Impossible Spaces? Liminal space and cross-generational love in Ann Hui’s A Simple Life (2011)

In this chapter I examine Hong Kong filmmaker Ann Hui’s depiction of cross-generational love in A Simple Life (2011) in terms of its play with time and space, narrative and image, history and memory. In its foregrounding of place, the body and intimacy, and its disruption of linear history in favour of the fragmented, rhythmic, and everyday, I argue, the film operates at once as a ‘memory text’, in Annette Kuhn’s (2000) terms, and as a profoundly political critique of the public history of a now globalised Hong Kong.

I begin with questions of time and space. In Space, Place and Gender (1994), Doreen Massey examines the binary opposition between space and time central to the work of contemporary cultural theorists. Whilst writers differ in the characteristics they attribute to space – for Ernesto Laclau, for example, space is stasis whereas for Fredric Jameson it is chaos – they are consistent, and consistent with a long philosophical tradition, in coding it as female. Whilst time, writes Massey:

is defined by such things as change, movement, history, dynamism ... space ... is simply the absence of these things. ... With time are aligned History, Progress, Civilization, Science, Politics and Reason .... With space on the other hand are aligned the other poles of these concepts: stasis, ('simple') reproduction, nostalgia, emotion, aesthetics, the body. (1994: 256-7)

From this follow two further arguments. The first, and more familiar, is that space/the feminine becomes the realm of immanence, the body, exteriority, whereas time/the masculine is that of transcendence, interiority, subjectivity. The second is that, as Massey argues, space becomes ‘the sphere of the lack of politics’ (1994: 250). In this formulation, space does have its own kind of temporality: that of cyclical time. This is the ‘woman's time’ of Julia Kristeva's (1986) description, a temporality characterized by repetition and a lack of change. Here, in this time outside history, which is really space, ‘things may change yet without really changing’ (Massey, 1994: 252). Shifting our focus slightly, we can see this also as the temporality of memory as Kuhn describes it (2000), in which place is foregrounded, events are repetitive or cyclical, and linear time is
disrupted. Here, the past inserts itself into the present as a kind of 'haunting' (Plate 2011: 122), and you have a sense 'that something has been irretrievably lost' (Kuhn 2000: 188). But for the cultural theorists whose work Massey examines, what all of these lack, indeed are opposed to, is genuine dynamic change; this belongs to time, the sphere of history, politics and action – and to masculinity.

The opposition that Massey charts is one familiar not only from the Western philosophical tradition critiqued by feminist philosophers and cultural theorists. It also underpins much of literary and film theory. In Gérard Genette’s equally binary, equally gendered account of storytelling, ‘narration’, which concerns the ‘temporal, dramatic aspect of the narrative’ is a matter of ‘pure processes’. Its opposite, ‘description’, serves to ‘suspend the course of time and to contribute to spreading the narrative in space’ (1982: 136). It is therefore, ‘quite naturally’ in Genette’s view, the ‘ever-necessary, ever-submissive, never-emancipated slave’ of narration (ibid.: 134). In Stephen Heath’s theorization of cinematic narrative, this becomes the opposition between movement and its regulation through cinematic framing. In this view, disruption of cinema’s ideologically conservative ‘fictions of wholeness’ (1981: 118) can come only from an intensity of movement – the eruption of time or history into the ‘smooth stability’ of cinema’s constructed world (ibid.: 49).

Massey is concerned to re-think this gendered opposition. What she offers in its place, however, is not a straightforward re-valorizing of space. Instead, she proposes a more radical rethinking of space itself. In place of the gendered opposition of movement/stasis, time/space and journey (or story)/landscape, culture/nature, she proposes a space that is not static but is itself a ‘dynamic simultaneity’, a ‘simultaneity of stories-so-far’ (Massey 2011). Space, then, ceases to be ‘something we travel across’ (Massey 2006: 46) in our journey towards becoming (human, or subject, or hero), but becomes itself the intersection of different stories, different temporalities. The journey of man, or history, with its ‘overarching narrative’, is ‘actually the fact of intersecting with a multiplicity of other stories’ (Massey 2011). Space, insists Massey, is ‘political’. In contrast to Heath, she argues that ‘the very possibility of any serious recognition of multiplicity and heterogeneity’ depends not on time or history, but on ‘a recognition of spatiality’ (2005: 11).
I have suggested that the opposition that Massey critiques underpins not only gendered concepts of history and subjectivity but also theories of narrative and cinema. Massey herself, however, does not draw such connections. The stories with which she is concerned are the metanarratives of modernity - the ‘story of globalization’ (2005: 62), ‘the “story” of capitalist modernity’ (ibid.: 63), 'the story of “the West”' (ibid.: 10) – or the smaller narratives of historical change. Yet this struggle to articulate ‘a different temporality' (Morris 1998: xv) which is also a groundedness in space, place and the body, and to insist on a ‘multiplicity' of stories rather than a singular narrative, is one that has not only characterized feminist cultural and textual theory, despite its occasional forays into dreams of nomadism or cyborg identities. It is also, I think, a useful way of thinking about the kinds of cinema women might produce. If space, as Massey suggests, is conceptualized as stasis/surface/that which is to be travelled over, and gendered female, then, as Teresa de Lauretis (1984) and others have argued, to cross over space – and thus become the subject of narrative – is to be gendered – or to masquerade as - male. But to seek to imagine that journey otherwise, to engage with space, in all its complex, embodied temporality, will be to effect a very different relationship, one which must also change narrative: no longer ‘overarching’ and single, but ‘simultaneous’, plural, a ‘meeting up of histories’ (Massey 2005: 4).

Ann Hui is a director whose films are preoccupied by questions of space, and by the haunttings of memory. In A Simple Life she presents a story that is concerned with – to use the terms of Massey’s gendered opposition – “simple” reproduction, nostalgia, emotion, ... the body'. The transient and liminal spaces of its story of inter-generational love are not, however, the ‘ever-necessary, ever-submissive’ backdrops to the histories it recounts. They constitute its focus, and in presenting us, in Massey’s words again, with ‘the intersection of different stories, different temporalities’, they are, above all, political.

**Ann Hui’s cinema: Modernity and displacement**

Hui is a filmmaker whose work is identified with a specifically Hong Kong cultural and cinematic history. Born in Manchuria, the daughter of a Chinese father and Japanese mother, and moving to Hong Kong at the age of five, she studied English and
comparative literature in Hong Kong, and filmmaking at the London Film School, before beginning her career as a television documentary maker in Hong Kong in the late 1970s. For Elaine Yee Lin Ho, her life and work are paradigmatic: they ‘inscribe the transitional history of Hong Kong cinema’ (2001: 162, my italics), a history that both depicts and embodies a rapid transition to modernity characterized by accelerated urbanization, a sense of hybridity and dislocation, and a Westernized and increasingly technologized corporate culture. If she is viewed as paradigmatic chronicler of Hong Kong’s modernity, however – many of her films focus on periods of its twentieth century history – she is also seen as its critic: her films, writes Ho, attempt to ‘distance, dislocate, and disrupt the corporate push toward economic success, Western lifestyles, and the technology that characterizes Hong Kong’s modernity’ (ibid.: 163). Hong Kong itself has been viewed as a place whose rapid process of urbanization has meant that its history ‘is inscribed in spatial relations’ - in the ‘jostling anachronisms and spatial juxtapositions that are seen on every street’ (Abbas 2006: 81). Ann Hui’s cinematic rendering of its history provides a specifically gendered interrogation of that space. Her protagonists, like those of other Hong Kong filmmakers, are displaced, dislocated, marginal, but as women, their marginality is also to a sense of history written as overarching narrative of colonial conflict, nationalist uprising, or modernist progress. Their stories are at odds with the historical narratives on whose margins they exist, often glimpsed in fragments through the male narrators through whom they are told. The films’ focus on the temporality of the everyday takes us into cramped and makeshift spaces of the private and domestic that resist the kind of allegorical reading – in which character and narrative are seen to stand in for Hong Kong and its history – that is so common in writing on Hong Kong cinema.

**Political and personal**

Hui’s films have been seen as falling into two groups: political works and personal stories (Yau 2007: 122). *A Simple Life* (2011), her twenty-sixth film, would seem to fall firmly into the second group. Western reviewers saw it as one of Hui’s ‘low-key dramas about women’s lives’ (Clarke 2012), a story drawn from real events, with ‘a tonic flavor of the everyday’ (Saltz 2012), a portrait ‘of two good people’ painted ‘in gentle humanist terms’ (Ebert 2012), ‘suffused with [a] gentle, unforced humanity’ (Chang 2011). Yet the distinction between these groups of films, as both Ka-Fai Yau and Patricia Brett Erens
have suggested, is not quite so straightforward as it seems. In *Boat People* (1981), set in post-revolutionary Vietnam, and one of Hui’s most ‘political’ films, the film’s human centre is Cam Nuong (Season Ma), a fourteen year-old girl whose marginal existence reveals the realities of life in Danang, and whose gaze both challenges and evades the camera of photographer Akutagawa (George Lam), through whose search for a visual ‘truth’ the film is narrated. Conversely, *The Postmodern Life of My Aunt* (2006), like *A Simple Life* one of Hui’s ‘low-key dramas about women’s lives’, has also been seen as an investigation of the ‘divided, incoherent and fragmented’ nature of post-socialist China (Leung 2014: 849). Here, too, the film’s protagonist is a woman whose story seems always slightly off-centre, a marginal figure within both familial and national structures who is often viewed, as the title suggests, through the perspective of others. What connects the two, and other films such as *The Golden Era* (2014) and *Our Time will Come* (2017) is a focus on a woman whose story is framed by male characters: an elusive figure who struggles to emerge from their constructions and whose life is lived in the interstices of the more dominant historical narratives that they embody. Only in the autobiographical *Song of the Exile* (1990) is the story voiced through a female character.

This doubleness of Hui’s films has been identified with an increasingly feminist consciousness by a number of critics (Erens 2000a, Ho 2001, Yue 2010). For Ho, for example, Hui’s female characters, ‘in their subjective and social estrangement’, both mark and are displaced within Hong Kong's rapid historical shifts: their stories, ‘marginalized, repressed and rendered invisible by the city's modernity’ (2001: 173, 169), serve to interrogate and critique its progressivist myths. In the case of *A Simple Life*, then, it is perhaps not surprising that whilst reviewers focused on the film’s central relationship, with its ‘rhythms of shared routine and intimacy’ (Saltz 2012), one critic could also suggest a comparison with that most feminist of interrogations of the domestic everyday, Chantal Akerman’s (1975) *Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* (Clarke 2012).

*A Simple Life*

*A Simple Life* tells the story of the developing relationship between middle-aged and unmarried Hong Kong film producer Roger Leung (Andy Lau) and Ah Tao (Deanie Ip),
the maid who has served his family for sixty years but who, following a stroke, insists on retiring to a care home. We follow their increasing closeness until her death after a second stroke, two years later. The film was based, as the film’s publicity material emphasised, on producer Roger Lee’s own experiences, and Lee co-wrote the script as well as producing. Publicity material also focused on the existing relationship between Hui and her two central actors, and between Ip and Lau, who is Ip’s godson. When, in the ’behind the Scenes’ DVD ’Extra’, Ip talks of this relationship (’He’s forever a kid in my eyes’, but ’he’s now a successful businessman and actor’), it is unclear whether she is referring to that depicted in the film or to her own with Lau. The film, then, charts an inter-generational love story, but one that is uncomfortable and never fully acknowledged. It is a relationship that for some reviewers had ’troubling undercurrents’ (Sachs 2011). Its protagonists, they pointed out, ’aren’t married or lovers, but servant and master’ (Saltz 2012); theirs is not a relationship of ’romantic love’ (Sachs 2012). Like many of the relationships in Hui’s films, it is outside the bounds of ’proper’ familial or romantic relations, anachronistic and uneasy in its combination of distance and intensity. When, in order to render it comprehensible, Roger at various points in the film claims to be Ah Tao’s godson or nephew, the pretence only serves to point up the relationship’s inadmissibility.

It is a relationship whose marginality is further emphasised by its unfolding not in places that are private and intimate but in transitory public spaces: cafés, parks, and the liminal public areas of the care home and hospital to which we see Ah Tao admitted. It is also one in which intimate touch is almost absent: ’I found myself waiting for a hug that never came’, commented one reviewer (Ebert 2012). Instead, food replaces touch as the agent and language of (given, refused, or withdrawn) sensual contact. At the beginning of the film a series of scenes define the relationship before Ah Tao’s stroke through the rituals of choosing, cooking and consuming food. We see the time and care with which Ah Tao buys, prepares and presents to Roger’s critical gaze the dishes that comprise his meal, and the automatic way in which, hearing her steps behind him at the table, he simply extends a hand to receive the bowl of rice that he knows she will hand to him. At the film’s close it is the absence of such exchange that we see marked. Roger’s meal is now a take-away bowl of noodles, eaten alone in a hospital corridor.
A Simple Life gives us the story of Ah Tao’s decline and death that lies between these scenes, told, as in many of Hui’s films with a female protagonist, through the recollections of a central male character, here Roger. It is his memories that constitute the extended flashback that is the film; his voice-over, beginning the story with his own birth (‘Ah Tao was already with my family when I was born’), that we hear at its start. It is a story, however, that is also a recapitulation of the history of Hong Kong. Ah Tao’s life has encompassed its feudal background, the Japanese invasion, a rapid modernisation which replaced Chinese maids with overseas workers, and a newly wealthy diasporic middle-class who move freely between Hong Kong, China and the USA. Yet the public history that has been so central a preoccupation of Hong Kong cinema is glimpsed only on the film’s periphery, and it is on the repeated interruption of Roger’s linear narrative and its apparent transparency that it focuses. Its scenes are fragmented, circular, and often filmed with an intimacy and closeness that can seem to approximate touch. What we see are the marginal and fleeting spaces of the everyday, and the detail and sensual specificity of those spaces. Roger is shown to be an authoritative and financially powerful player in the transnational film world that he inhabits, a figure at ease in Hong Kong’s global capitalist present. But if he is frequently in motion, traversing the spaces of that transnational world, the camera does not invite us to look with him to a destination and purpose beyond; instead we must pause and look at. As the film develops, it is Ah Tao that increasingly provides its sense of movement, but it is always a movement in place.

The film opens with a wide shot of one of its many transitional spaces, a deserted railway platform. The image that follows, of Roger sitting in the station’s waiting-room, hunched and alone, hugging his rucksack to his chest like a child, is filmed through the glass of one of the room’s windows. The effect is to render him insubstantial, lost within the blank space of the institutional room, with its banks of empty chairs, and the reflections of spectral passers-by and the black bars of metal railings into which it seems to dissolve. As the camera cuts inside, he is positioned at the extreme edge of the frame, seated in front and to the left of a vast reproduction of a Chinese water painting that dominates the shot. This, the nostalgic fantasy of a past China, is an institutional image that we will see again towards the end of the film, where it provides the backcloth to the orchestrated photograph of the reunion of Roger’s family. Now, we
follow Roger, a solitary figure throughout, as he boards his train and gazes, apparently unseeing, at the bleak coastal landscape that it crosses. As we hear his voice-over, it has a curiously formal quality, precise and distanced. It is, we later realise, not an internal monologue but an extract from his funeral oration for Ah Tao.

In the flashback scenes that follow we see the domestic routines of Ah Tao and Roger before her stroke, as she shops in the market, object of both affection and practical jokes for its stallholders, and cooks for Roger. For him, the domestic space of his flat is clearly a temporary retreat. As so often in the film, he is preparing to leave, and we watch his meticulous and self-absorbed preparations. But he dominates its space. As he silently eats the meal she has prepared, we view him centre-frame, filling the shot. He does not speak to or look at her as she hands him the food whose preparation is her life. When the focus shifts to Ah Tao, she is filmed through the doorway of the tiny kitchen, squeezed into the background of a frame whose foreground Roger occupies. On his return from a business trip to Beijing, we view her again through the kitchen doorway: what fills the frame are walls and door; as she caresses the cat, her body half-obliterated by the kitchen door, she occupies the same amount of frame space as the washing machine. A little later, after her stroke, we see them in the hospital. He is once again self-absorbed, turned away from her and preoccupied with his mobile phone, too far away from her bed for the camera to capture them in a single shot.

This, then, is a relationship of master and servant, oddly formal and distanced despite the confined domestic space in which it is enacted. That it is also a relationship of love on Ah Tao’s part is evident from the sensuous detail of the food that we see her preparing, the camera capturing the colour, texture and sounds of the contents of the sizzling wok. This intimacy of detail and use of blocked, cramped shots are contrasted, in the remainder of the film’s opening scenes, with the world of transnational film production that Roger occupies with such ease. The scenes of his financial meeting in Beijing, with the representative of a proposed film’s Chinese backers and its directors – played, as ‘Director Tsui’ and ‘Director Hung’, by Tsui Hark and Sammo Hung – take place in expansive, ultra-modern malls and offices. It is a world that is capitalist and patriarchal – Roger’s young, female assistant hovers in the corridor outside the production company’s vast offices during the meeting – and focused on size and money. Tsui demands a larger set, doubled lights and crew, and a bigger budget. Its victors are
those who can win and control the money. Its creativity is self-proclaimed – ‘Shooting a film is like giving birth’, asserts Tsui – but hollow. Beneath the larger sets and increased budget, the films produced, admits Roger later, aren’t good. Above all, however, it is a world of performance: the performance of a romanticised and heroic Chinese history in the films produced (Roger’s film will be yet another version of the epic war drama, *The Three Kingdoms*), and the blustering, noisy performance of Roger and the directors to secure the money.

Two further points about this world are worth noting. One is that if Roger’s feudal relationship with Ah Tao has in one sense infantilized him – he is incapable of the simplest of domestic tasks – it also renders him perfectly able to succeed in this world of global capitalism. There is continuity, not contradiction, between these two realms of male privilege. The second is that the attributes of Roger’s world of film production run right through the layers of Hong Kong society, and Roger is known, and comfortable, at all these levels. The care home in which he will place Ah Tao is owned, he finds, by an old friend, Grasshopper. Here, too, the shiny foyer masks the reality: in this case of stinking toilets and the temporary cubicles that are the residents’ ‘rooms’. Here, too, the primary concern is money: ‘Before you know it, we’ll outnumber convenience stores’, boasts Grasshopper of his expanding empire of care homes. Here, too, China’s history is a matter of hollow performance, in this case by the group who arrive at the care home, complete with singer and camera crew, to celebrate the mid-Autumn or Moon Festival. They distribute traditional moon cakes to the residents but then, filming over, take them back ready for the next performance. The cakes are, says, one of the group, not gifts but ‘just props’. Roger, we find, is an old friend of the manager of this group, too. But Grasshopper’s empire also extends in other directions. It is on him that Roger calls when he later needs a group of thugs to evict a tenant in one of the poorest areas of Hong Kong, so that the flat can be prepared, without her knowledge, for Ah Tao’s final years. ‘No need for death defying stunts’, comments a satisfied Grasshopper to Roger as his men complete their task through the threat of violence alone. The aside reminds us not only of the film that Roger is making but also of Lau’s own status as action star of such blockbusters. Roger, with no sign of compassion for the evicted man, smiles and pays Grasshopper’s men.

**Space and time**
If, then, other films of Ann Hui set the everyday lives of their female protagonists against the vast sweep of official histories, reversing our customary focus, in *A Simple Life* this history is doubly absent: not only peripheral to the film’s narrative but a matter of performance and myth – the fantasized construction of a self-aggrandizing transnational cinema whose central concern is power and money. Like Sally Potter in *The Tango Lesson* (1997), Hui lets us glimpse at the film’s margins the film she is *not* making, whilst the film she does make centres on the spaces that it would render invisible.

In the first instance these are the spaces of the care home. Liminal spaces, they are neither public nor private – the residents, indeed, have no privacy. Many of the scenes take place in the home’s foyer, the threshold space just inside its glass doors. Neither wholly inside nor outside, this is a place for eating and mah-jong playing, a space of waiting and watching as fellow residents are moved in or out and visitors arrive or, more often, fail to arrive. It is the loss of human dignity of the home’s residents that strikes us first: they are fed in line, with a grey and unsavoury slop; they grumble about misplaced teeth and stolen possessions; their rooms have no doors. Outside, a low-angle exterior shot, apparently filmed from the doors of the building, shows us a bleak line of decaying concrete apartment blocks against the sky: an image of overcrowding and isolation. When, later in the film, at the time of the Spring Festival, we finally see a series of far more conventional shots of the Hong Kong skyline, the night sky lit up with exploding fireworks above celebratory crowds, the camera pulls back to show us the television set on which they are being displayed. This, too, is a constructed spectacle, and Ah Tao is watching alone.

Yet these marginal and indeterminate spaces are also the site of unexpected warmth and beauty, and of intersecting stories that we are allowed to glimpse but do not wholly discover. As Ah Tao wanders the corridors of the care home at night, early in her stay, she comes across a scene of tenderness between the most mobile and rebellious of its residents, Uncle Kin, and a confused, wheelchair-bound old woman whom he carefully steers back into the lit space of the foyer. Following them, Ah Tao discovers there a scene of t’ai chi being practised by a group of residents whose movements possess an unexpected grace and beauty. Later this space is the scene of laughter and dancing, as well as of pain and loss. Ah Tao is welcomed and receives gifts from its poorest
residents. Recovering from her stroke, she begins in turn to offer warmth and support to those who are most isolated and helpless. As she sits and waits for Roger’s visits we hear snatches of the histories of the home’s occupants, and glimpse for a moment the loneliness not only of its residents but of its supervisor, Ms Choi. Alone together at the time of the Spring Festival, she tells Ah Tao about the oldest of the home’s residents, the wheelchair bound old woman, abandoned by her family when they emigrated twenty years earlier. When Ah Tao asks about her own life, however, Choi’s face remains closed, and she painfully withholds her story.

An impossible relationship

It is in this context that the relationship between Roger and Ah Tao develops. It is initially one of duty on his part – we later learn that she nursed him after a heart operation a few years earlier. Now, he will pay for all her care but also ensure that he gets the best possible deal from Grasshopper; his command of the financial details of the home’s operation contrasts with his vagueness about Ah Tao’s age and life, But it gradually becomes one of a never quite acknowledged love. On Ah Tao’s part, her insistence after her stroke that she wants to retire and ‘live in an old people’s home’ seems born of self-sacrifice. ‘You get one stroke, you get another’, she says when Roger informs her that she is likely to recover up to 80% of her movement, and though she insists that such a retirement is what she wants, the sideways flicker of her eyes as she says it belies her words. In his early visits to the home Roger is as dominant, and as evasive, as he was earlier. His staccato list of items he might bring for her is spoken as he busies himself in tidying her cubicle, never looking at her. When she suggests that he might bring her some marinated tofu, his response is defensive: ‘You don’t like the food here? … If you haven’t had [tofu], you don’t need it’.

As it develops, their relationship, itself always marginal and unnameable (‘[Is he] your son? … Godson?’), is itself played out in transitional and marginal spaces, outside the linear trajectory of Roger’s life. As it acquires its own rhythms and language, these are the cyclical rhythms and the language of Ah Tao’s life, the language of food. We see them, then, in the public spaces of the care home, in cafés and in a small park to which they pay repeated visits. As they share memories, they are of food. ‘The fish is not bad’, she says in the café, ‘but the sauce is too salty’. ‘Next time’, he responds, ‘we’ll bring your
own soy sauce. You were always so fussy, you spoiled the rest of us’. It is a language that Roger only gradually, and imperfectly, acquires, but it is central to Ah Tao's world. Towards the end of her life she will sum up its temporality in a conscious re-working of the verse from Ecclesiastes; there is, she says, ‘a time for steaming melons and a time for salted eggs’.

Two scenes are central in this development. The first comes when Roger takes Ah Tao back to the flat they have shared. He has now cooked for her (she is critical of his efforts) and brought back for her visit the cat that was her companion. As they attempt to sort through her few possessions, all of them implements of her caring role (a sewing machine, a rice cooker, casserole dishes), they open a wooden trunk of mementos. These are objects that signify her memories, but they are all memories of him. In this return to the apartment, the past is recalled, but it is also re-made. The pair now sit close together in the kitchen, touching, and holding between them the photograph she uncovers of the two of them, he as a child, she as a young woman. Photographs, as Annette Kuhn writes, can constrain our memory, funnelling it into conventional channels. But they can also do the reverse, ‘questioning identities and memories and generating new ones’, offering pasts that ‘reach into the present’ (2000: 183-4). There is no separation between these two characters now, and no splitting or blocking of the cinematic frame. Her face fills the screen as she gazes at the photograph; he is behind her, gazing not at the photo but at her face. Yet what for her seems to be pure happiness as past and present merge is for him more painful. What he appears to recognize now as love remains unnameable, outside and in transgression of the familial relationships that these mementos both displace and, more subtly, reinforce.

The second scene comes shortly afterwards, at the mid-point of the film. Ah Tao has regained her strength and mobility, so that as the scene begins we see her exercising alone in the park she has visited with Roger. As she exercises, a wedding party walk past, ignoring her, and she gazes after them. Their exit coincides with Roger's entrance. ‘Thinking of getting married?’ he asks her. The theme of marriage has already been suggested in the episodic series of scenes that has preceded this sequence, and what now ensues is a display of gentle flirtation, as he teases her about past suitors and she him about previous girlfriends. It is clear that for both of them this relationship is the most important one in their lives. For Roger this is another transient moment, outside
the mainstream of his life – he is carrying his customary rucksack, poised once again to leave – but within it, it is Ah Tao who is mobile, active, and assertive, moving back and forth across the small square, touching and even hitting him as he teases, whilst he sits facing her, leaning in towards her, absorbed. Recounting her rejection of her suitors, her condemnation is, as ever, spoken in the language of food. They were, she pronounces, ‘fishy’, a term that will become a private term of disapproval between them.

In the scenes that follow, we see both Roger’s attempts to bestow on Ah Tao an identity that will make her, and their relationship, legible in the world that he inhabits, and its impossibility. He takes her to the premiere of his latest film, introducing her as his ‘aunt’. As she waits for his arrival, we see her in front of a mirror, applying lipstick and putting on rings that appear to be new. Her hair is styled and she is smartly dressed. When Roger arrives and gives her his arm, she comments, ‘Handsome feller.’ ‘Gorgeous girl’, he replies. The scenes of the premiere itself are studded with directors, producers and actors from The Hong Kong film world. ‘He’s a very famous director’, says Roger of Ninh Hao, to whose smoking Ah Tao has objected; ‘Let me introduce you. This is my aunt’. As Roger and Ah Tao walk down the street afterwards, arms linked, away from the luxury, lights, and shiny reflective surfaces, we see their intimacy. But we also hear that the film was not, as Roger admits, ‘good’, and that she fell asleep during it. This too, then, has been a performance, and we have already seen that it is unsustainable, as Roger’s mother enters the film, and with her the claims of a proper familial, social, and historical order.

Returning briefly to Hong Kong from the US, Roger’s mother takes over his apartment – he sleeps on the sofa and is instructed to turn off the television - and patronises Ah Tao, firmly reinstating her status as servant. Although Ah Tao momentarily reasserts her authority, and the centrality of her relationship with Roger – the birds’ nests soup brought by Roger’s mother is, she pronounces to his delight, ‘fishy’ - Roger is increasingly reclaimed by a world in which he functions efficiently but without intimacy or ease. His mother arranges Ah Tao’s future without reference to Ah Tao’s or Roger’s wishes. It is she who insists that the long tenanted run-down apartment is a more appropriate (and cheaper) setting for Ah Tao’s final days, but Roger does not demur. In the care home, meanwhile, residents die or are removed. As a weeping daughter is escorted from the foyer, Ah Tao gazes after her, and Roger at Ah Tao; the brief flowering
of this impossible relationship is already ending. Ah Tao will shortly be readmitted to hospital.

A final public scene punctuates the story of Ah Tao’s decline. Roger’s extended family visits Hong Kong to celebrate the first birthday of his great-nephew, son of Roger’s nephew and his English-speaking Korean wife. Ah Tao, now in a wheelchair, is invited to the celebrations in a plush hotel. Against the intimacy of the photograph discovered by Ah Tao and Roger, with its power to evoke both a newly recovered fullness of relationship and, simultaneously, a sense of unspoken loss, this scene provides us with two very different public photographic images. The first is the more immediately jarring, because it suggests another role that Roger plays that has been barely visible in the film. Informed that it is customary for a Korean child to be presented with several symbolic gifts, from which it will choose its future path, he holds up, grinning, a centrefold image of scantily dressed models for the boy’s gaze. But the more telling image is the one that closes the scene. Against the background of a reproduction of a Chinese water painting like the one we saw at the start of the film, the several generations of this successful transnational Hong Kong family pose, facing us, for their ‘group photo’. The photograph will show Ah Tao smiling at its centre, but we have seen that she is a belated addition, inserted with difficulty into the group by Roger after it has already formed for the camera.

The later scenes of the film show Ah Tao’s rapid deterioration. The pair return to the small public square of their earlier flirtatious meeting, but this time Ah Tao is buckled into a wheelchair, her body twitching and her head lolling to one side. Roger continues to tease (‘Are you putting on weight?’) and she to talk of food – ‘Roast goose. I want to have roast goose’ – but her words are repetitive and barely distinguishable. Roger turns his back on her not, this time, to avoid her but to hide his pain. In the hospital, faced with her imminent death, he must decide whether to discontinue treatment. In another cramped institutional space, it is now Roger who is squeezed into doorways and corridors, the frame split by a vertical pillar and our view of him blocked by the bank of lockers that takes up half the shot. Outside the windows we can see the movement of a city in which life continues as usual. In this last return to the hospital, however, as Roger sits by her bed he puts off a caller and sits holding her hand, before finally, tenderly, smoothing back her hair and making sure that her feet are warm.
Yet at the end of his final visit Roger resumes his public life. He authorizes the ending of any treatment for Ah Tao, calls his assistant to tell her that he’ll stick to his planned schedule, and informs the doctor that if Ah Tao dies whilst he is away he will complete the paperwork on his return. Her funeral is formal and impersonal, the only emotion provided not by Roger but by the unauthorised entrance of the reprobate Uncle Kin. This time, we realise, when we watched Kin, as so often, borrowing money, it was not to pay for prostitutes, as we saw him do earlier, but in order to be able to place a small bunch of white roses on Ah Tao’s coffin. At the end of the service Roger resumes his life of constant journeying. The film’s close sees him once more with rucksack on his back, leaving the car park below his apartment block. He climbs the external stairs and, after pausing to glance up, proceeds to open his front door.

A simultaneity of stories

Time and history, it seems, have been restored. A relationship that interrupted ‘change, movement, history, dynamism’, and blurred temporal boundaries, mixing Hong Kong’s past and present, the feudal and the familial, ownership and love, has closed. It was a relationship, indeed, that was strictly speaking impossible: not only anachronistic but a-temporal, already over before the film began, perhaps a figment of Roger’s nostalgic longing. Yet this is not quite the film’s ending. As Roger returns to his apartment in this repetition of a much earlier scene, the film cuts to a shot of Ah Tao on its balcony, watching for his return. As he enters the now dark apartment we again see her, listening for his entrance from behind the kitchen door. We do not know, then, whether this is the end of the film or its beginning, the retelling of its opening with Ah Tao and her love now at its centre or a haunting of the film’s – and Roger’s - present by memories, or fantasies, of its past. We remember perhaps the sense of his insubstantiality without her at its opening. The final shot is of the memory text at the film’s centre: the photograph of Roger as an infant and the young woman Ah Tao who holds him.

Writing of the difference between autobiography and memory texts, Kuhn argues that in autobiography, ‘[t]he present, the time of writing, is set up at the outset as the goal towards which the story will inexorably direct itself’ (2000: 180). In the memory text, however, time is neither purposive nor fully continuous and sequential. Instead, ‘events are somehow pulled out of a linear time-frame’, cyclical rather than sequential, and we
find ‘an insistence on [the primacy of] place’ (ibid.: 188, 190, original emphasis). In this sense, then, *A Simple Life* can itself be seen as a memory text, both a staging of memory and haunted by a further layer of fragmentary memories in which shared events are recalled – the buying of a watermelon, the cooking of a meal – but remain unanchored in a linear story. Patricia Brett Erens makes a similar argument about Hui’s *Song of the Exile* (1990) which, she argues, is not an autobiography but a specifically female *memoir*: a text which does not construct a unified subjectivity but refracts that subjectivity through the views of others and through ‘the “invisible presences” that are the most profound determinants of subjectivity’. Such a memoir constitutes, she writes, ‘a kind of countermemory’ (2000b: 55).

But *this* memory text is also political. The relationship that it charts, whether lived and only belatedly understood or reimagined and restaged through memory, is not only unnameable and transgressive, mixing flirtation and filial love, and claiming for itself the intensity and closeness that should properly belong within familial or romantic bonds. In its emphasis on space and place, on the sensuous detail of food and the rhythms of everyday life, it also constitutes an interruption of the relentless movement of capital and people that is Hong Kong’s history, and the self-serving re-writing of that history as myth that is its present. The patriarchal world of power and money that Roger inhabits is not overthrown, and we can have no doubts about either his full implication in that world or his continuing occupation of it. But Hui’s film, which ‘suspend[s] the course of time and ... contribute[s] to spreading the narrative in space’ (Genette 1982: 136), also comments on that world and the history it constructs.

This, then, is a film in which time, and history, are felt not as driving forces but as pressures at its edges. Its focus is instead on small, transient and liminal spaces, on the cyclical rhythms of the everyday, and on the ways in which, beyond the grand sweep of history, the past may exist in a relation of simultaneity with the present. Through this interruption of Roger’s life and all that it represents Ah Tao comes slowly into focus and with her not only a history of love and mutual dependence that Roger has repressed but also that which Hong Kong’s relentless push to modernity renders invisible. In the spaces that we now must look at, too, we glimpse a host of other stories with which that of Ah Tao and Roger intersect. In her reconceptualization of space, Doreen Massey asks what it might mean if we ‘refuse to convene space into time’ and think instead of ‘a
meeting-up of histories’, of ‘interrelations’ and ‘embedded practices’ (2005: 5, 9-10). This, she insists, is a political question about how we conceive of history and its accustomed narrative of ‘the inevitability of ... neoliberal capitalist globalisation’ (ibid.: 4). It is also a gendered question. With its feeling of a suspension of time and time’s ‘overarching narrative’, A Simple Life takes us into this other space and makes visible the lives and relationships that this dominant narrative renders impossible.
References


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**Filmography**

*Boat People.* Dir. Ann Hui, 1981

Jeanne Dielman, 23 Quai de Commerce, 1080. Dir. Chantal Akerman, 1975
Our Time will Come. Dir. Ann Hui, 2017
Song of the Exile. Dir. Ann Hui, 1990
The Tango Lesson. Dir. Sally Potter, 1997
Notes


2 Or ‘visual pleasure’, as it is termed in Laura Mulvey’s (1989/1975) critique of Genette’s gendered opposition as it translates into cinema.

3 The term ‘women’s cinema’, as Patricia White has recently observed (2015: 3–4), remains a contested term. In a ‘post-feminist cultural climate’, she writes, it is often identified with the ‘industry-produced chick flicks’, films for women, which are the successors to the ‘women’s films’ (Doane 1987) of the 1940s. Like White, and like Alison Butler (2002), I use it here in the sense first introduced by Claire Johnston in 1973, to refer to films made – directed, and with a visible signature – by women.

4 For a fuller discussion of this, see my *What if I Had Been the Hero?* (2012) and *Spaces of Women’s Cinema* (2019).

5 Patricia Brett Erens (2000a and b) adds a third group: genre films.

6 ‘Another version?’ comments Grasshopper, when told of the subject of Roger’s film; ‘There’ve been so many’. The ‘Three Kingdoms’ was the tripartite division of China during the Han and Jin Dynasties. 2008 had seen two film versions of the story, one of which, *Three Kingdoms: Resurrection of the Dragon*, had a budget of US$25 million and a reputed 40,000 extras, and starred Andy Lau.

7 Lau began his acting career as an action hero and continues to star in such roles.

8 In these scenes, we see Ah Tao interview potential successors as Roger’s maid, none of whom is willing to meet her requirements. After the final applicant has left, her vacant seat is occupied by Ms Choi who asks, direct to camera, ‘Picking a wife for Roger?’