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# Ann Hui's Films and the Poetics of Mundane Redemption

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By Peter Zarrow

Seen from above, people are ants. As ants are specks in nature, so people—at least Hong Kongers—are specks in the massive infrastructure of forty- and fifty-storey highrises, the limitless concrete of train and highway networks, and the forbiddingly busy shops. Seen up close, however, face-to-face, they become souls. The camera in the masterpiece directed by Ann Hui, "The Way We Are," switches between these two perspectives. "The Way We Are" (lit. "Day and Night in Tin Shui Wai" 天水圍的日與夜, 2008) simply shows the quotidian, extremely ordinary events in the lives of a few characters, gradually revealing how they came to be the persons they are. This results in a picture of intensely human life: neither tragedy nor comedy, both sad and happy, both lost and found.

The more or less independent auteur, "New Wave" Hong Kong director Ann Hui (Hui On-wa; mandarin Xu Anhua 許鞍華) has produced wonderful films since the 1980s—such as her semi-autobiographical "Song of the Exile" (客途秋恨, 1990) and "Eighteen Springs" (半生緣, 1997), based on an Eileen Chang story (Ang Lee's "Lust, Caution" was far from the first cinematic work to draw inspiration from one of that writer's tales)—and some near-misses ("The Postmodern Life of My Aunt," 2006), as well as some interesting TV work. The latter includes a searing look at Hong Kong's treatment of Vietnamese refugees. Ann Hui has made films in a remarkable range of genres: from her breakthrough semi-autobiographical film about reconnecting with her Japanese mother (her father is Chinese) to semi-documentary films, through smart commentaries on contemporary China, brilliant adaptations of novels, and even martial arts tales.

"The Way We Are" is an enormously affecting non-story: nothing happens to speak of. Families cohere, but only barely; new families can be made by lonely people, but only partially; the younger generation has another chance to do it all over again, but there is no reason to think they will do a better job. People eat together (this is a Chinese movie, after all). Sometimes, sadly, they eat alone. But they are tough (this is a Hong Kong movie, after all). This is a film of both alienation and a kind of redemption. There is the son, On, on the cusp of adolescence, waiting over the summer for his test results to get into Form Six (don't ask: arcane Anglo school traditions). He seems smart, hardworking, and nice enough: there should be no problem. And if he fails, his rich uncles—they have maids and cooks and educate their children abroad—will help. There is the mother, Kwai, widowed, living with On in one of those matchbox Tin Shui Wai apartments full of tiny cheap furniture. Kwai is hardworking and cares for her son, but refuses to see her sick mother in the hospital. Gradually the story of this family over the last few decades becomes revealed—in subtle flashbacks, the bits of knowledge of the youngsters, and in the daily lives of the family. A parallel story develops with a neighbor, Granny, over the summer. Granny, too, is lost, until Kwai befriends her—a delicate and slow process that again slowly unfolds before Ann Hui's camera. Kwai, a widow, at least has On, a son; but Granny is alone.

And then there is the film's capture of memory. Kwai and her mother fight against the memories. Nothing is ever said directly or forthrightly. What would be the point of demanding satisfaction for sacrifice, making guilty feelings explicit? Anyway, this is not a film about speeches but emotions, reflected in faces. There is a hint of history—those outside forces that shape our lives. We might infer the family came to Hong Kong in the late 1940s, where Kwai then worked to get her brothers a good education. As she now works for her son's future.

In the apartment: peace, solitude, loneliness, rest: a prison safeguarded by lock after lock. Outside: friends (at least for On) and relatives, and the whole overwhelming complexity of Hong Kong reduced to a few social networks. There is considerably humor as well. I certainly hope I don't make the film sound labored. It's wonderfully fun, even if not exactly Hollywood-style cheerful. And even more, I hope I don't make the film sound voyeuristic. With these characters, at least, it would be presumptuous for any in the audience to condescend to them. A director's movie in the sense that Hui is in charge of the delicate operation of saying everything through the camera, it is also an actor's movie, particularly dominated by Kwai (Paw Hee-ching 鮑起靜). But all the performances are good.

Tin Shui Wai is a real place—one of Hong Kong’s “new towns” of high rises thrown up in the late 1980s almost overnight in the New Territories. It soon became known for its poverty, Mainland immigrants, and family violence. But of course it is also simply a place where a lot of ordinary people live—several hundred thousand, in fact. “The Way We Are” seems to describe the heroism of the little people, the heroism of survival, but, again, somehow Ann Hui makes it clear that we ourselves are the little people and there is nothing to feel superior about. We are all damaged, yet alive.

Hui’s next movie, “Night and Fog” (lit. “Night and Fog in Tin Shui Wai” 天水圍的夜與霧) of 2009, has none of the subtlety of her first Tin Shui Wai film. It is based on a real-life homicide case of 2004 of a blue-collar Hong Kong man murdering his Mainland wife. The film is certainly competent, but we have seen this “social problem” theater done by-the-numbers before. Abusive husband ignored by oblivious police and neighbors; social agencies pathetically inept and simply inane; women’s safe houses just not enough. The story has been filmed from Buenos Aires to Boston. Here, the Mainland bride twist does not seem to explain much—and we just do not get enough of the back-story in Shenzhen bars and Sichuan farms. Hui’s anger gives the film a certain power, but the characters do not quite come to life.

Urban anomie *and* human strength is much more compelling in the first of these two films, even if little happens beyond survival. Still, both films represent Hui’s intense humanism: the demand not for sympathy or even empathy but for self-recognition. “Humanism” can be a contentious label. The French director Bertrand Tavernier’s films also deal with a wide variety of subjects in a wide variety of genres. Most concern with “ordinary people” from a tender or left-wing slant, and critics began calling them “humanist” in an effort to make sense out of them as a corpus of work. This so upset Tavernier that he made the exceedingly grim *Coup de Torchon* (1981) as a riposte. [1] Yet supposedly hopelessly pessimistic, this film noir of colonial murder still manages to treat its characters with considerable sympathy. [2] The same humanistic intensity infuses the films of Ann Hui, though I have no idea whether she would embrace or disavow the label, or simply find it irrelevant. It is true there is a grimness to much of her work, as there is to Tavernier’s—but they both deal in redemption. Very partial, mundane redemption. Hui’s affinity for Eileen Chang should put to rest any fear that she indulges in sentimentality. “Night and Fog” suffers not because it lacks redemption—after all, life does not always offer redemption—but because its characters lack a certain lifefulness—which the characters of “The Way We Are” have in abundance.

[1] Steven Hay, Bertrand Tavernier: The Film-maker of Lyon (London: I. B. Taurus, 2000), pp. 25-26. Perhaps Tavernier was really objecting to being pigeon-holed, rather than declaring war on “humanism.” Or perhaps he wished to ally himself with the anti-humanism—that is, skepticism of individual autonomy and of universal claims—of postwar French intellectuals. I am, however, simply using the term as to refer to a general stance of respect for the dignity of persons, and to hell with metaphysics.

[2] The film is also very funny, full of black humor. Tavernier’s *L’Appât* (1995) is actually the a darker film, since its sociopathic youths can hardly evoke sympathy, yet even here Tavernier cannot result inserting a critique of the adult world that gives the film a humanist slant.

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