



可见与不可见  
the visible and the invisible



鼠疫使港岛的阶级在海拔上更加严格的隔离开来  
The plague consolidated the vertical segregation on Hong Kong island

# Many Undulating Things

It was the humidity that was first recognised by the British when they arrived in Hong Kong, their sensitive skins unacclimatised to the tropics, where every surface was sensuously alive. In the third chapter ‘Ferro Vitreous’ of *Many Undulating Things* (2019), and in *Miasma, Plants, Export Paintings* (2017), filmmakers Bo Wang and Pan Lu trace the British fear of contagion in Hong Kong. They culled a scene from the 1955 film *Love is a Many Splendored Thing* where an American journalist (William Holden) estranged from his wife in 1949 meets Dr. Han Suyin (played by Jennifer Jones) – they embrace in her Hong Kong apartment. This scene was filmed in a Los Angeles studio, the bronze makeup on the journalist’s face supposedly depicting the dense tropical air filtered through the whirling shadows of an overhead fan. In contrast, scenes in Bo Wang’s and Pan Lu’s film shot in the shopping malls of Hong Kong portray their structure as one large organic entity, people secondary to their function, put into motion by the comforting machinery of airconditioning. As direct confrontation, the density of air instigates both fascination and fear, leading to the desire to manipulate the climate for personal comfort. That fear was one of contagion as well, perhaps even of their invader status: *a fish does not know it is in water*. And (being aware of) humidity is a constant reminder that one is not in their rightful element. The unseen viruses of this new land were provocative to violent intervention, a narrative running parallel to the fear of the mechanisms of virality employed in the 2019 Hong Kong protests.

Climate control had been a fantasy of the British colonial government in Hong Kong, demonstrated through their forestation projects in 1880s, and obsession with “miasma”. In *Miasma, Plants, Export Paintings*, the film’s voiceover imparts that miasma, or impure air, was considered for centuries to be the most dominant force in causing illness and death. It cites physician Thomas Southwood Smith from 1830: “Nature, with her burning sun, her stilled and pent-up wind, her stagnant and teeming marsh, manufactures plague on a large and fearful scale.” Tropical air is thought to contain more biomass, more miasma. But it wasn’t theirs alone. Changing the weather became possible for the People’s Republic of China when they seeded clouds by firing rockets and shells loaded with silver iodide to make it rain prior to the opening of the 2008 Beijing Olympics. The Beijing Weather Modification Office is part of a nationwide effort at weather control, the largest in the world employing 37,000 people. The urban legend of “Li’s Field” suggests that the richest man in Hong Kong, Li Ka-shing, controls the weather, as some major typhoons have missed Hong Kong altogether or have appeared on the weekend, meaning no work days were lost. In 2014, as a signal of a failure of climate control, the glass ceiling of Kowloon Tong’s Festival Walk Mall burst apart at the seams, allowing it rain inside the building. People from across Hong Kong rushed to witness the spectacle, turning their gaze upward toward the sky.

The film essay *Many Undulating Things* opens by citing Karl Marx in *Capital Volume 1*, 'Chapter 16: Absolute and Relative Surplus Value' — "It is not the tropics with their luxurious vegetations but the temperate zone, that is the mother of capital." In *Miasma*, *Plants*, *Export Paintings*, and *Many Undulating Things*, the filmmakers delve into the history of botanical transplantation. They describe how John Reeves was sent to Hong Kong to collect tropical plants to be sent to Kew Gardens in London; botanists were sent to Hong Kong and across Asia to collect living specimens for the Gardens' permanent relocation. These symbols of Empire arrived in the form of transplanted living plant specimens. Most did not survive the journey. In the 1830s, Nathaniel Bagshaw Ward devised the Wardian Case, a miniature glass greenhouse to accommodate the specimens, containing the original soil and a mimicry of the conditions under which the plants flourished. The plants were considered authentic, housed, transplanted and consumed by the provenance of a global empire. These preceded the glass atriums of the Parisian shopping arcades, which brought in natural light and climate-controlled conditions under which citizens would browse the shop windows. Acculturating taste was made possible through a strict regiment of temperance, stimulating a seamless experience without rupture. Much like the climate-controlled malls in Hong Kong, this over-commodified temperate zone became the mother of capital.

In these films, the camera observes the maze of escalators in different malls in Hong Kong. Unlike the suburban destinations of the United States, the malls in Hong Kong are integrated through passageways and entry-exit points, pedestrians and shoppers transferring seamlessly from street to mall. These malls are nexus points of gathering, attached to the MTR subway system. There are no discernible fissures in this city, even though the infrastructural changes that have occurred are dramatic. It becomes impossible to imagine a past beyond what is experienced in the immediate present. This is where the film-maker's work lies, in the fissures of this story. They follow the workers and streams of movement, the people you never notice, but are ever present. Their presence is what informs their film essays, punctuating an apparent endlessness of the city, and marking the multiple rebirths that have occurred and been forgotten — the end of British administration, the end of 'greening' projects, the end of socially enforced segregated housing between the British and the Chinese. This challenges the texture of the city and what holds it together, and points to its striations. In these fissures, the proposition of life on shifting ground arises: once we lived differently, and now, we can also live a different life. What one sees was built by others, and what one wants to see can be built by ourselves. Stefan Al's book *Mall City: Hong Kong's Dreamworlds of Consumption* (2016)<sup>1</sup> states that Hong Kong has the world's densest concentration of malls, about one per square mile, with one in four people employed in the retail and wholesale sector. The city has a reputation for being "Asia's shopping paradise", "the pearl of the Pearl River Delta", and "Asia's World City"; the Hong Kong Police Force, 30,000 strong and greater per capita than London, is known locally as "Asia's Finest".

The first 'mall battle' of the 2109 Hong Kong protests occurred in July at Shatin's New Town Plaza, when riot police stormed the centre to confront protesters who were exiting through its atrium, following the cessation of a protest. Debate later hypothesised that there may have been discussions between the mall's management and the police — mall staff turned off the air conditioning, prompting the exit of the protesters. Before this, in June, a protester fell from an elevated podium of the Pacific Place Mall in Admiralty, having unfurled a banner that called for the withdrawal of the extradition bill. He was wearing a yellow raincoat, the colour being representative of the movement. Increasingly, shopping malls have become sites of embattlement, but also of creative civil disobedience. Groups of protesters gather in mall atriums, singing protest songs. In a mall in Sha Tin, people folded origami



cranes and promoted their cause to passers-by. In November, multiple malls were trashed, the most dramatic of these occurrence at the luxury mall, Festival Walk next to Kowloon Tong station, where protesters set fire to a large Christmas tree. The destruction of these privately-owned 'public' spaces saw a war waged on the enforcement of climate control. The regulation of these physical spaces is executed architecturally: now street and roadside railings are being torn down with the burning of subway stations. The city infrastructure regulating the flows of people is being rearranged. In constant flux, these transactions are being made live during protest gatherings. When a street march becomes too dense, people spread out, to give each other space—to breathe, or to run. The protesters are constantly testing the temperature as well.

The miasma once feared by the British in many ways was a fear of virality itself—of unseen and unpalatable elements. The conflagration that led to the Hong Kong protests had been smouldering under the surface for years, from mainland diaspora and its discontents to the younger generation born after the 1997 Handover, the official passing of the territory from the British to the People's Republic of China. The strategies formulated by protesters incite a similar fear in the current environment, the majority of which is being constituted by Beijing. Networks on social media forums such as LIHKG, Telegram and WhatsApp orchestrate diverse forms of civil disobedience, generating a framework that involves people from all social levels. Mobilising social media for transmission of protest tactics, actions and media, this movement reveals itself to the public only when it chooses to. Graphic designers upload posters online and almost immediately are seen in printed form pasted on walls across the city. The Lennon Walls<sup>2</sup> in underpasses and overpasses featured the latest memes and developments, a mood board for the sentiment of the current moment. Protesters maximised their use of social media in an all-pervasive way, where online to offline transmission became almost immediate, flash gatherings generating thousands of people in a few hours. Just like the service workers and manual labourers highlighted in Bo Wang's and Pan Lu's films, it is the deceptively anonymous that keeps these flows moving. This virality is mediated by a massive collective, which regulates and controls its own visibility and legibility.

Academic Ackbar Abbas writes in the oft-cited *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Public Worlds) (1997)*<sup>3</sup> that Hong Kong is a city that is continually transformed, politically and literally. In *Many Undulating Things* the narrative is divided into three chapters: 'Water Demon', 'Night Air' and 'Ferro Vitreous'. The first scene begins with a faux-junk sailing past the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre, the site built for the 1997 Handover ceremony when thousands of international journalists flew in to cover the event which overshadowed the Asian Financial Crisis of the same year. The rolling waves of Victoria Harbour are illuminated by the famous bright lights of the city, and the junk's red dragon wing sails remain motionless, a decorative pandering to British-colonial trade era. The sounds of a weather report can be heard as background noise. None of these diegetic sounds, of conversations between mainland tourists and radio reports are translated as subtitles; a double entendre, it assumes two audiences. Overheard, the sounds of the city become part of the fabric of its psyche. Another layer is presented for those who understand Cantonese and Mandarin, gently applied footnotes to the narrative voiceover that guides the course of the filmic essays. The notion of climate control or 'talking about the weather' can be synonymous with an insurgent political discourse, a syncretic code where poesis is politicised. These images feel instructive, informing the narrative: we are left to find the "brave waves in between" (if I might translate literally the Chinese title of *Many Undulating Things*) to piece together our conclusion on this overwhelming place. It does not offer a militant cinema as evidenced by pro-left propaganda in the wake of the 1968 protests in the West or the music videos and journalism produced by various protester blocs, but it does demand a militant viewing. If an image is shown differently, it must be seen differently as well. As Hong Kong's mainstream film industry has engaged the market dynamics of mainland productions, a film centre that used to export its motifs globally has turned inward.

*Many Undulating Things, Miasma, Plants, Export Paintings* and *Traces of an Invisible City: Three Notes on Hong Kong* (2016) form a trilogy of sorts, film essays that depict the sensuous rhythm of the city now, its literal ebbs and flows, to a soft voiceover discussing the influence of British colonialism in the territory. To reread these works now (in the context of the protests) means discovering the clues of a movement fermenting under the sleek surfaces of the city. Hong Kong is a city that moves fast. Even the escalators tend to cycle at twice the speed of those in other cities. Railings direct traffic and human flows, maximising the time spent from points A to B. Many of these railings have been taken down now by the protesters, in an organised removal of the infrastructure that prevents being together in the way they desire. The state owned MTR Corporation's public transportation system has been under attack as well, for abetting in the aggressive actions of the police. The concept of "be water"<sup>4</sup> also runs at the same velocity, with its participants addicted to the consolidated live streams, police action tracking apps, online forums and Telegram messages. Rereading these films affords a space of slowness, and surveillance of the quotidian that is a sensation of movement, one expressing a dark humour, a sense that the more globalised a city becomes, the more it offers flat planes of movement to stimulate the sensation of being still. The political question now is one of autonomy; all protesters strive for greater political and legal autonomy, less so for the greater territory. The independent space propounded by Bo Wang's and Pan Lu's films is the time for study, for tracing colonial influence, and to inspire a different way of looking at one's surroundings.

These films follow a typical documentary format that delineates its narrative through chapters. The voiceover is gentle yet authoritative. In *Miasma, Plants, Export Paintings*, the first of three chapters, 'The Exhibition' is filmed at the Hong Kong Convention and Exhibition Centre in Wan Chai during *Art Basel Hong Kong*. The camera follows the meanderings of an elite art audience

during what appears to be the Fair's VIP viewing days, but lingers on the service workers who direct people to the bathrooms, or help people find their missing jackets. They appear mostly attentive or idle, of gesturing hands and worker badges. The direction is not didactic, rather they present images of labour that have fallen out of the frame. This human labour that makes possible the Class-A efficiency of Hong Kong is shown in *Many Undulating Things* where a voiceover describes the necessity of the manual unloading and transference of shipping containers just outside the port.

What began as demonstrations against the proposed Fugitive Offenders and Mutual Legal Assistance in Criminal Matters Legislation, commonly known as the extradition bill to mainland China, led protesters to formulate five demands to address police violence and the government's lack of transparency. A city known for its effectual infrastructure in which flows of people and capital freely circulate is now a port city with no exit plan. The strategies of the protests that have unfolded since June 2019 can be best described by the directive to "be water". To me the term has come to represent the quick and vulnerable organising tactics taken on by protesters to adjust the temperature of any given situation through direct democracy.

The Hong Kong District Council elections were held in November. With a record seventy-one percent voter turnout, the pro-democracy camp gained control of seventeen out of eighteen District Councils, taking 388 seats out of the 452 contested. Many young people will cite the 2014 Sunflower Movement in Taiwan as inspiration for the Umbrella Movement the same year, which also influenced the protests of 2019. Like the flowers that bloom unexpectedly, their potency can similarly be reproduced socially. From the glass boxes of our controlled climates, a new formulation of climate can emerge, a new politic of transference — not a protest of dogma but one in pursuit of freedom, an other possible society constituted through praxis. The methodology of virality is not a means to an end, but a rehearsal in of itself, in how people can work together.

On 11 November 2019, it was Singles Day in mainland China, an invention of dorm culture from Nanjing University in 1993 which has evolved into an Alibaba-driven consumerist holiday whereby single people are encouraged to celebrate their love through an online shopping frenzy. Sales abound. Over \$US42 billion in revenue is generated in this one day. The same day in Hong Kong saw the Hang Seng Index fall nearly three percent when a protester was shot by the police. The week before, protester Alex Chow Tsz-lok fell to his death under suspicious circumstances from a carpark building, fleeing a police raid. His father left a simple note at Chow's memorial. It read, "My child, your duty is done. Rest in peace. I am proud of you." A few wild flowers were taped to the bottom right of the page. Through Bo Wang's and Pan Lu's films, the present historical is shown, allowing for the political to be assessed by its subjects. The story they tell is far from complete, and the chapters they present are those in a much longer epic with no end. For that, the images they make and assemble become a promise for the future person, documents that prove that such a time existed.

Notes

<sup>1</sup> Stefan Al (ed.), *Mall City: Hong Kong's Dreamworlds of Consumption*, Hawaii: University of Hawaii Press, 2016

<sup>2</sup> The original Lennon Wall was created during the 2014 Umbrella Movement democracy protests, located at Admiralty, of post-it notes advocating democracy and universal suffrage. During the 2019 protests over 150 new walls appeared across Hong Kong

<sup>3</sup> Ackbar Abbas, *Hong Kong: Culture and the Politics of Disappearance (Public Worlds)*, Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997

<sup>4</sup> The 2019 protesters have taken on the famous quote from martial arts star Bruce Lee, "be water, my friend" as their methodology, to be fluid, fast moving and flexible