicate a transition in space or time. However, these empty shots are also frequently placed at moments of political transition or before and after major historical events. For instance, after Japan's surrender, the film shows an approximately ten-second empty shot of *Jiufen*, the mountain town in northern Taiwan where much of the film is set, accompanied by the film's main theme, while the Lin family's restaurant, *Little Shanghai*, is celebrating its reopening. Not long after the KMT government takes control of Taiwan, another thirty-eight-second distant shot overlooking Jiufen appears. This shot follows a restaurant table scene in which a group of young Taiwanese intellectuals discuss the new political situation, expressing a vague unease toward the new government. In another sequence, shortly before the outbreak of the February 28 Incident, just when characters received the news about a woman selling cigarettes was mistakenly killed by the police. The film presents this moment through an approximately twelve-second empty mountain shot, showing hills and the faint rooftops of houses, while off-screen voices discuss the incident. The following shot moves into Wenqing and his friends eating in the photography studio. The off-screen voice in the previous shot is from characters sitting around the table. During the conversation, they start with the incident and shift to the price of cigarettes, eventually, compare life under Japanese rule with life after the KMT government's takeover, mentioning rising prices and increasing hardship.

Moreover, as discussed in Chapter One, the two empty shots are accompanied by radio broadcasts. The broadcast is Chen Yi, the Chief Executive of Taiwan Province, announcing the implementation of martial law and the arrest of dissidents. As the broadcast continues, the film cuts to an empty shot of Wenqing's dimly lit studio. No one is there; only objects remain, with sunlight coming in through the window. After this, Taiwan enters martial law, later remembered as the White Terror period. Again, through the combination of off-screen sound and empty images, the film presents, in an indirect and restrained way, a decision that will profoundly change Taiwanese society. In the end, The final shot of the film is also an empty shot, lasting around forty seconds. It shows the entrance hall of the Lin family's restaurant, a space that has appeared many times throughout the film. At the center of the frame is a large round wooden table. The foreground is dim, and the entire space is empty. In the room on the right side of the image, a light flickers repeatedly throughout the shot. Narratively, by the end of the film, among the Lin brothers, only the mentally damaged Wenliang remains. The film's theme music is faint, but the sound of a bell can be heard, slowly approaching like footsteps. After around twenty seconds, text appears on screen: 'September 12, 1949. The mainland changed hands. The Nationalist government moved to Taiwan and established Taipei as its temporary capital.' As the music enters its main melody, the image fades into black and the end credits begin.

Under this arrangement throughout the whole film, *A City of Sadness* presents major historical transformation in an extremely indirect way. The film does not show the decision that will change Taiwanese society through direct dramatic action. Instead, it places this decision beside empty spaces, distant views, and disembodied voices. However, the result is a quiet but powerful sense that history is happening, even when it is not fully visible. As we discussed in Chapter one, through this indirect narration accompanied the use of off-screen sound, these major events become woven into the environment and the surrounding spaces. History is not presented as something far away from daily life, but as something that slowly seeps into it. Through seeing closely with characters' personal stories, and how their stories are intertwined with the broader historical context of Taiwan, underscoring the deep connection between the individual and the fate of the nation.¹⁰⁵

¹⁰⁵ Jiayu Chen, 2025, The Interaction of Narrative and Visual Style with Time, History, Memory, and Ethnic Identity in *A City of Sadness* (1989), p.45

Building on this observation, I argue that these empty shots are carefully arranged. They are not merely transitions. They also present a gradual awareness that political pressure is approaching what once seemed to be a peaceful living space. They also offer the viewer a clear moment of breathing. This narrative technique does not dramatize the environmental shift with overt emotional force, but subtly conveys the profound changes imposed upon ordinary people and the land itself. In this sense, capturing the locations of past traumatic events through the lens of emptiness can extend and even amplify the emotional and experiential resonance for viewers.¹⁰⁶ This can be understood that the viewer does not need to witness the event directly in order to feel its historical pressure. The place itself, even when empty, can suggest that something has happened, or that something is about to happen.¹⁰⁷ For instance, the differences in the same scene at different times, such as the repeated entrance scene of the Lin family's restaurant, the mountain and sea view of Jiufen, or Wenqing's studio, etc. Through this emptiness, the landscape and interior space become charged with memory, affect, and historical tension.

Narratively, these empty shots are placed at stages of large-scale social and political transformation. They suggest the arrival of a larger force, something that descends slowly and quietly, gradually changing people's living environment. At the moment itself, one may not yet be able to perceive the change clearly, but it will gradually appear in the details of everyday life — in institutions, structures, schools, families. Politics is not only an abstract concept; it is tightly connected to people's lives. When the narrative pauses visually but time does not stop flowing, the viewer begins to think about what has happened, or to imagine what might happen next. The stillness produced by these shots gives form to a feeling that is difficult to explain, or temporarily impossible to articulate. Through the blankness of the empty shot, the narrative takes a step back and gives more time. In this sense, it provides the viewer with another perceptual dimension through which feeling can emerge.

¹⁰⁶ Larsson, E. , *Photographic Engagements: Belonging and Affective Encounters in Contemporary Photography*, p. 205–206.

¹⁰⁷ Chen argues that space in *A City of Sadness* functions as a carrier of social identity and historical memory, rather than merely as background. My reading builds on this argument, but shifts the focus from spatial transformation to spatial emptiness, asking how empty shots allow historical pressure to be felt through absence itself. Chen, 'The Interaction of Narrative and Visual Style,' p. 48.

This sense of detachment — what might be called a sense of removal — may not always evoke a strong reaction from the audience. Yet this is precisely why it matters for this thesis. *A City of Sadness* does not constantly demand emotional response through dramatic intensity. Its atmosphere is built through restraint, slowness, and a repeated refusal to show everything directly. The film often allows major historical events to remain outside the frame, while ordinary spaces, family interiors, landscapes, and objects continue to appear on screen. This creates a viewing experience in which history is not encountered as a single dramatic event, but as a pressure that gradually surrounds daily life. In this restrained atmosphere, the empty shot becomes a space where historical pressure and bodily perception meet. It does not tell the viewer what to feel. However, it pauses and suspends direct meaning, allowing feeling to emerge slowly. This is the basis for the next section, where I move from the general function of empty shots in the film to my own embodied experience of one particular scene. If this section has shown how empty shots operate within the film's overall structure, the following section asks how such an image is felt by a situated viewer.

3.2. Scene Analysis — Drifting and Memory



Figures 3. Screenshots from *A City of Sadness*, captured by the author.

At the end of 1945, at night, in Jiufen, Taiwan, a group of people gather around a round dining table inside a restaurant room. They drink and eat while discussing the political situation after the Japanese government has ended its colonial rule over Taiwan and the

Kuomintang government has just taken over the island. Around the table are Taiwanese leftist intellectuals, a deaf-mute photographer, and a journalist from the mainland. Some speak Taiwanese, while others speak Mandarin. The photographer is Wenqing, the youngest son of the Lin family. He cannot hear, but he still quietly participates in the dinner. During the conversation, the journalist asks how they feel living under the Chinese flag again. Kuan-jung replies that the mainland-appointed governor, Chen Yi, is a bandit, but he is quickly silenced. Someone next to him interrupts: 'Let's not talk politics. Let's drink first.' Everyone raises their glasses. (Fig. 3)

At this moment, singing comes from outside the window. The song is *The Song of the Exiles*, a song about soldiers longing for home. One of them gets up and opens the window. The group then decides to sing together with the people outside. Holding their glasses, they look out the window and sing in response. As the lyrics continue — 'I have been far from my home, I abandoned a wealth of treasure and began my wanderings... or in what month, will I commence my return to my beloved home?' — the film cuts to an empty shot overlooking the mountains and sea of Jiufen in the early morning. The mountain range extends downward toward the sea, and thick mist spreads across the coastline. The song continues: '...in what year, will I commence my return to my beloved home?' The image seems almost still, while the singing continues, like ripples spreading across the surface of a quiet lake after a stone has been thrown into it. (Fig. 4)

The entire scene lasts around five minutes. It contains only a few inserted shots before ending with the empty shot. The main shot is a medium master shot centered on the dining table with the window in the background, stayed still until the end. The group sits around a round wooden table at the center of the frame. The main light comes from the yellow overhead light above the table, leaving the edges of the frame relatively dark. The viewer's attention is naturally drawn toward the center. Wenqing sits close to the camera, with his back facing the viewer, quietly remaining in his seat. We cannot clearly see his facial expression. Most of the time, the viewer's attention naturally follows the person speaking, but at times the eye also begins to wander through other details in the frame, like the kind of distracted looking that happens during a conversation.

In terms of editing, the sequence begins with the medium master shot, then cuts to a medium shot of Kuan-jung, followed by a view of the street outside the restaurant. After that, there is a shot of Wenqing waiting for food in front of a street vendor selling grilled skewers, before the film cuts back to the master shot inside the restaurant. At first, the group discusses the political situation in a joking and casual way. After about a minute and a half, when Kuan-jung responds to the journalist's question, the film cuts into a medium shot getting closer to him. Wenqing's back appears blurred in the foreground, while the focus is placed on Kuan-jung in the center of the image. This editing and shot design naturally emphasizes the content of Kuan-jung's words. Soon after, Wenqing stands up and leaves the frame. The image cuts to the outside of the restaurant, located in a lively area surrounded by other restaurants and drinking places. At this moment, the sound of singing overlaps with the noisy environment, suggesting that the song may come from other guests nearby. Wenqing waits for food at the street vendor, but he does not react to the song. Eventually, he returns to the restaurant with the grilled skewers. The image returns to the same master shot as before. After the singing begins, the shot remains for about thirty-seven seconds, then cuts to the empty shot overlooking Jiufen's mountains and sea in the early morning. This empty shot also lasts about thirty-seven seconds. Finally, the singing fades, we hear the thunder sounds, and the scene ends.

Throughout the scene, the camera maintains a distance that is both observational and present. Because of its duration, the scene preserves something close to the time of a complete conversation. As we discussed in the previous section, it emphasizes how major changes in their lives are discussed at an ordinary dinner table, through fragments of everyday conversation. From these fragments, the viewer gradually pieces together their expectations for the future at this transitional time period. What they long for is a return to the embrace of the motherland. After fifty years of Japanese colonial rule, during which they were not fully recognized and were often treated as second-class citizens, they seem to hope that life may improve under a government with less cultural, and perhaps even linguistic, distance. After the group recognizes the song from outside, their movement toward the window shifts the focus from the table to the window. Light comes through from outside into the interior. The

call-and-response singing appears, on the surface, like a drunken celebration. Yet in the context of political transition, the song also quietly expresses the people's unease and helplessness.

In the final empty shot, the narrative seems to pause on the surface, but time does not stop flowing. As the singing continues, I feel lost, both visually and mentally. At first, I search the image intensely, trying to grasp a point of focus. Eventually, I give up searching and, at the moment, this image triggers my bodily memory. What comes back to me are memories of times when I could not answer what Taiwan is, or who I am. My palms begin to sweat, my mind goes blank, and I briefly forget to breathe. Then the anxiety that follows becomes overwhelming. But afterwards, when my attention returns to the image, the narrative absence within the image also gives me a sense of release. My bodily sense of time seems to be extended. I remain quietly in the present. I listen to the singing that continues outside the frame. I do not merely watch an image of Taiwanese people facing a political condition that swings back and forth; I also sense their emotions. I felt a profound sadness I could not immediately articulate. Yet, I can only drift with it, carried along by the flow of time.



Figures 4. Empty shot of Jiufen. Screenshots from *A City of Sadness*, captured by the author.

3.3. Folding Time into the Body: Why does this Image Hurt?

After describing my encounter with the empty shot in the previous section, this section moves further into interpretation. This movement follows Sobchack's phenomenological method, not as a rigid sequence, but as a way of slowing down the viewing process. The previous section remained close to description and reduction: it described what appears in the image, how the narrative pauses, and how my attention begins to drift before any clear meaning is formed.¹⁰⁸ This section asks what happens after that suspension. How does the empty shot act upon the body? How does visual absence become affect? And how does affect begin to call up bodily memory? In addition, based on my own experience, this section will also explain the concept of spectatorship labor in the analysis process.

Although I did not live through the time period depicted in the film, not even the February 28 Incident or the martial law period, the sadness I felt while watching this sequence did not appear from nowhere. When seeing these images, I felt a profound sadness I could not immediately articulate. In my encounter with the empty shots in the film, I do not experience the image only as something to be understood intellectually.¹⁰⁹ The image first appears as a visual absence, but it gradually acts upon my body. Because there is no clear narrative focus, my attention begins to drift. I search for meaning, but the image does not immediately give it to me. Instead, it opens a space in which affect begins to emerge. This affective response is not purely visual. It exceeds the act of seeing. The empty shot does not only ask me to look; it makes me stay, wait, and feel. In this process, my body begins to respond before I can fully explain what I am responding to. My breathing changes, my attention slows down, and memories begin to surface. These memories are not recalled as clear narratives, but as bodily memories: the feeling of hesitation, anxiety, and suspension when I am asked what Taiwan is, or where I am from.

In this sense, the image does not simply represent a historical event. It activates a relation between cinematic absence and my own embodied memory. In my experience, the empty shot becomes a space where the film's time and my own memory fold into each other. What I

¹⁰⁸ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye*, p.42-49.

¹⁰⁹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p.73.

bring into the image is not only knowledge of Taiwanese history, but affect, sensation, and lived experience. This is what I call spectatorship labour: the viewer does not passively receive the image, but participates in its completion through perception, affect, and memory.¹¹⁰ Thus, absence here is not simply visual emptiness, but becomes an embodied experience. It is activated by the image and completed through the viewer's own perceptual engagement. Empty shots function as moments of temporal suspension, allowing viewers to shift from narrative comprehension to a more embodied perception of cinematic time and space. This suspension of narrative action invites viewers to experience time in a Bergsonian sense—as duration rather than succession—and to engage with the film through what Sobchack describes as an embodied mode of perception.

Marks' discussion of cultural memory helped me understand my experience more clearly. For Marks, images that appear empty, unclear, or difficult to recognize do not simply fail to represent meaning. Instead, they open gaps in which unrepresented histories and sensory memories may be activated. These gaps emerge from the difficulty of fully representing history and experience, and therefore appear through silence, absence, hesitation, and the viewer's own effort to respond.¹¹¹ In Marks' terms, certain cinematic images seem meaningless on the surface, yet they call forth memories and histories that are not directly represented.¹¹² This idea provides a way for me to understand my experience of watching empty shots. The empty shot is not simply a lack of narrative content, but an open space that allows the viewer to participate and response. It is in this kind of gap that the viewer's memory and perception begin to operate. Again, back to my experience, because the narrative steps back, the space in the image and the extended duration begin to act together. They create a time-space that can contain feelings that have not yet been spoken. What I fill into this space is not only my personal memory. It is also a cultural memory that is connected to Taiwan's historical silence and unresolved identity. I do not fully name this feeling when I watch the image. Rather, I stay in a state that has not yet been clearly articulated. In this sense, the empty shot does not explain cultural memory directly, but allows it to be felt through the viewer's embodied experience.

¹¹⁰ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p.48

¹¹¹ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 43-47.

¹¹² Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p.43.

Through the accumulation of the viewer's own experience and the mechanical experience of the cinematic image, the film becomes completed. Under these viewing conditions, what I call spectatorship labour is not simply the act of filling in the blankness of the image. It is closer to a process of situating or placing oneself within it. What matters here is that viewing is not a purely rational act of understanding, but an embodied experience. The viewer brings their own memory, affect, and experience into the gap opened by the image, allowing these incomplete images to be perceived.

3.4. Identity as Felt Suspension

If the previous section explains how absence becomes embodied through affect and memory, this final section asks what this embodied experience reveals about identity. Here, interpretation moves beyond the immediate viewing experience and toward the broader cultural and historical condition that makes this experience meaningful. My response to *A City of Sadness* is not only a personal feeling, but a situated response shaped by diasporic experience, Taiwan's unresolved historical trauma, and the unstable condition of Taiwanese identity. In this sense, this section brings together the three layers of the thesis: the cinematic image, the viewer's embodied memory, and the broader cultural context of Taiwan. This is where spectatorship labour becomes more than a viewing mechanism. It becomes a way to understand identity as something felt, suspended, and continuously formed through the encounter between image and viewer.

Phenomenology reminds us that the viewer's perception is always situated.¹¹³ Therefore, as a diasporic viewer, this embodied response cannot be separated from my situated context as a diasporic Taiwanese viewer. Diaspora here does not only refer to geographical distance, although watching Taiwanese cinema from abroad is part of my experience. It also refers to a broader condition of dislocation: being shaped by multiple cultural histories, unstable political narratives, and the difficulty of naming Taiwan within the international order.¹¹⁴ Under this condition, my viewing experience allows me to recognize identity not only as a

¹¹³ Sobchack, *The Address of the Eye: A Phenomenology of Film Experience*, p. 23.

¹¹⁴ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, p. 9.

structure that can be stably identified, but also as a fluid subjectivity accumulated through continuous processes of perception and adjustment.

Watching *A City of Sadness* from this position, the February 28 Incident is not encountered only as a historical event. It is also connected to Taiwan's ongoing process of transitional justice, to the unresolved question of national identity, and to the difficulty of explaining Taiwan in everyday life.¹¹⁵ The sadness and anxiety I feel when watching the empty shots are therefore not simply private emotions. They are connected to larger political and historical conditions. This is where Laura U. Marks' discussion of images as 'transitional objects' becomes useful. For Marks, cinematic images may retain indexical traces of an original event, but these traces do not transparently restore the past.¹¹⁶ They remain sedimented, partial, and difficult to fully grasp. Drawing on Deleuze's idea of the 'radioactive fossil,'¹¹⁷ Marks describes images that cannot be completely understood, yet continue to exert force. In this sense, the images in *A City of Sadness* do not bring the past back in a complete or stable form. Rather, they allow the past to seep into the present in unstable ways.

This helps me understand why the empty shots affect me so deeply. What returns in the image is not only the historical past of the February 28 Incident, nor my personal memory. It is the interaction between both. The instability and absence within the image meet my own unstable emotions and memories. Through this encounter, the film becomes a floating experience co-constituted by the image, my body, and the broader historical condition of Taiwan. When I look at these images, I do not feel that the past is simply represented before me. Rather, I sense it as sedimented layers: traces of history, cultural memory, and my own bodily response folded into one another. Like Marks' transitional object, the image holds something of the past without fully restoring it. Like Deleuze's radioactive fossil, it remains partially obscure, yet continues to emit force. What I encounter, then, is not a complete historical image, but a layered and unstable presence that acts upon my body.¹¹⁸

¹¹⁵ Lai, T., *Ereba shijian yanjiu baogao* [Research Report on the February 28 Incident], introduction.

¹¹⁶ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 124.

¹¹⁷ Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, p. 84.

¹¹⁸ Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, pp. 49–50, 62, 73. See especially Marks' discussion of "virtual images" and collective memory.

Thus, in this viewing experience, identity is no longer understood as a fixed position. It becomes a felt state. It is neither completely free nor completely determined, but suspended between movement and stillness, between knowing and not knowing, between belonging and not being fully recognized. To understand Taiwanese identity, then, may not only be an intellectual or rational task. It may also require attending to how identity is felt, delayed, adjusted, and continuously formed through perception and memory. Therefore, the cinematic experience is completed through the interaction between three elements: the image, the viewer's embodied memory, and the historical-cultural condition in which the viewer is situated. The film does not complete itself on the screen alone. It becomes complete through this encounter.

This understanding of cinema as an encounter between time, life, and perception also resonates with Tarkovsky's reflection on cinema as sculpting in time. In *Sculpting in Time*, Andrei Tarkovsky writes that to sculpt time through the form and expression of facts is one of cinema's most important artistic principles. For him, the vitality of cinema lies precisely in its inseparability from the life and reality around us. To analyze film, then, is not only to analyze technique, but to understand how cinema reconstructs and retraces ways of living.¹¹⁹ This also response to Hou's cinematic approaches, as he considers the film was his 'imitation of that time'.¹²⁰ In this sense, in *A City of Sadness*, the image carefully and honestly returns to the lived reality of that historical moment. The reality shown by the film is not an objective historical event, nor a reproduction of museum evidence, but the psychological state and atmosphere of an era.¹²¹ In this sense, my viewing experience is also produced through my interaction with the film. I interact with the instability and absence within the image, placing my own unstable emotions and memories into it. The two constitute one another and form a drifting experience that cannot exist without either side. The movement from image, to body, to identity does not form a linear correspondence, but a connection established through perception and affect.

¹¹⁹ Tarkovsky, A. (1986) *Sculpting in Time: Reflections on the Cinema*. Translated by K. Hunter-Blair. London: Faber and Faber.

¹²⁰ Ling, C., 'A City of Sadness: Historical Narrative and Modern Understanding of History', *Asian Social Science*, 4(12), December 2008, pp. 19–26, here see p. 20; citing Reynaud, B., *A City of Sadness*. London, British Film Institute, 2002, p. 24.

¹²¹ Reynaud, B., *A City of Sadness*. London, British Film Institute, 2002, p. 24, quoted in Ling, 'A City of Sadness', p. 20.

Conclusion

This study examines how long takes, aesthetic distance, and empty shots in *A City of Sadness* shape the interactive relation between viewer and film, and how meaning gradually emerges through the viewer's bodily perception and active participation in the viewing process. I argue that cinematic experience does not come from the image alone, but is shaped by multiple historical structures and viewing positions. From Taiwan's repeated colonial histories and its unstable contemporary geopolitical condition, to the historical context in which Taiwan New Cinema emerged during a period of social transformation, and finally to my own viewing position as a diasporic Taiwanese spectator, these conditions are intertwined and layered like sediment. Together, they shape the viewing experience itself. At the same time, I also stand upon these conditions and continue to be affected by them.

One of the central concerns of this study is the concept of spectatorship labour. This thesis argues that the visual aesthetics of *A City of Sadness* are built upon Taiwan's complex colonial history and its ghostly geopolitical condition of seeming to exist and not exist at the same time. These conditions are also entangled with the viewer's own lived reality. As one of the first Taiwanese films to publicly engage with the February 28 Incident and the White Terror, *A City of Sadness* does not choose to represent history in a direct or dramatic way. Instead, through distance, blankness, and incomplete narration, it opens up a way of viewing this historical pain.

Through a phenomenological perspective, this thesis focuses on the relation between the image and the viewer's bodily perception. Beginning from my own perceptual and experience of the film, I argue that cinematic experience is not completed by the image alone. It requires the viewer's active participation through perception, affect, and memory. Within this viewing structure, the empty shot becomes an important cinematic strategy. When narrative information is reduced, when characters leave the frame, or when major historical events are not directly shown, the viewer is asked to remain within the image and within time. The viewer must supplement, feel, and understand the image through their own act of

viewing. In other words, cinematic experience is not produced by the image alone, but through the continuous interaction between image and viewer.

This thesis does not attempt to offer a universal or stable definition of Taiwanese identity, nor does it attempt to predict Taiwan's political future. Instead, it takes this unresolved and difficult-to-define condition as its starting point. It focuses on how the viewing experience of absence resonates with such questions at the level of perception. The movement from image, to body, to identity does not form a linear correspondence, but a connection established through perception and affect. I suggest that the suspended, drifting, and difficult-to-name condition of Taiwanese identity is not only a political reality, but also a perceptual condition. The empty shots and sense of absence in *A City of Sadness* provide a space in which this difficult-to-articulate anxiety can remain and be felt.

Although this thesis begins from my own situated viewing experience, the cinematic absence discussed here is not only related to the past. It is also connected to a particular condition of living within an uncertain present. The urgency that led me toward Taiwanese cinema and questions of absence did not emerge in isolation. It developed alongside an increasing awareness that certain histories, identities, and ways of living may remain unresolved, fragile, or vulnerable to disappearance.

For me, this uncertainty has not ended. It continues to exist in the present. And I, like many others, continue to drift within this unfinished condition.

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