Submitted by Cha Chiu, to the University of Exeter as a thesis for the degree of (Doctor of Philosophy in Modern Languages), August 2010

This thesis is available for library use on the University that it is copyright material and that no quotation from one thesis may be published without proper acknowledgement.

I certify all material in this thesis which is not my own work has been identified and that no material has previously been submitted and approved for the award of a degree by this or any other university.

Cha Chiu

(Signature)
ABSTRACT

The works of Tsai Ming-Liang and Kim Ki-Duk, two directors in contemporary Asian cinema, qualify as postmodern films transgressing the hegemonic dominance of classic text, aesthetic and structure manifested in the blockbuster Hollywood films that are overwhelming in Asia.

The characters in Tsai’s and Kim’s films are social marginal and outcast excluded from mainstream society. They seem to be disengaged from their past and future, simply floating in different presents as a carrier of desire. One difference between is that the major figures in Tsai’s films are marginal young men and women presenting a sense of alienation and solitude among the residents of the city, and their intimate behavior is portrayed in enclosed spaces. Kim’s films, the major figures are abandoned by and isolated from society, either brutal men or solitary prostitutes.

Tsai and Kim always make ample use of the residual in everydayness in order to produce the incessant different present-becoming. These becoming presents are constituted by unpredictable contingency without the association of cause and effect between event and event. Therefore, for Tsai and Kim, time depicted in the cinematic temporality is enunciated by the permanently present discourse, which is absent from its past and is still unknown for its future, but only produces the infinite moment. In other words, this temporal prolongation is a-historical, lacking depth and merely progresses in action linking action. Thus it also becomes a fragmentary and not a linear development for its lack of commencement and an end, being an endless present-becoming.

There is no connection between narrative spatiality in Tsai and Kim’s films. This has become detached from its related and logical linkage prescribed in the classical narrative structure, but randomly, coincidentally and unforeseeably merged together, imbedded with the linguistic system of scission revealing no beginning and end but only providing the characters, Taipei and Seoul residents, like nomadic
tribes wandering around without indicating the direction of their coming and going. In other words, these spaces in both post-colonial cities can be regarded as temporary and transitional spaces and create the ephemeral mirage of a playground. Tsai and Kim’s cinematizations of the urban spaces of Taipei and Seoul respectively have been constituted by the present discourse, which makes the spatial marking, to which personal memory as well as collective history attaches, vanish.

These are the most salient traits in the postmodern text and structure, which can be viewed from both directors’ masterful works among Asian cinema. Moreover, their non-historical discourses, non-moralistic and non-ethical and dehumanized and dystopian text in describing social life as well as non-linear and non-classical narrative structure in constituting cinematic text also make Tsai and Kim’s films catch the international gaze. Nevertheless, there is still a lack of a full postmodern exploration of both directors’ works. This has motivated me to construct a passage from European postmodernity to Asian postmodern films.
PART 1. INTRODUCTION

1. Introduction 1

1.1 Tsai Ming-Liang 1

1.2 Kim Ki-Duk 4

2. Theory 7

2.1 Before postmodern theory 7

2.2 The trace of language 9

2.2.1 Words as free signifiers with no name 9

2.2.2 A process of producing infinite and different presents 12

2.2.3 Producing instead of representing the reality with the resemblance 14

2.2.4 Decision and scission 16

2.2.5 Prolonging the permanent present with no origin 18

2.3 Construction and deconstruction 19

2.3.1 An open syntagmatic system with a heterogeneous constitution 19

2.3.2 Signs without logocentric matrix and making meaning in the difference 23

2.4 Aims and contributions 26

2.4.1 Postmodern film should be investigated by postmodern theory 26

2.4.2 Postmodern sublime going beyond the modern paradigm 29
2.5 Hollywood blockbuster films in Asia 32

2.5.1 Hong Kong film 32

2.5.2 Chinese film 34

2.5.3 Taiwanese film 38

2.5.4 Conclusion 41

2.6 Structure of the thesis 42

Part 2 THE DIMENSION OF POSTMODERNISM

Chapter 1 How to define postmodernism 49

1.1 An approach to postmodernism 49

1.1.1 The time of the post 49

1.1.2 The emergence of the post 54

1.2 Postmodernism as pluralism 59

1.2.1 Problematizing the knowledge of rationalism, utopianism and foundationalism 59

1.2.2 Transgressing theorization 62

1.2.3 Repudiating the utopian humanist values and social life 65

1.2.4 Postmodern superficial and depthless culture 67
PART 3 POSTMODERNISM IN CONTEXT

Chapter 2 The question of writing, museum and art 70

2.1 The question of writing 70

2.1.1 Grammatology 70

2.1.2 Montage writing 74

2.1.3 Present discourse 77

2.1.4 Writerly and readerly text 80

2.1.5 Schizophrenic language system 83

2.2 The question of museum 86

2.3 The question of art 90

2.4 Connection with postmodern films 95

Chapter 3 The question of literature and media language 98

3.1 The question of literature 98

3.1.1 Postmodern textual structure 98

3.1.1.1 Contradiction 98

3.1.1.2 Discontinuity 100

3.1.1.3 Randomness 101

3.1.1.4 Excess 102

3.1.1.5 Short circuit 103
3.1.2 Text in destabilizing the truth 104

3.1.3 Intertextual and paradoxical text 106

3.2 The question of media language 109

3.2.1 Signs losing a fundamental property in the postmodern visual text 109

3.2.2 Plural text written with the infinite language 112

3.2.3 Alienation in between a signifier and a signified 114

3.3 Connection with postmodern films 117

3.4 Conclusion 119

PART 4 POSTERNISM IN ASIAN CINEMA

Chapter 4 Learning from Tsai Ming-Liang’s films 150

4.1 Vive L’amour : 1994

4.1.1 Narrative structure constituted in different centers with the same weight 121

4.1.2 Only present discourse 122

4.1.3 Microscopic narrative progressing in the transitional space of consumption 124

4.1.4 Schizophrenic language written in the euphoric displacement 127

4.1.5 Signifier and signified coupling together as a gram 133

4.1.6 Writerly text - bisexual or homosexual? 134

4.1.7 New trigger activated in a process of destabilizing the meaning in time 136
4.1.8 A film in writing 137

4.2 The River: 1997

4.2.1 An approach to the schizophrenic syntagmatic system 141

4.2.2 Postmodern simulacrum and the expression of inward feeling 143

4.2.3 A chaotic, non-moralistic and dystopian world 147

4.2.4 Unsolved enigma with no final decipherment in revealing the truth 148

4.2.5 Incest is an ahistorical and non-ethical term transmitting the postmodern sublime 152

4.3 The Hole: 1998

4.3.1 No official statement, but multiple ex-centric enunciations 157

4.3.2 A personal unparalleled experience exploring intimacy in a world of disaster 159

4.3.3 Words are an anonymous signifier and produce infinite difference 162

4.3.4 Transgressing the hierarchic boundary in inventing the unthinkable bricolage 165

4.3.5 An ahistorical and depthless postmodern simulacrum producing the unprecedented present in space 167


4.4.1 Different new beginnings with infinite presents 170

4.4.2 Transforming the time in time with the inventive presence of the present 172

4.4.3 The dissolve of voices from Taipei-Paris with the present discourse 180

4.4.4 Producing the new triggering from resemblance 181
4.5 Good Bye Dragon Inn: 2003

4.5.1 A film in a film, a seamless graft in a rewritten process of becoming – present 184

4.5.2 Exchanging signs in the intertextual space 186

4.5.3 Transmuting nostalgia as the present - becoming in the intertextual zone 187

4.5.4 Signifiers freely generating self-multiplicity with uncertainty and bizarreness in the temporal disorder 190

4.6 Wayward Cloud: 2005

4.6.1 Deferring a watermelon in the incessant slippage of meaning 195

4.6.2 Inventing the ahistorically and magically spatio-temporal moment 200

4.6.3 Texts reciprocating each other in producing the postmodern spatialization 203

4.6.4 Erasing the demarcation between the fictional and the realistic life 206

4.7 I Do Not Want To Sleep Alone: 2006

4.7.1 A fantastic heterotopias, an engulfed city with plural culture 211

4.7.2 A process of ceaselessly producing the meaning of a mattress 213

4.7.3 Discovering the resemblance from the difference 216

4.7.4 Time is enunciated with the present discourse with neither beginning nor end moving in permanent motion 218

Chapter 5 Learning from Kim Ki-Duk’s films 270

5.1 The Isle-2000

5.1.1 Erasing the locus of causal link and producing the incessant triggering 223
5.1 Dissemination 224

5.1.3 Making fishhooks into the meaning of deference, the same and new 226

5.1.4 Deconstructing objects for prolonging the temporal sequence seamlessly in a dehumanized field 228

5.1.5 Sexuality is pleasure with pain to redeem the hopelessness. Medicine or perversion? 230

5.1.6 Stop in progress 233

5.2 Bad Guy-2001

5.2.1 Postmodernist new principles of chaos, contingency, spontaneity and organism 235

5.2.2 Keeping narrative in progress to catch here and now 238

5.2.3 An amphibian text, destabilizing answer in between right and wrong 240

5.2.4 Refusing the end as a conclusion, but creating it as the new trigger in action 246

5.3 Spring, Summer, Fall, Winter…and Spring - 2003

5.3.1 Transgressing the rule of stratification and constituting living beings as a gram 248

5.3.2 Signs lacking the first birth and creating the same and new 251

5.3.3 Ceaselessly reshuffling the preexisting texts with the nonorganic structure 254

5.3.4 Meaning is a- context-bound, but context is boundless to catch the undivided present in motion 257

5.4 Samaritan Girl- 2004

5.4.1 Sexuality is the present discourse produced by the individual paradigm merely for its own self- presence 261
5.4.2 The ecstasy of communication functioning from screen and network in the obscene world 264

5.4.3 Replacing fundamental statement with my performativity with little narrative 268

5.4.4 Intercepting and participating in the clipped text to produce its different present-becoming 272

5.4.5 Triggering off a new commencement as a progressing pause in the nonorganic structure 274

5.5 *3iron*-2004

5.5.1 There is no his story but my presence of the present triggers off the Incessant moment 277

5.5.2 Narrative structure organized by the permanent present discourse with no inaugural act 280

5.5.3 Dehumanized and dystopian society 282

5.5.4 Truth invented and deferred from its pre-established name 283

5.5.5 Once the voice loses its origin; the author will just enter into his own death and writing begins 286

PART 5 CONCLUSION

Chapter 6 Postmodern life and text in Tsai Ming-Liang and Kim Ki-Duk’s film 357

6.1 Cross-reference 291

6.2 The criteria for identifying postmodern films 294
6.2.1 Waning of the bourgeois life 294

6.2.2 Meaning produced among free signifiers with no logocentric mark 298

6.2.3 Postmodern texts transgressing the institutional knowledge based on the modern paradigm 301

6.2.4 To write is to graft and to create intertextuality 304

6.2.5 Producing the different presence of the present 306

6.2.6 All narrative structures constituted by scissions detached from beginning 309

BIBLIOGRAPHY 312

FILMOGRAPHY 322