

Mimang: **the Snail Shell of Life**

Mimang strings together three stories of life with different meanings of the Korean word “mimang”. Instead of the grand narrative, the film focuses more on the unnoticed details of daily life, setting the scene on the conversations of certain people wandering in the same neighborhood. There is no dramatic plot, only long shots of characters moving around and small talk that seems too trivial to get the point, constituting the tone of the whole film.

The statue of Admiral Yi, Jongkak subway station and euljiro, which appear from time to time in the film, are clues to the spatial location of the downtown area of Seoul. Being the busiest and most vibrant part of the city, it tends to be the first to embrace sharper changes. With urbanization, vegetable markets and hardware stores were replaced by high-rise shopping malls, and the Seoul Cinema was demolished too. The space is like a container, perfectly preserved there, but contents inside are changing. It makes me think about the human body, which is the carrier of people, even though all three stories revolve around the same protagonist, they all continue to grow. Many things seem to remain intact, but in fact they are repeatedly torn down and rebuilt. This film concentrates on

the very concept of the “snail shell” proposed by the director during his creation. The outward spiral pattern on the snail’s shell proves the mark of change.

The metaphor of the snail shell is presented in different forms in the film. In the first chapter, the man and his girlfriend talk about circles on the bus. The shape of the circle seems to be closed, but when a certain point returns to its original position after a full circle, it has actually changed. The most typical variant is the clock, which follows a fixed trajectory and completes the routine from day to day. The bus itself looks similar, which, despite a fixed schedule and itinerary, carries a totally multiple passengers forward, with new changes occurring every second.

According to Henri Bergson’s theory, time is a continuous river, constantly rushing, churning, and leaving traces in space. But there is also something seemingly unchanging – memory, which is classified as an unaffected existence, like an anchor that indicates the direction of the space one is in. Like the statue of Admiral Yi, which always stands on the streets of Seoul, it is a bystander to witness the transformation of the city. Memory, however, is not immutable; it comes from the past and is continuously influenced by the present. There are endless debates about whether Admiral Yi was left-handed or right-handed, and the truth gets more and more blurred with time. Do the original facts really matter? People’s attachment to memories arises more from a feeling of warmth and security brought by familiarity. At the end of the film, the man catches a glimpse

of the familiar street outside the window, and could not help but get out of the bus, as if summoned, starting the experience of roaming through his memories. Memory can evoke the deep desire for eternity and stability from the bottom of the heart, resisting the unpredictable, endless changes.

Therefore, when former lovers come across one day unexpectedly, facing with a cloudy summer day, they always hold the umbrella in their hands to prevent themselves from being drenched by the pouring rain. Immersed in the aftermath of a broken love affair, they resist sudden changes. Seven years later, the woman who meets her new life earlier is sensitive to the rain dripping from the clear sky. Instead of being in panic, she takes it for granted, as if she has internalized every change into her life as a matter of course. After a brief reunion, the man exchanges farewells with the woman in the taxi, he feels a drop of rain on his head all of sudden. The hint of slight rain heralds the onset of change, but it is no longer a prelude to chaos, but rather the coming of hope and release. People will always carry the past, from the present to the future, holding on to memories and creating more of them.

In Flames:

the Survival Anxiety of Female Directed Towards the Other

The Pakistani society, as epitomized by Karachi, is filled with a terrifying atmosphere in *In Flames*. From a gender perspective, the film tells the story of a family's difficult life situation for women after the patriarch's death. Not only are the women physically threatened by the various males around them, but they are also subjected to constant mental violence, haunted and tormented by ghosts from previous traumatic experiences. Using the specific genre narrative of horror, *In Flames* makes the danger visually visible. As the scholar Noel Carroll's theory of Art-horror suggests, fear comes from the invasion of the other by the external world, leading to concerns that oneself and one's boundaries may be blurred and destroyed. The typical patriarchal environment in Pakistan excludes women's rights. While within the female community, men have become the strange other as well. Gathered in a narrow area, women still have to be vigilant of their only remaining living space in case of being invaded repeatedly without limits.

In the film, men's provocations against women's basic rights are found in every aspect of daily life. From the moment Mariam, the protagonist, is attacked by an unknown man's brick on the car window when she is driving, danger ripples like waves, spreading from outside to inside of Mariam's surroundings. Saleem, the tricycle driver who takes Mariam home late at night, generously waives Mariam's fare but secretly has the intention to rape her. Uncle Nasir, who promises to help Mariam's family with their debts, is actually plotting against the property left by his deceased brother. Even the truth about the father, whose domestic violence is never clearly mentioned before, surfaces at the end of the film. From strangers to the most important part of intimate relationships, the threat posed by men does not change with the degree of intimacy between them. Instead, the closer the person is, the more unpredictable hypocrisy is combined with the infliction of harm, which is more elusive than direct and obvious violence, and becomes a ticking time bomb lurking in a women's lives.

The failure of relationship between Mariam's parents, witnessed by Mariam in her childhood, also affects Mariam's romance with Asad. Coming from Canada, Asad has a more open way of expressing his love: adding friends on social media, meeting frequently at the library, and riding motorcycles to the beach with Mariam...A series of actions by Asad in a short period of time make Mariam weightlessly fall into a romantic bubble, but also awaken the hidden unease that has been embedded inside her due to her parents' domestic violence and

misogyny in the society. However, Asad suddenly dies in a car accident, making it difficult for Mariam to verify her trust in intimate relationships. Once unable to find evidence from reality, Mariam allows her gradually expanding suspicion devour the true but vague Asad, causing him reappear as a demonic phantom. In addition, it can be found that Asad gives Mariam a bracelet as a token of romance, and Fariha, Mariam's mother, also wears a necklace, which may be related to her former love story with her father, but also almost suffocate her in the film. Bracelets and necklaces serve as a metaphor not only for love, but also for the potential pitfalls that men give to women under the guise of goodwill, binding women to the patriarchal social environment, and even elevating their subordinate status into an intergenerational cycle, so that they can no longer have the possibility of resisting patriarchal power.

The eerie atmosphere pervades the physical space, making the deserted coastal cottage and the warm private house overlap in Mariam's memory, as they are both unsafe. When Mariam takes a tricycle back home from the coast, looking at the streets of Karachi, the space is disorderly and crowded because of the swelling population. Utilizing special cinematography, with the camera shaking violently and the rhythm changing rapidly, the film presents the entire city in crisis. In fact, as Pakistan's largest city, Karachi sees a large number of poor people from all directions come to make a living, resulting in conflicts in terms of party, ethnicity, and religion. The tricycle Mariam takes has no closed doors, but is open

to the outside, traveling on the roads of Karachi. At this point, Mariam's anxiety relevant to gender cannot escape from the tricycle, resorting to justice or help. Instead, the dark cloak of the outside world wraps the gender metaphor of the tricycle within, blending with each other, creating a more complicated and intractable social dilemma.

Given this, what can women do to get rid of it? *In Flames* offers a solution by encouraging women with similar experiences, especially the mother and daughter in the film, to unite and bravely ignite their past misfortunes, letting them into ashes. Within the family, in the face of the absence of the patriarch, it is Fariha's role as a mother that is needed to make up for it, reconstructing the myth of maternal instinct to empower her daughter in order to restore the family's stability. Even if such an approach does not touch upon the essence of gender dilemma, the film still brings more attention and introspection to the current Pakistani society.

Ser ser salhi:

Modernity Flowing Like Winds

Located in the interior of East Asia, Mongolia has been the birthplace of many nomadic tribes since ancient times. The grasslands allow people to thrive here, establish civilizations, and provide a wide field for people to fight on horseback. In the 20th century, the Mongolian government was influenced by the global political situation and launched a revolution under the impact of the Soviet Bolshevik Civil War, attempting to end the three-century-long feudal rule by Chinese dynasties and declare its independence. The Mongolian People's Republic, founded in 1924, remained in the camp of the Warsaw Treaty Organization and embraced the socialist system before the end of the Cold War.

Nowadays, Mongolia, as depicted in the film *Ser ser salhi*, is a mélange of modern civilization and traditional history: skyscrapers mixed with features of Khrushchev's architecture expand like ripples, encircling the Mongolian yurt districts on the slopes. Smoke from industrial chimneys mingles with the thin clouds of the snow-capped mountains. Worshipers pay homage to the sky and the earth next to the Zaisan Memorial which commemorates the Soviet Army martyrs. At the same time, modern shopping malls and game arcades appear in

different corners of the city, witnessing customers paying money for pleasure and desire. The unfinished process of urbanization has resulted in the coexistence of disparate spaces in Ulaanbaatar, confusing the perception and experience of those who live here.

Ze, who lives in the suburb at the foot of the mountain, is a shaman due to his childhood gift of prophecy, helping his neighbors with predictions and providing advice on actions. Besides, he is also a 17-year-old preparing for his college entrance exams, being used to suppressing his adolescent emotions due to strict school discipline and the promised bright future from his teacher. A shamanic ritual gives him the opportunity to meet Maralaa, someone of the same age who seems completely different from Ze. She lives in an urban building, listens to trendy songs, and behaves uninhibitedly. Her parents divorced when she was young, her father works in South Korea, and her mother has countless romantic affairs. She doesn't believe in the existence of spirits and sees shamanism as a deceitful charade. She has an artificial heart implanted during surgery, which Ze laughingly calls as the Terminator in the science fiction movie.

The characters are so typical that they seem to represent the dual aspects of this Mongolian city. One is the more primitive and traditional way of life. Shamanic beliefs provide a narrative for people to follow and connect human spirit to nature, under which can people plan their lives with reverence and moderation. Most families have lived together for generations, like ancient trees with stability that

is hard to shake. However, this stability also implies that it is unwieldy. When faced with the advent of new things, their reactions and changes are often slow, leading to a sense of backwardness. The other is the emerging modern way of life. Urban civilization splits traditional large family structure into atomized individuals, which are more mobile, thus become unsupported and adrift as well. This experience brought by living space and social relationships further affects a spiritual void, a sense of aching emptiness. Even though people are free to move, they feel perplexed about where to go. Having lost their spiritual dependence, they turn to enjoy the direct sensory stimulation, through which they perceive their connection with the world.

Each of these dual aspects has its own strengths and weaknesses, so they are often attracted to each other, with traditional life yearning for the novelty and convenience of modernity, and modern life nostalgically longing for a return to tradition. In *Ser ser salhi*, Ze and Maralaa go to a rooftop overlooking the city built on a steppe, and begin their graffiti creation and fantasies about the future. Ze's wish is to live in a smart apartment, while Maralaa dreams of returning to a nomadic life of self-sufficiency. However, as the romance continues, their more practical desires are revealed. Ze feels that his spirit is upset in the crowded nightclub, where the changing lights present a mixed expression of the god and human on his face, with a serious and sad expression on the god's face and a lost expression on the human's. Maralaa also decides to leave Mongolia for her

father in South Korea, heading for the even more unpredictable unknown. Although the two have crossed paths before, their lives ultimately remain in opposite directions, and they both return to their more familiar space. As the winds of modernity spread throughout the Mongolian city, all that is solid melts into air, and the two sides of Ulaanbaatar are thus entangled and contradictory, influencing individuals living in the midst of them.

Even though modernity attracts people wherever they are, achieving true social mobility is still very difficult. At the age of 17, Ze does not have the future foreseen by school, but has to work to lighten the ease the financial burden on his family while continuing his duties as a shaman. The birth of his sister's child also implied the cycle of intergenerational fate. When Maralaa says goodbye to Ze, Ze almost blurts out, "You'll come back," as if it were a fatalistic prophecy and even pronouncement that echoes in the city of wind.

Memories of Underdevelopment:
**A Distracted Mode of Being in the
World**

Beginning with the Bay of Pigs invasion (April 1961) by a US-backed group of Cuban exiles and ending with the Cuban Missile Crisis (October 1962), the film *Memories of Underdevelopment* marks a special period in Cuba's history. The communist Castro government that took over Cuba was caught up in the context of Cold War between a new-found national self-confidence in confronting the forces of capitalism and the existential fear brought about by nuclear weapons. Cuba, caught between these two extremes, as if were caught in the interstitial space, unable to control its own direction, and couldn't completely detach itself from the situation.

The protagonist of the film, Sergio, also embodies this existence. As a 38-year-old middle-class intellectual who wanders aimlessly through the streets of Cuba and peeps through binoculars into his neighborhood at home, he does not seem to be truly involved in Cuban life, but rather distances himself from it with the attitude of indifference. In fact, all the changes in the city have nothing to do

with him either. Sergio is neither an exile nor a revolutionary. At this particular time in Cuba, he is like an actor without a role, not being taken seriously, who stands on the stage of history without knowing what to do. Just like Sergio talking about his understanding of cinema to the young girl Elena: actors repeat the same actions, the same lines, the same actions, the same lines, the same actions, the same lines... The plot of the film is also trivial and fragmented, using the infinite repetition of empty and quotidian life content to justify its adherence to form. Sergio's tasteless routine leaves him nowhere to go in the liminal space of Cuba. Unable to find his identity, he performs an ambiguous identity, immersing himself in his privileged memories that are no longer clear enough to prove his existence. However, he is unable to focus on the present, distracted, and can only simply regurgitate it, transforming the repression and impotence into a sexual desire to release it.

In addition to its fictionalized plot, *Memories of Underdevelopment* is also a compilation of various visual materials: single-frame images with documentary characteristics showing the starvation and hardships of Cuban livelihood during the period of political corruption, and film clips that were deemed obscene by the Cuban censorship are linked together in this film, repeating three times for circular playback, bombarding audience's eyes. Other segments of memorizing are also inserted into the linear narrative, interrupting the continuity of the story, preventing the accumulation of experience and the development of the plot. The

audience's viewing experience thus aligns with the feelings of diegetic characters, while also echoing the film's title: people exhaust all their energy, but only use it to adapt to time.

Drifting:

Symbolic Order Does Not Exist

In 2012, invoking the Waste Disposal Ordinance, the Hong Kong government raided and removed the belongings of a group of vagrants at the bottom of the Tung Chau Street Flyover in Sham Shui Po. Under the government's long-standing eviction policy, the homeless responded with actions for the first time. They believed that the government had not informed them in advance of the clearance, and that the damage to their private property had violated the law, and decided to collectively demand an apology and compensation. After nearly a year of legal proceedings, 2 of the 21 homeless individuals who filed the lawsuit passed away, while the remaining 19 finally reached a "settlement" with the government and received a compensation of HKD 2000 per person. In keeping with the tradition of many previous Hong Kong Category III films being based on real events, *Drifting* similarly attempts to reproduce the sequence of events while presenting unpopular, even radical views addressing social, political, racial, or sexual inequities, as well as hypocrisy in religion or government.

In the film, Fai's photo with his son, placed at his bedside, is ruthlessly confiscated by the law enforcement officers who clean up the streets. In reality, a key argument surrounding the lawsuit revolves around whether government departments responsible for managing food and environmental hygiene have the right to arbitrarily discard the personal belongings of the homeless, particularly items such as identification cards, bank passbooks, and cell phones that clearly do not belong in the category of "garbage". According to Mary Douglas' statement in her work *Purity and Danger*, based on the presumption of cleanliness and usefulness, as well as the desire to constantly approach the original state of perfection, waste and dirt are closely associated in language and are seen as disorders that disrupt purity and distinct boundaries. "Dirt offends against order. Eliminating it is not a negative movement, but a positive effort to organize the environment."

Just as the commonly used term "洗街 (street washing)" unconsciously equates homeless people occupying street space with dirty and unclean waste, and legitimizes the act of removing outside distractions from the ideal environment as cleanliness, the film also occasionally shows a sense of invisible order that specific class groups strive to uphold. Muk, a young man losing his ability to speak, who returns to his original family after being missing for eight years, is an example. In a conversation with social worker Miss Ho about Muk's experience of homelessness, his mother seems to not truly care about how her

son has fallen to such a state, but only laments that he is no longer as bright as he used to be. At the same time, she shows no reaction to Miss Ho's description of Muk's street life with Fai, but is very serious about correcting the Ho's use of the name Muk, emphasizing that his name is Ching Hin. Naming an unnamed person who once lived outside the order is the mother's way of pulling her son back into the recognized order of modern society. However, the fact that one person shares the name of Muk and Ching Hin proves that the boundaries of order are not naturally formed but artificially defined. As decent and tidy as the order is inside, there are as many people outside the order who are not treated as deserving of the attention, the name, or even the importance of their life story.

The cinematography also implies this point. The film is almost entirely shot handheld, capturing the unstable and risky survival state of the homeless, while only in two scenes, the upscale residential area where Muk's mother lives and the balcony where Miss Ho, from a middle-class background, overlooks the night scene of Hong Kong, are shot with a fixed camera on a tripod. Compared to the absolute stability of the objective living environment, a sense of order is more of a subjective existence. The desire for order stems from people's fear of being violated by instability and the fact that risks always surround their lives. The Chinese title of the film, 濁水漂流, literally translates to "drifting on turbid water". It seems to confirm an idea: it is not the homeless who are dirty, but the social environment that keeps them in a state of drift and turmoil that is impure. The

desired order and boundaries of certain groups dissipate the moment they immerse themselves in the macro environment and cease to exist. The truth of the modern world is like water, highly irregular and constantly flowing, with no absolute purity or order.

While exposing the hypocrisy of order, the film also challenges the implicit sense of order in the minds of the audience. It looks directly the image of homeless people in Hong Kong with raw and coarse shots, explicitly exposing the scene of Fai injecting drugs into his thigh. At the end of the film, the camera lingers for a full minute and a half on the distant view of the fire that destroys Fai's life and his only home, continuously burning. The audience's gaze towards the group in the film, rather than being an arrogant voyeuristic observation, is more like an unexpected acceptance of the world presenting its natural, raw and unadorned side directly in front of them. The ending fire is so cruel and unbearable to watch, yet the camera does not give any space for audience to escape or find solace, letting the raging flames to disintegrate the illusions of cleanliness and order in their minds, as well as indifferent attitude towards other groups. Rather than trying to help solve the plight of the homeless community, the film truly aims to address the issue of where people should position themselves when looking at public events and social trauma across class, generation, and geographic scope. It is the motif that director Jun Li, with his academic background in journalism, has been exploring, and it also pertains to

how individuals from all walks of life can understand and unite with each other to form a common human ideal of true social justice.

24 Hour Party People:

Plastic Face Can't Smile the White Out

In 1976, the punk band Sex Pistols performed to an audience of only 42 people at the Lesser Free Trade House in Manchester. The venue, located on Peter Street, was built on the site of the Peterloo Massacre in 1819. Once a site of revolutionary history and bloodshed, it was now occupied by rock youth who, armed with a few instruments, emitted screams like declarations, igniting sporadic sparks of the decaying city. Post-war Britain saw a decline in industrial spirit, and failures of both pre-industrial infrastructures and modernist housing reconstructions became isolated in Manchester on a physical spatial level. However, people who were ignored from the system, just like the architecture, developed an unusual counterculture from the extreme social exclusion environment. They used alternative music to occupy long-abandoned venues and transformed them into theatres for cultural performances. This is where the history that the documentary-style film *24 Hour Party People* focuses on begins, when one of the 42 audience members, Tony Wilson, decides to establish the Factory Records

music brand. In the club with “Factory Closed” written on the wall, another “Factory” opens.

From there, the birth of local band Joy Division announces the beginning of Manchester’s revival, calling the shots with their idiosyncratic style and leading a group of followers in spirituality. Dick Hebdige, a cultural studies scholar from the Birmingham School, summarizes the meaning of style from the previously famous punk community: subculture shows resistant attitudes by taking advantages of the production of style, which is absolutely an intentional communication, a visible construction. It is bricolage that being used by certain subcultural group to recombine basic elements, assault the syntax of everyday life, and generate new meanings, suggesting extensive homology with the group’s daily experience. Unlike the frank speak-out of punk, Joy Division narrows the apocalyptic and destructive tendencies from a global scale to individual minds, turning the focus inward with a darker and more obscure spiritual direction. In the film, lead singer Ian Curtis has an epileptic seizure on stage, his body trembling as if electrified. Mistaking his actions for a deliberate dance symbol, the audience imitate him below the stage, actively practicing self-exile. The torment of illness is symbolically reappropriated by the group and is sublimated into an art with implicit subversive and rebellious meanings. Ian Curtis’s suicide forms a perfect closed loop with the style of the singer and the songs, creating a tragic myth that has been passed down through the generations.

Under the stimulation of neoliberal policies, the working class neither has a present nor the ability to envision a future. They shatters their beliefs in Thatcher government's cold declaration that "there is no such thing as society." Nighttime became a refuge in Manchester, with alcohol, drunkenness, illegal drug abuse, avant-garde music, wild dancing, and inexplicable sex serving as solace. In 1982, The Hacienda, a nightclub in a converted industrial warehouse, was founded, where melancholic and despairing melodies of rock intertwined with the electronic dance characteristics of the Acid House genre and the hallucinogenic effects of drug experiences, dominating the bodies and ears of young people throughout the night. In this decade-long frenzy known as Madchester, the band Happy Mondays emerges. Their song *24 Hour Party People* provides the inspiration for the film's title, depicting the cultural spectacle of Manchester at the time. However, at the end of the film, the owners eventually close the business due to significant financial difficulties and safety concerns. The film pays homage to that legendary history with its collage-like style and alienation effect. It is like an independent publication produced within the subculture, disregarding revisions, full of errors and omissions, replacing skill with passion, and persistently disrupting mainstream syntactic practices with its unique language style, provoking the sluggish nerves of mundane life.