

Contemporary Documentary in Taiwan: Memory, Identity, Flux

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Abstract

In the following paper I will seek to illustrate how four documentaries made in recent years by young Taiwanese filmmakers, *Le Moulin* (2015), *Wansei Painter – Tetsuomi Tateishi* (2016), *Letter #69* (2016) and *3 Islands* (2015), display a fresh and original approach in the landscape of contemporary non-fiction cinema both on the island and in Southeast Asia as a whole. These works not only embody the hybrid and transitional quality that has been an essential part of Taiwanese cinema since its beginning, reflecting the colonial past of the island since the seventeenth century, but also explore the aesthetic boundaries of documentary by crossing into the field of contemporary art. Mapping the formal thresholds of non-fiction cinema, and pointing to relatively uncharted cinematic territories where archival material, poetry, written texts and reenactment intertwine and blend, these documentaries also reveal the complexity and black holes of the visual representation of history.

Keywords: Taiwan cinema; documentary; experimental documentary; visual representation.

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It's not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on the past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation.

(Benjamin 2002: 462)

1 Introduction

Born and evolved in a colonial context during the Japanese occupation of the island (1895–1945), cinema in Taiwan has been, from its very foundation, entangled with the concept of national identity. “Transnational from the beginning” (Hong 2011: 25), cinema in Taiwan has continued to embody a multilayered and hybrid quality throughout its history, reflecting and contributing to an identity in constant transit, where “people, places, and eras [are] caught always in the flux of becoming something else” (Hong 2011: 121). These elements became overtly visible and artistically significant during the process of democratization the island experienced from the mid–1980s onwards, its culmination being the lifting of martial law on July 15, 1987 after almost four decades of so-called White Terror.¹ Cinematically, the most famous result of this period of liberation and rebirth is the Taiwan New Wave, a cultural phenomenon also brought into existence by the transformation the film industry underwent at the beginning of the decade. However, another area where the social and democratic changes went hand in hand with the artistic (re)evolution has been documentary. Indeed, it was during the 1980s and 1990s that a strong wave of documentaries started to thrive in Taipei and the rest of the island: works that, by excavating the past and the fractures of the present, unburied and exposed the truths so long hidden from the public discourse, and contributed to reviving a democratic consciousness in the people of Taiwan.

The most prominent actors in this documentary renaissance were the members of a media group of activists, the Green Team, whose beginnings coincide with those of the democratization of Taiwan. On November 2, 1986, when leading opposition figure Hsu Hsin-liang returned, unauthorized, from his American exile to Taiwan, he was welcomed at the airport in Taoyuan by a large number of people: a mass mobilization organized by the Democratic Progressive Party (DPP). While the narrative created by state media in the following days was one in which the demonstrators had been violent and had attacked the police, it was the police who had started to charge and clash with the people gathered for the event, as the documentary recorded on DigiBeta Cam by the Green Team, *The Taoyuan Airport Incident* (1986), showed when it was screened at the headquarters of the DPP. Martial law was lifted only eight months later, and this documentary became a *de facto* marker of the beginning of a new way of creating non-fiction movies, and of political and media activism in Taiwan. Documentaries had been made on the island since the arrival of cinema,² at first by the Japanese colonial government, the first documentary produced was *Introducing Taiwan Today* (1907) by Takamatsu Toyojirō, and from 1949 onwards by studios owned or connected to the Nationalist government and thus lacking political freedom. However, the time was ripe for the birth of a different approach to non-fiction, one more directly engaged with the social issues gripping the nation and perhaps, more importantly, matching the expectations of a population of viewers hungry, after almost four decades of political repression, for social justice and truth. During the 1990s and 2000s, documentary in Taiwan kept evolving in a variety of styles and areas in parallel to what was happening in the rest of Asia: personal movies, in part facilitated by the progress in technology, ethnographic films, documentaries exploring the cultures of the Taiwanese indigenous peoples, and works targeting themes such as national identity and local nostalgia.³

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1. “The White Terror in Taiwan refers to the oppressive atmosphere created by the Nationalist government in its effort to consolidate power and control after its defeat at the hands of the Communists on the Mainland in 1949. Shortly after the relocation of the Nationalist government to Taiwan, martial law was declared, to legitimate its totalitarian rule over the island.” (Lin 2012: 39) The periodization of this era though is not unanimously accepted, some scholars refer to it only when talking and writing about the 1950s, while others use the term White Terror to define a longer period of time, from 1949 to 1987, the year the martial law was lifted.
 2. Surprisingly, ten shorts made by Edison were exhibited in Taipei in August of 1896, few months before the arrival of the technology, the Kinetoscope, in Japan.
 3. For a short but comprehensive overview of the history of documentary in Taiwan see: Lee (2012a).

The past two or three years have witnessed the advent of what appears to be a different type of documentary, one that signals a “reversal from the previous social issue-driven, journalistic documentaries, with many entries crossing over into the domain of contemporary art.”⁴

In the following chapters, I will analyze four documentaries made by three Taiwanese artists between 2015 and 2016, and seek to demonstrate how these works represent not only a fresh and somehow original approach to non-fiction cinema in Taiwan and in the landscape of international documentary, but also how they explore and embody, by combining archive materials, texts and poetry filtered through a personal and experimental touch, a non-linear, reflexive and problematic mode of representing history.

2 A Labyrinth of Images

In *Le Moulin* (2015), director and visual artist Huang Ya-li depicts the birth, evolution and demise of the first modern art group that flourished in Taiwan during the 1930s: poets, writers and artists who were trying to assert their cultural identity four decades into Japanese colonial rule, in an era when the world was moving towards total war. At the same time, the group, whose complete name was Le Moulin Poet Society, connected their artistic endeavor to the West: in particular, to the activities of the admired Surrealists in France. Although the movie proceeds chronologically, it begins with the events of the 1930s, when Yang Chih-chang, Li Zhang-rui, Lin Xiu-er and Zhang Liang-dian began their activities, and ends after the Allied bombing of Taiwan, the Japanese surrender, and the arrival of “Motherland China” and its sour aftermath.

More an experimental video collage and a labyrinth of images than a documentary in the Griersonian meaning of the term, the movie is assembled like an essay-poem and constructed from archive footage, paintings, written and spoken poetry, digital images, photos, old radio programs, minimalist music. Built from this overwhelming accumulation of disparate materials, *Le Moulin* manages nonetheless to be restrained in its tone. Almost Bressonian in its reenacted parts, we never see the faces of the members of the group, but mainly their hands: turning pages, writing letters and poems, lighting cigarettes and holding books or photos. The impact of Surrealism and Dadaism, and the influence of the European avant-garde movements at the beginning of the century in general, which reached Taiwan through Japan, is obvious in the fascination the group had with machines, trains and speed, and in a style that prioritized artistic fragmentation and experimentation over unity. This fascination is also reflected in the admiration the group had for Jean Cocteau and his works. In this regard, one of the pivotal moments of the movie is when the poet and filmmaker visited Japan in May 1936. This modernist approach is not only present in the writings and poems of the group, but extends to and is reflected in the aesthetics adopted by Huang in constructing his documentary: anti-narrative, non-linear, accumulative and elliptical, but at the same time elegant and gentle, a movie that works as an assemblage and a cubistic landscape of an era.

Another remarkable achievement of the movie is its use of languages; in particular, of Japanese, the language spoken and used in writings by the members of the group. By using Japanese as its main language, with written translations on screen in Mandarin and English, and by referring to dozens of archive materials taken from Japan and in relation to Japan, the movie brings violently to the foreground the colonial past, uncompromisingly exposing the assimilation planned and implemented by the Japanese Empire. However, *Le Moulin* has the compelling quality to present this period of Japanese dominance and submission from the perspective of a group of artists who were trying to resist this assimilation by using the language of the colonizers as a means of expression, thus complicating the picture without falling into the trap of oversimplified nostalgia.⁵ Huang, interviewed on the occasion of the screening of *Le Moulin* in London in 2017, admitted he does not speak any Japanese, and yet the movie is almost entirely narrated in Japanese and based on documents, letters and

4. Hsieh (2016). This is not the first time experimentation and documentary have crossed paths; in this connection, notable examples are the works made for TV by the renowned photographer and documentarist Chang Chao-tang during the 1970s.

5. “The poets wanted to create their own Taiwanese literature movement, but their own language was not sufficient for modernist poetry and the only way they could work was to write in Japanese (...) It may not have been the best choice at the time, but it was the only way they could make progress with the movement. They must have figured, ‘Well, if we’re going to be under colonial rule anyway, we may as well use the language.’” (Shoji 2017).

poems written in Japanese by the members of the group.⁶ The cultural layers that make ‘Taiwanese identity’ are reflected in the languages spoken in the island, currently or in the past. In the same interview, when asked about the mother tongue of the poets, Huang had this to say:

Typically, their mother and their grandparents would speak Hokkien but their father wanted them to be brought up with a Japanese identity. In this entire situation, no Mandarin is present, and there is no space for it. It’s rather analogous to my present-day situation, where I have a very few words of Hokkien and can converse with a very basic understanding with my grandparents. But Mandarin has become the Japanese of Taiwan. (2017a)

This overlapping of languages and cultures creates the displacement that has been the common thread running through Taiwanese history since when the Dutch, the Spanish and Ming loyalists occupied the island in the seventeenth century, the Qing dynasty up to 1895, the Japanese in the first half of the twentieth century, and the Kuomintang (the Nationalist Party of China) in the post-war era. *Le Moulin*, in all its excess (the movie is nearly three hours long and very dense with events, quotes and obscure references practically impossible to grasp and decipher in only one viewing), succeeds in inhabiting and embodying this displacement.

Displacement, a physical one this time, is also at the center of *Wansei Painter – Tetsuomi Tateishi* (2015) by Kuo Liang-yin and Fujita Shūhei, another documentary that depicts the colonial occupation of Taiwan, but is here seen from the point of view of the ‘aggressor.’ Tateishi was a Taiwan-born Japanese artist, painter and teacher who was forced to leave the island, deported, in the years following the end of the Pacific War. Within the sociopolitical environment, things started to dramatically change at the beginning of the 1940s, when a divide began to emerge between Japanese and Taiwanese in areas such as painting, literature, and theater. The government was promoting Japanization and Taiwanese culture was considered vulgar and barbaric. In such a period, when the imperialistic and fascistic oppression promoted by Japan was at its peak and the propaganda machine was in full swing, Teteishi wrote extensively for *Folklore Taiwan*, a magazine written in Japanese, exploring and reviving the traditional arts and customs of the island. This (re)discovery of Taiwanese cultural heritage was so important that Teteishi is still praised among Taiwanese scholars of the subject today. At the age of 39, in 1944, Tateishi was drafted and sent to the war front, and after the conflict ended his family stayed in Taiwan, part of the Wansei community (Japanese who were born in Taiwan) in a land now under Chinese administration. In 1949, they were forced to leave the country and go back to Japan. There Tateishi continued to paint, and eventually became a well-known illustrator for encyclopedias and scientific publications: many of his illustrations can be found in Japanese children’s books and covers of the 1960s and 1970s. After the war his painting style changed considerably, becoming more surrealistic and abstract. As he once explained, “military and post-war experiences in Taiwan cast a shadow over my heart. I searched for new styles of painting, yet I could not decide on a particular style.”

Less experimental in its form than *Le Moulin*, the movie is nonetheless relevant because, like the documentary by Huang, it uses a variety of materials to illustrate life during the Japanese occupation, including still photos, paintings, archival images, and interviews with Tateishi’s relatives and Taiwanese arts scholars. The narration is heterogeneous: the main voice, his granddaughter’s, is intertwined with short pieces read from his memoir and the voices of his wife and children. There are also few scenes of modern Taiwan and Japan, such as a school where he used to teach and places where he used to go. Everything is held together by minimal and unobtrusive music, a sound design that gives the movie its almost contemplative mood. When the story moves to Japan after the war, the documentary loses some of its appeal: while still a well-crafted work, the film risks becoming hagiography. Fortunately, such a tendency is balanced by the artist’s paintings that fill up the screen with their colors, shapes and mystery.

6. “...there were two types of (high) school in Taiwan then. In the ‘small schools’ that these students were taught in, the whole curriculum was taught in Japanese. In contrast, in the public schools, it was still a Japanese curriculum, but a little Chinese was taught. Some ethnic Chinese, if their families were wealthy, were sent to the small schools, as in the case of some of the members of *Le Moulin*.” (Macy 2017).



Figure 1: *Wansei Painter – Tetsuomi Tateishi*

3 A Constellation of Images

Letter #69 (2016) by Lin Hsin-i is a short movie in which the young female director addresses the White Terror,⁷ a period of purges when political dissidents, protesting or resisting the Kuomintang-led Republic of China government, were persecuted, incarcerated and killed. In 1954, Shi Sui-huan was imprisoned for hiding her brother, who was resisting the regime of Chiang Kai-shek. During her confinement, which ended with her execution, Shi Sui-huan wrote letters to her family; her final letter, number 69, was left blank.

The blankness of the last letter is the canvas from which the director starts her investigation into the White Terror. While the period started in 1947 and ended in 1987, when martial law was officially lifted, the director might want to refer here to a more specific time and place: the first years of the White Terror, and a corner of the Liuzhangli Cemetery in Taipei where Shi Sui-huan and other 201 people are buried.⁸ Most of them were leftist thinkers or activists but also include people who simply wanted to protect their relatives, as Shi herself. The graves were forgotten and virtually untouched in fear of repercussions until the end of martial law, when the country slowly started to breathe again.

The absence of written words in the last letter embodies the impossibility of directly connecting with the tragic period and its remnants, yet the blankness also represents the white noise resulting from the accumulation of all the ghostly memories that in one way or another, despite being denied for so many years, are still alive and present. Sewing together the fragments of all these scattered memories in a heterogeneous piece of cinematic patchwork, Lin Hsin-i's short movie is an attempt to discover and create the images and sounds of a lost, tragic period. The letters of Shi Sui-huan are juxtaposed with the narration in the present, done by family members of the victims, and images of ruins are overlapped with performative actions that recreate some of the gestures that she might have done.

Not only does *Letter #69* bring to the surface a forgotten past and direct its gaze towards a crucial period in recent Taiwanese history (an approach that thematically echoes the works of Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang, and, as we have seen, the documentaries of the late 1980s and 1990s), but aesthetically, the movie is a fragmented and kaleidoscopic work that blends the beauty and clearness of the digital image with the grain and roughness of overused celluloid film (an old strip of film on which the director has printed the woman's letters) and read and written passages from letters with the constant sound of a running film projector.

This aesthetic fragmentation is also present in *3 Islands* (2015), a longer documentary Lin made a year prior to *Letter #69*. *3 Islands* is a work in which the transnational and transitional elements that lay at the core of

7. The first documentary to directly address the White Terror was *Why Don't We Sing?* (Kuan Hsiao-jung, 1995).

8. For the problematics regarding the periodization of the era, see note 3.

Figure 2: *Letter #69*

Taiwan cinema and its hybrid identity are expanded outside the island itself. The film captures the historical resonances that tragically bind together three territories: Taiwan and the February 28 Incident, Okinawa and the mass suicides during World War II, and the Jeju Uprising. This movie is too a multilayered work punctuated by literary quotes, archival footage, contemporary art, beautiful digital shots of jungle and ruins, fictional memories and eerie, minimalist music.

The very first image is a close up of an old strip of celluloid in what appears to be a destroyed building. Later we discover that it is an abandoned theater in Tainan, Taiwan. The shots of the strip and those of the hands pulling it are superimposed with quotes from Marguerite Duras and Kao Jun-honn—a Taiwanese artist who uses semi-fictional narrative to fill in the black holes of history—confronting personal and historical memory, the differences that each language brings with itself, and the impossibility of capturing all history’s truths even through an objective recording.

Figure 3: *3 Islands*

In the following scenes, written messages of a young kamikaze pilot who died in the battle of Okinawa are intertwined with images of mural art in Taiwan and connected with footage of kamikaze attacks on American ships. Moments of battles as experienced during World War II by Zhang Zheng Guan, presumably a Taiwanese pilot who fought in the Pacific War with the Japanese Imperial Army, are narrated, in Japanese, over a split screen: one side showing the places where the carnage and horrors of war took place as they are today, the other showing the act of filming and photographing the very same spots. Archival war images and scenes from the Taiwanese jungle are then linked to those of the protests in Okinawa against the American base in Futenma; furthermore, all these scenes are connected by the narrated memories. One of the more dense and horrifying passages of this account describes scenes of a mutilated and headless body still moving; another relates a tale

of men walking and singing with their hands on their bellies, holding their own intestines and livers.

In the central part of the movie, Lin moves her focus to the island of Jeju, a small territory located between Japan and South Korea and a place of geopolitical importance due to its proximity to Chinese waters. Once again, we are confronted with images from present day and photos and archival footage from the colonial past of the area and, more importantly, from the Jeju Uprising in 1948, a revolt during which people were raped, tortured and brutally murdered by the Korean government's militia. Talking or writing about the massacre was taboo for more than 50 years, and it was only in 2005 that an official apology from the South Korean president was issued. The final part of the film moves again to Japan where it follows Ichimura Misako, a woman who decided to live as a homeless person in Yoyogi Park in Tokyo.



Figure 4: *3 Islands*

Split screen, superimpositions, literary quotes and a sense of reflexivity expressed by the insistent shots of the celluloid strip: these elements all have a *raison d'être*, because the film gives equal importance to the facts, stories and histories narrated and to the act of depicting them. Thus, what interests the director is additionally, if not mainly, exploring the aesthetic limits of non-fiction and those of historical representation, highlighting the black holes of such representation. In *3 Islands*, as in *Le Moulin* and *Letter #69* (and to a lesser extent in *Wansei Painter – Tetsuomi Tateishi*) the multitude of images, words and stories colliding and clashing together creates a polyphonic narrative of almost overwhelming proportion, perhaps more akin to installation art than documentary in the 'traditional' meaning of the term. What these works create is a map on which places and times are combined and rearranged, revealing, in their process of mapping the past with and through the present, important historical fault lines that run through the Taiwanese territory and extend beyond it. As we have seen, all the documentaries, by using a broad variety of materials such as archival images, poetry, fictional narration, radio plays, photos and paintings, the gaze of the director is here just one among many fragmented, dispersed and multiplied in the representation. This is obviously an aesthetic procedure that resembles one often adopted in contemporary art, and one that allows the filmmakers to "break the established mold of representation in order to encourage reflective, critical responses from viewers" (Izod and Kilborn 1997: 140). Thus, by approaching non-fiction from a perspective derived from the arts and literature more than from activism or journalism, Lin Hsin-i and Huang Ya-li are not only delving into the past of their island, but are also hinting towards a different way of conceptualizing historical documentary and new possible representational strategies. More than ever, the famous quote from Walter Benjamin is applicable. The documentaries analyzed here envision history and the work of true historians, as conceived by the German philosopher, as more a constellation between past and present than a linear progression from a past to a future, or as "beads on a rosary":⁹ a patchwork of diverse and heterogeneous historical elements and personal memories in constant

9. "A historian who takes this as his point of departure stops telling the sequence of events like the beads of a rosary. Instead, he grasps the constellation which his own era has formed with a definite earlier one" (Benjamin 1968: 263).

tension and caught in the process of rearranging and redistributing themselves from the perspective of the present.

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