The Postnational and the Aesthetics of the Spectral:
Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Flight of the Red Balloon*

In critical discourses on post-Cold War world cinema, there is no term that has become more influential than the term transnational. The phrase 'from national to transnational' is now considered one of the best phrases to epitomise the change in the landscape of world cinema over the past two decades. But at this moment, when people are beginning to doubt the celebratory attitude toward transnationalism in the wake of global recession, we need to reassess the phrase to find if there is any missing link or any 'vanishing mediator' that we have neglected between this transition from national to transnational. This paper proposes the buried term 'postnational' as this vanishing mediator in order to theorise how this term enables us to understand the way in which contemporary world cinema can engage in our imagination of new communities characterized by alterity, openness, and incommensurability rather than by homogeneity, stability, and exclusion. To illustrate the potential of cinema for opening up ways to imagine such postnational communities, this paper closely examines *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007) directed by Hou Hsiao-hsien, focusing on how the aesthetics of the spectral is crucial to such an imagination. It should be noted that the film appears characterised as transnational in terms of both its contexts of production, circulation and reception, and its textual elements. My close reading of the film reveals, however, that the transnational approach to the film risks overlooking its other potentials in relation to our imagination of a postnational community.

The Postnational: Bare Life as Form-of-Life

Over the past decade, an increasing number of studies on world cinema have demonstrated how border-crossing movements in terms of production, circulation and reception are crucial to understanding world cinema, especially world cinema in the post-Cold War era. Indeed, this tendency of study complicates the understanding of the nation and national cinema, highlighting how national culture in general and the national cinema in particular can no longer be rigid or pure since they have increasingly been informed by border-crossing cultural flows including multinational co-productions, transnational remakes, and transnational stardom. Moreover, as opposed to the emphasis on the national, which has often been critiqued as homogeneous, territorialised or fixed, the emphasis on

the transnational draws our attention to new virtues such as mobility, heterogeneity, deterritorialisation and flexibility.

Despite these and other celebratory achievements and possibilities of the transnational perspective, however, I suspect that this perspective does not fully open the way for the potentials overlooked or blocked by the national. Rather, it tends to embrace only the selected potentials that current neoliberal capitalism makes profitable. In other words, it tends to condone the increasing tendency according to which transnational flow is regulated under the global neoliberal governmentality whereby, as Aihwa Ong notes, flexible transnational elites "claim citizenship-like entitlements and benefits, even at the expense of territorialized citizens" whereas "low-skill citizens and migrants [...] are constructed as excludable populations."[1] Consequently, the transnational perspective tends to ignore this new kind of wasted lives who are regarded as worthless and thus excluded from national security, but at the same time also excluded from the border-crossing flow because they appear valueless or even harmful from the perspective of transnational capital. These worthless lives include, but are not limited to, so called 'internally displaced persons' (IDPs), those who 'ha[ve] been forced to leave their homes' as a result of conflict, natural disasters or development projects, but 'remain within the borders of their own countries'[2] unlike exiles or refugees. But they are not simply exceptions to the rest of us who live 'normal' lives, and it should be noted that we are all virtually vulnerable to such abandonment as can be seen in the recent nuclear disaster in Japan. To foreground this limitation inherent to the transnational and to illuminate the excluded potentials, I propose to call attention to the term postnational.

Although it has not been very popular than the term transnational, the term postnational has been deployed in academia by critics such as Arjun Appadurai and Jürgen Habermas to designate emerging political or cultural phenomena or horizons that transcend the national boundary or cut across nation-states with the decline of the nation-state in the post-Cold war era.[3] And yet, these previous deployments of the term have some drawbacks, one of which is that as can be seen in Appadurai's use of the term, the term is often confused with other similar terms such as global or transnational. Another problem that should be noted concerns Habermas' understanding of the term. He proposes to understand the postnational as a global public sphere in which we can in principle lead to an agreement concerning any global issue through democratising communication beyond particular national interests. What is important to note here is his suggestion that sustaining such a global public sphere requires as a prerequisite constitutional norms or cooperative legislations that are to work at a global level. Hence, the postnational understood this way runs the risk of excluding non-normative phenomena or thoughts from consideration.[4]

To avoid these pitfalls, I argue, the term postnational not only needs to be redefined in terms of its temporal rather than spatial character, but also it needs to be redeployed so that it can involve any singular possibilities that cannot be captured either by

[1] Aihwa Ong, *Neoliberalism as Exception: Mutations in Citizenship and Sovereignty* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2006), p. 16.

[2] <http://www.idpguidingprinciples.org> [accessed June 25 2011].

[3] For Habermas's and Appadurai's understandings of the postnational, see chapter 4 of Jürgen Habermas, *The Postnational Constellation: Political Essays*, trans. by Max Pensky (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2001) and Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996), pp. 164-72.

[4] Pheng Cheah pertinently draws our attention to the normative and thus exclusive character of Habermas' notion of the postnational. See chapter 2 of Pheng Cheah, *Inhuman Conditions: On Cosmopolitanism and Human Rights* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006).

national or by global norms, rules, or laws. My understanding of the term is greatly indebted to Agamben's discussion of bare life, especially in his book *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life*. The postnational, I propose, refers to the very dimension of what Agamben terms 'bare life' that emerges in the state of exception or emergency, such as the state of siege, in which state law is suspended. By the term bare life or *homo sacer* Agamben means 'life that may be killed but not sacrificed.'[5] As this definition indicates, and Agamben also remarks, the quintessential example of bare life is the concentration camp inmate, who resides outside the applicability of state law and thus whose life and death do not have any meaning or value whatsoever. From this perspective, however, bare life seems to be conceived only in negative terms. Indeed, bare life grasped this way, Agamben notes, is not entirely indifferent to state law, but rather maintains a relation of ban or abandonment with state law whereby bare life is implicated in the sphere of state law through its 'inclusive exclusion.'[6] As the "Final Solution" and any other cases of sovereign violence illustrate, then, bare life here could not be said to embody the postnational given that it is still understood to be at the mercy of national sovereignty.

But there is a different aspect of bare life that we need to highlight in order to illuminate the postnational. This positive potential of bare life, Agamben proposes, is no longer implicated within state law through the relation of ban, but rather emerges in 'non-relation' to state law. To put it another way, unlike the aspect of bare life captured by state law as its exception, this new aspect of bare life, or 'form-of-life' in Agamben's vocabulary emerges as an indeterminate remnant or excess of the process of being captured by state law.[7] In this regard, rather than being deemed meaningless or valueless from state law's perspective, bare life as form-of-life involves a multiplicity of singularities that exceed state law's as well as any global law's processes of signification or valorisation. If the term the postnational means 'exceeding all the possibilities allowed by the nation-state including an inclusive exclusion by state law,' it is best theorised as bare life as form-of-life.

Postnational Communities and the Spectral

Although bare life as form-of-life emerges absolutely outside the nation-state, it does not imply that bare lives have no potential to form a community. Rather, it is possible to imagine a radically different, postnational community that consists of bare lives. Immediately after the collapse of the actually existing socialist regimes, critics have proposed alternative notions of community grounded on alterity, incommensurability and openness as opposed to the old notions of community such as the nation-state or the Soviet Union founded on a body of shared features or a common ideal. Agamben, among others, proposes an alternative notion of community grounded not on any specific identity, but on unconditional belonging. He proposes a community of whatever singularities, which 'has no identity, [which] is not determinate with respect to a concept, but [which is neither] simply indeterminate, rather [which] is determined only through its relation [...] to the totality of its

[5] Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer: Sovereign Power and Bare Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University press, 1998), p. 83.

[6] For more details about law's inclusive exclusion of bare life, see Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 15-29.

[7] For the detailed account of the notion of bare life understood as form-of-life, see Agamben, *Homo Sacer*, p. 54-62.

possibilities.'[8] In other words, as he paraphrases, the community of whatever singularities is 'mediated not by any condition of belonging, nor by the simple absence of conditions, but by belonging itself.'[9] Significantly enough, his notion of community requires as the condition of its possibility a medium by means of which beings acquire a sense of belonging without losing their singularities. The first and foremost point about this notion is that a community is less a collective of identical or similar beings than a collective of singularities that have nothing specific in common. This means that a community has potential for involving within itself something radically other or the absolute outside. In this regard, this notion of community is an answer to the question of how singular beings as bare lives can form a postnational community. Another important point about Agamben's notion of community is that he implies the role of media in forming such a community. But it is Derrida's and Stiegler's ideas about spectrality that provide more precise understanding of the relationship between a medium and a community.

Indeed, Derrida's theory of spectrality allows us to understand the precise relationship between mediated perception and the community predicated on alterity or incommensurability. It should also be noted that both Derrida and Stiegler highlight the crucial role of photographic/cinematic/electronic media technology in producing the spectral.[10] In fact, the notion that the communicability of the medium is crucial to our imagination of a community is not a new idea. Benedict Anderson already proposed that media technology such as the newspaper and the novel enables one to develop a sense of national community from other people one has never met. As one comes to know about the lives of others through those media, one becomes acquainted with them and develops a sense of commonality between one and others.[11] But as Derrida would have put it, one's experience of others through media does not necessarily lead to one imagining a national community grounded on homogeneity and commensurability, but it opens up the possibility that one might envision a postnational community characterized by incommensurability and alterity. To clarify the difference between these two, I want to call attention to Derrida's distinction between the spiritual and the spectral. In deconstructing Marx's *German Ideology*, Derrida writes:

> The production of the ghost, the constitution of the ghost effect is not simply a spiritualisation or even an autonomisation of spirit, idea, or thought, as happens par excellence in Hegelian idealism. No, once this autonomisation is effected, with the corresponding expropriation or alienation, and only then, the ghostly moment comes upon it, adds to it a supplementary dimension, one more simulacrum, alienation, or expropriation [...]. Once ideas or thoughts (Gedanke) are detached from their substratum, one engenders some ghost by giving them a body. Not by returning to the living body from which ideas and thoughts have been torn loose, but by incarnating the latter in another artifactual body, a prosthetic body, a ghost of spirit, one might say a ghost of the ghost.[12]

[8] Agamben, G. (1993). The Coming Community. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, , 1993), p. 67

[9] Ibid., p. 85.

[10] Jacques Derrida and Bernard Stiegler, *Echographies of Television* (Malden: Polity Press, 2002). Derrida is hesitant to use the term community because for him it presuppose commonality, 'a unity of languages, of cultural, ethnic, or religious horizons' [ibid, 66]. However, my understanding of postnational community, in as much as it is predicated on incommensurability or alterity, does not contradict his vision of the utopian social bond. And for the ways in which cinematic technology, among others, produces spectral images, see chapter 6 of Akira Mizuta Lippit, *Electric Animal: Towards a Rhetoric of Wildlife* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000) and Tom Cohen, *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies, Vol. 1* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005) and *Hitchcock's Cryptonymies, Vol. 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2005).

[11] Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1991).

[12] Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: the State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International* (New York: Routledge, 1994), p. 26.

To sum up what Derrida states, the spirit is an idea that, sublating (i.e. *Aufhebung* in its Hegelian sense) all the differences or oppositions between bodies, expresses that which is common to all the bodies whereas the spectre refers to a supplemental dimension of alterity added to the spirit through its reincarnation in an artifactual body. To be more precise, as an excess or supplement added to the spirit, the spectre erodes the unification of bodies that the spiritualisation process performs, and thereby enables bodies to feel their irreducible differences from one another. This distinction between the two terms clearly reveals how the mediated perception of others also enables one to develop a sense of postnational community distinct from that of the national community that Anderson discusses. Anderson claims that when media allow one to imagine a national community, such a community is created to substitute for religion in transforming 'contingency into meaning,'[13] that is, a multiplicity of bodies into a unified collective. Imagining a national community should, then, be understood as a spiritualisation process. In contrast, imagining a postnational community should be understood as a spectralisation process. The reason is because a postnational community, as I discussed, is formed by singular beings and this dimension of singularity is created by the spectralisation process.

[13] Anderson, *Imagined Communities,* p. 11.

Imagining Postnational Communities in Flight of the Red Balloon

[1] Flight of the Red Balloon,
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Hou Hsiao-hsien's films offer us one notable example among contemporary East Asian films that marks the shift from their concern with a national community to that with a postnational community. While Hou began to make so-called 'national' films financed by Taiwan national film companies including his own called 3H Productions, later beginning with the film *Good Men, Good Women* (1995) he transitioned to 'transnational' filmmaking involving various European and Asian film companies. During the period of his transnational filmmaking, he has often shot at locations outside of Taiwan such as Mainland China and Japan. The film Flight of the Red Balloon becomes

even more significant given that it is his first film that has ever been financed by European film companies and has even been shot in a European location that is Paris. What is even more notable is that the film deals with transnational life as its main subject matter although this kind of life has been included sporadically within his earlier 'national' films such as *A City of Sadness* (1989) and *The Puppetmaster* (1993).[14]

As in most of Hou's films, the storyline of *Flight of the Red Balloon* is quite simple if one considers only 'significant' events at the sacrifice of insignificant details. Song, a Chinese film student, begins to live with a Parisian family as a babysitter for the child, Simon. The latter has lived with his single mother, Suzanne (played by Juliette Binoche), who works dubbing Chinese puppet shows. Song, taking care of Simon, is making a remake of Albert Lamorisse's 1956 short film *The Red Balloon*, featuring Simon. Suzanne is having trouble with Marc, her tenant, who does not pay the rent while she waits for her daughter Louise, who lives in Brussels possibly with her father, to return. Last but not least, a strange red balloon floats and sometimes lingers around Simon and Song.

Significantly, the film portrays a Parisian life that is already characterised as transnational in many respects. Indeed, transnational cultural exchanges between China and France appear in the film in a variety of ways: that a Chinese woman works in a French family, that a French woman translates Chinese puppet shows, that a Chinese woman filmmaker makes a remake of a French film (that reflexively refers to Hou's situation), and so forth.

However, from the perspective of what I have discussed so far, the film is not simply reduced to a multifarious portrayal of transnational life. Indeed, mobilising different types of spectres, the film enables spectators to imagine postnational communities to come. One of the film's notable visual features is that it often creates doubles of people or objects utilising images reflected in mirrors or windows. It seems normal when both the actual source and its reflected image are simultaneously seen within the frame. But when only reflected images are seen within the frame, this cinematic experience begins to communicate a sense of otherness. For instance, in the scene where Song and Simon are walking in a street, what we see for the first few seconds are only their reflections in a cafe window even though after this short period of time their actual images appear within the frame due to a camera panning. During those few seconds we might get a sense that the reflected images of Song and Simon suddenly look unfamiliar to us even though these images ostensibly resemble their referents outside the frame. This antinomic feeling can be described as the feeling of "uncanniess" (*Unheimlichkeit* in German) Freud once wrote about, given that he defines the uncanny as "that class of the frightening which leads back to what is known of old and long familiar."[15] This dimension of unfamiliarity within the familiar is also the first and foremost feature of what Derrida terms spectre since as a supplementary dimension added to something, as we discussed, the spectre evokes a sense of alterity. Consequently, during those few seconds we see a spectralisation process emerge because

[14] Even when Hou addresses the colonial period of Taiwan in his earlier 'national' films such as *A City of Sadness* (1989) and *Puppetmaster* (1993), he often portrays an innocuous friendship between Taiwanese and Japanese without recourse to any antagonistic or condescending stance. This signals that Hou's so-called national films had already germs of postnational imaginations that his more recent transnational films are dedicated to.

[15] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud Vol. XVII*, trans. and ed. by James Strachey (London: The Hogarth Press, 1957), p. 220.

the reflected images add a sense of alterity to the otherwise ordinary perception of Song and Simon. Their spectral doubles enable us to feel as if Song and Simon became endowed with qualities other than what they are, say, qualities other than their national identities. Thus, through this spectral technique, we are given chances to imagine a postnational community of the singularities of Song and Simon over and above chances to see how a transnational relationship between them unfolds.

The film also provides several interesting instances of spectral sound images. Take, for example, the scene in which Suzanne is dubbing a Chinese traditional puppetry into French. During the first few seconds, we hear her vocal dubbing when only the Chinese puppet is within the frame while her visual image is outside the frame. Even though we see her visual image appear in the subsequent shot, during this time we do encounter another instance of spectralisation because it seems as if her voice, temporarily disembodied from her own body, became reincarnated in the puppet's body, an artifactual body. In Michel Chion's vocabulary this vocal spectre is an example of 'acousmêtre.' Chion defines this term as "a sound that is heard without its cause or source being seen."[16] When a voice becomes an acousmêtre in a film, Chion writes, it acquires a sense of otherness that cannot be attributed to its alleged source, as can be seen in many films such as Norman's dead mother's voice in *Psycho* (Hitchcock, 1960) or the unseen Mabuse's voice in *The Testament of Dr. Mabuse* (Lang, 1933). Moreover, in the disjointed juncture of the voice and the body in the scene we are discussing, we not only see a spectralisation of Suzan, but we also bear witness to a spectralisation of the puppet in the sense that the alleged voice of the puppet, disembodied from its body, becomes reincarnated into Suzan's spectral voice. In this regard, it is a mistake to think simply that the film illustrates a hybrid of Frenchness and Chineseness, or that it exemplifies the cross-border transition from Frenchness to Chineseness or vice versa. Rather, through this double spectralisation, not only does Suzanne potentially acquire a supplemental dimension irreducible to the alleged French national character, but also the puppet undergoes a similar metamorphosis. Hence, it is the postnationalisation process rather than the transnationalisation or multinationalisation process that can best describe the change occurring both to Suzanne and the puppet.

Last but not least, we also need to think about the status of the strange red balloon. Here we should also be very careful not to draw a hasty simple conclusion that the red balloon stands for the transnational exchange between Chineseness and Frenchness given that *Flight of the Red Balloon* is a transnational (Chinese or Chinese/French) remake of the French film, *The Red Balloon*. Just as Suzanne's spectral voice does with respect to the puppet, the red balloon during the process of disembodiment acquires an extra dimension of alterity that cannot be ascribed to a cultural feature of Chineseness or a combination of cultural features of Chineseness and Frenchness. Indeed, the balloon in Hou's film cannot be thought to have the quasi-anthropomorphic or magical character Lamorisse's film has, but rather looks ordinary.[17] But, even though it does not appear to have a purpose or intention, it nonetheless seems to have an unknown extra

[16] Michel Chion, *The Voice in Cinema, trans. by Claudia Gorbman* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999), p. 18.

[17] In comparing Lamorisse's and Hou's film in terms of the nature of the balloon, Sean Metzger and Olivia Khoo point out that the balloon in the former film is 'guided by the exigencies of chance" whereas that in the latter is "paced by non-events.'([Sean Metzger and Olivia Khoo, "Introduction," *Futures of Chinese Cinema*, ed. by Sean Metzger and Olivia Khoo (Chicago: Intellect, 2009), p. 15]). While their argument is not without pertinence, it does not precisely reflect the key characteristics of the two balloons. Unlike their assessment, the balloon in Lamorisse's film acts like a human being, thus implying necessity rather than chance whereas the one in Hou's looks ordinary but also haunted by an extra dimension of alterity.

dimension that cannot be attributed to any positive nature, as can be seen in the scenes in which it attracts Simon's attention or lingers around him without any explicit reason. Thus, from the Derridian perspective, if Lamorisse's balloon is understood as a spirit, the one in Hou's becomes a spectre, obtaining an extra dimension of otherness that cannot be reduced to any positive national character.

However, it is not only in the context of the production of the film that we can see the spectralisation of the red balloon. We can also see how it is spectralised within the film text itself in multiple ways. It is reincarnated, for example, in the one in the painting titled *Le ballon* by a Swiss painter named Felix Vallotton, in the one painted on the wall of a building on a street in Paris, and in the one appearing in Song's remake of Lamorisse's, and so forth. For the audience of the film, these multiple spectralisations not only amplify the visibility of the otherwise barely visible balloon, but also strengthen the feeling of postnational alterity about the balloon that otherwise would embody features of Frenchness, of Chineseness, or a hybrid of features of the two, evoking the national or transnational.

To reiterate, it is this aesthetics of the spectral that enables us to develop a sense of postnational community in the process of watching the film *Flight of the Red Balloon*. The imagination of national or transnational communities, in contrast, is accomplished through the aesthetics of the spiritual. Obviously, if we see the film through the lens of this aesthetics of the spiritual, we can be given opportunities to imagine a Chinese or a French national community or a Chinese/French transnational community. For instance, if we treat Suzanne and Song simply as representative of Frenchness and Chineseness respectively, we will have a chance to imagine a transnational community that can provide a link between Chineseness and Frenchness. But as we have discussed, once we call attention to a variety of spectral techniques deployed throughout the film, we will also have chances to imagine postnational communities in that we can envision other possible relationships or networks between characters without losing their singularities.

Conclusion: Towards a Postnational Perspective on Cinema

In sum, I proposed the term postnational to call our attention to those wasted lives excluded from both the national security and the transnational flow. As I suggested in my definition of the postnational as bare life as form-of-life, those postnational lives are not exceptional but potentially applicable to anyone or 'whatever singularities'. In this way, the term postnational involves a new notion of community characterized by alterity, incommensurability and openness, which is radically different from the old notion of national community based on a shared trait or ideal. The second important point I made is that a postnational community can be imagined through the spectrality of media. As I illustrated in a close reading of the film *Flight of the Red Balloon*, the aesthetics of the spectral in cinema enables us to imagine postnational communities in which we can develop a sense of belonging mediated by a sense

of otherness inherent to our encounter with others.

Obviously, the transnational approach to world cinema has contributed much to making visible what has been unthinkable from the national perspective on world cinema. But it is significant to note that the transnational perspective does not fully answer the questions nor fill the voids the national approach to cinema has left behind. The postnational perspective on cinema I propose in this paper is another response to the questions the crisis of the national cinema has opened up.