

Looking at the (W)Hole Picture: Imagining Taipei as a Global City

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores various claims that are made about globalization as a paradigm shift and how it is being registered in the social imaginary of one city, Taipei. Specifically, it seeks to look at ways in which imagining Taipei as a global city is a source of anxiety, both in representations of city government projects designed to alleviate traffic congestion and then in the 1998 dystopic film by Tsai Ming-liang, *The Hole*.

The paper strategically starts in an abstracted discursive realm, turns to physical representations of how Taipei relates to other (global) cities, then to city governmental efforts to reapportion citizens? experience of space from physical navigation to virtual interaction in a cyber-space, and finally tries to get a picture of how by-passed citizens in this emergent topography might be represented and imagine themselves not only as victims of the effects of infrastructural bypass, but also as a viable, resistant community with an identifiable politics, however rudimentary.

KEY WORDS

cybercity, de- and reterritorialization, globalization, Taipei, TRTS (Taipei Rapid Transit System), Tsai Ming-liang *The Hole*



There is something exceedingly frustrating, imprecise and deceptive about the term *globalization*. First, it implies that there is an unprecedented process underway that is “unifying” the world (at the very least its markets)—a claim which, on the face of it, seems glaringly ahistorical, as any reader of Marx & Engels’ *Communist Manifesto* will immediately point out (and they do, *pace* David Harvey).¹ Moreover, the word implies that this process encompasses the entirety of the globe with equal participation from all segments of the world; yet the persistence of egregious (and arguably worsening) economic and social inequalities belies any such claim. Even so, the fact that globalization is such a prevalent and, arguably, prevailing discourse necessitates that it be taken seriously. So, having vented this frustration, this paper will proceed with the recognition that while no definitive consensus has been reached by what exactly globalization’s dynamics and the full of extent its scope are (and to be fair to proponents and theorists of globalization, most concede it is a strategically partial and incomplete phenomenon), nevertheless widespread deregulation of financial institutions, privatization of heretofore public facilities and neo-liberal restructuring are profoundly impacting social, political and cultural relations. While critics of globalization can question whether and/or the extent to which claims made about these dynamics of globalization are in any way historically novel, it would be foolhardy to deny that, at the very least, globalization is a *discursive* reality however much one may critique it as a *descriptively* new phenomenon. In this light, this paper will proceed by discussing the claims that are made about globalization as a paradigm shift and how it is being registered in the social imaginary of one city,

Taipei. Specifically, I will look at ways in which imagining Taipei as a global city is a source of anxiety, both in representations of city government projects designed to alleviate traffic congestion and then in the 1998 dystopic film by Tsai Ming-liang, *The Hole*. Behind these representations of Taipei lurk the questions: what does it mean to imagine Taipei as a global city, and at what price to its citizenry?

I. Globalization: Going With the Flow

As has been pointed out, globalization is a contested and multivalent term. Reactions and assessments of the term/phenomenon run the political gamut from Fukayama's ecstatic non-Marxian proclamation of "the end of history," where capitalism has reached the triumphant point at which "economic forces are now encouraging the breakdown of national barriers through the creation of a single, integrated world market,"² to more sobering assessments along the lines of James H. Mittleman, who strategically identifies with those who have "experienced [globalization] from below," an experience marked by an overall sense of deprivation:

. . . the dominant form of globalization means a historical transformation: in the economy, of livelihoods and modes of existence; in politics, a loss in the degree of control exercised locally—for some, however little to begin with—such that the locus of power gradually shifts in varying proportions above and below the territorial state; and in culture, a devaluation of a collectivity's achievements or perceptions of them.³

What both of these otherwise opposed assessments of globalization share is the contention that previous institutional arrangements (specifically, nation-states) that heretofore structured economic, political and social relations are undergoing a paradigm shift—a *denationalization*, as it were. What emerges in the wake of this shift is still incomplete, but it is manifest that power is being displaced from the nation-state and increasingly transferred to transnational

corporations and supranational regulatory organizations (i.e., the WTO, the EU, NAFTA, APEC), all primarily catering to the flow of finance capital.

Historically, most date this paradigmatic shift in the 1970s, when the breakdown of the Bretton Woods international financial arrangement led to systemic deregulation that decentered economic power away from U.S. hegemony. Concomitantly, quantum advances in informational technology, especially in the form of (a de-materialized) cyberspace, have been seized upon by financial institutions to facilitate an almost seamless flow of capital. The literature on globalization recurrently characterizes this globalization as not only a re-organization of territoriality vis-à-vis power (i.e., denationalization), but as a process of rapid *detrterritorialization*, marked by a compression (indeed, as much as possible, an obliteration) of time and space—what Marx identifies as capitalism's propensity to “annihilate space through time.” Implicit (and often explicit) in much of the literature on globalization is that there is an inherently emancipatory promise to this detrterritorialization—concurrent with increased flows of accumulating capital comes increased opportunities for social and political mobilization that can circumvent previous oppressive constraints states had imposed. But it is crucial to note, as David Harvey points out, that “in order to liberate this emancipatory force from its political chains it is essential to pursue a political revolution to dismantle all of the institutions of ‘second wave’ industrial society—government regulation, the welfare state, collective institutions of wage bargaining, and the like.” (Harvey 9) From this point of view, globalization must not only be hailed as a process by which state-formed constraints on mobility (either financial, informational or personal) are being lifted, but should also be recognized as a dis-ordering of state infrastructure that arguably addressed real social needs as much as inhibited unchecked “growth.”

Even as globalization is said to be marked by a radical sense of detrterritorialization, sociologist such as Saskia Sassen and Harvey have compellingly argued that a more complete understanding of globalization demonstrates that these flows require concentrated and

fixed spatial nodes that actually produce and facilitate globalization's hypermobility; in other words, globalization is better understood as a process of *reterritorialization*. For Sassen especially, these fixed spatial nodes take the privileged forms of "global cities," sites of "vast concentrations of very material and not so mobile facilities and infrastructures . . . with [their] vast capacities for controlling hypermobile dematerialized financial instruments and [their] enormous concentrations of those material and human, mostly place-bound, resources that make such capacities possible" (Sassen 217) In a similar line of argument, Harvey contends that while the contemporary vogue of globalization discourse signals "a profound geographical reorganization of capitalism," one should not lose sight of how globalization is a variant ". . . of territorialization, deterritorialization, and reterritorialization continuously at work throughout the historical geography of capitalism." (Harvey 7) This in turn may throw into question the degree to which national state authority is becoming obsolete; to see reterritorialization as a reassertion of resistant politics in the face of the forces of globalization (which, to be sure, it can be) overlooks the degree to which (in Sassen's words) "global processes materialize in national territories and do so to a considerable extent through national institutional arrangements." (Sassen 228) In other words, it is too simplistic to see globalization as preeminently opposed to the structuration of nation-states; alternatively, nation-states are intensely imbricated in the emerging logic of globalization—handmaidens, as it were, to the very forces in the process of dismantling their very own infrastructures as nation-states!

As previously stated, the concept of a global city offers not only a delimited and manageable unit of analysis for identifying the processes of globalization, but also is a crucial and specific reterritorialized site where globalization is produced and serviced. As such, global cities ostensibly lend themselves to a reassertion on the part of social communities involved in the production and service of globalization to address community and social needs. Yet while global cities offer a compelling case for a reterritorialization in which older notions of citizenship might be deployed to answer these social and material

needs of a given urban populace, one can't underestimate the degree to which the dynamics of globalization are in turn structuring this urban reterritorialization also. In other words, even as the flows of power are to a certain degree reigned in and harnessed in these site-specific populaces, the uneven temporal and geographical development that characterizes globalization at the macro-level rearticulates itself at the urban level as well. This is perhaps best theorized in the work of Stephen Graham and Simon Marvin, whose *Splintering Urbanism: Networked Infrastructures, Technological Mobilities and the Urban Condition* argues that part and parcel of the emerging urban condition in the process of globalization is an "unbundling" of heretofore "monopolistic, standardised (*sic*) and integrated networked infrastructures." (Graham & Marvin 138)

A salient effect of this infrastructural unbundling (and the primary concern of Graham and Marvin's book) is that "... the transitions away from integrated networked infrastructures towards unbundled networks are involved in reconfigurations of social and spatial relations within and between cities." (Graham & Marvin 166) The authors contend that "... the key to developing an understanding of the complex connections between unbundling and urban restructuring is to explore the uneven nature of three forms of what [can be] call[ed] 'infrastructural bypass.'" (Graham & Marvin 167) These forms of infrastructural bypass are: first, a distinction between valued and non-valued users; second, bypassing those who are non-valued; and, finally, connecting valued users both within the specific local urban site and also with global circuits of infrastructural exchange. Examples they give of these emergent infrastructural networks include custom designed services on the part of public utilities (i.e. telecommunications, energy, water and waste facilities) for private commercial use, skywalk pedestrian systems, private transportation systems, etc. This unbundling ostensibly leads to stark polarization of the urban populace, resulting in a phenomenon which Castells has called a "dual city," a city fragmented along the lines between those who are valued and those non-valued.

The most agonizing question in the face of this infrastructural

bypass is, of course: so what about those non-valued users? Graham and Marvin contend that they fall back on their own “coping strategies,” which is usually a turn to informal systems of infrastructure provision; but there’s an obvious resignation that such coping strategies are highly passive, marked by unreliability and do not begin to address the underlying dynamics that produce and exacerbate the unequal conditions within a given urban populace. More optimistically predisposed commentators (*pace* David Harvey or Arjun Appadurai) focus on these inequalities and the communities that bear them and see the opportunity for a “grassroots globalization,” which involves a two-part move vis-à-vis globalization: first, it puts us “in a position . . . to understand the spatio-temporal contradictions inherent in capitalism and, through that understanding, better position ourselves to exploit the weakest link and so explode the worst horrors of capitalism’s penchant for violence though ‘creative’ destruction;” (Harvey 5) and simultaneously, it gives us the potential to recognize that the disintegration of state-bound infrastructure creates opportunities to re-imagine social life, as an emancipated social imagination “. . . informs the daily lives of ordinary people in myriad ways: it allows people to consider migration, resist state violence, seek social redress, and design new forms of civic association and collaboration, often across national boundaries.” (Appadurai 6)

While such hopeful rhetoric is entirely salutary, we shouldn’t lose sight of the very real contemporary consequences that are involved in bypassing whole communities—consequences which more often than not are obstacles to grassroots community building rather than disjunctive sites ripe for political exploitation. Identifying and then making use of these sites of inequality requires abandoning high abstraction (which is endemic in the academic literature on globalization), and instead needs to be articulated (and imagined) in crude, everyday terms: what happens to people when they are deprived the infrastructural guarantees nation-states afforded them? Where do people go when access to roads are denied them? Where does one turn after welfare benefits are revoked—for healthcare, subsidized transportation, for food? If waste treatment plants bypass you as an

individual, how do you get a clean glass of water for you and your family to drink? While such crude issues may not immediately be voiced in communities being restructured by the effects of globalization, I nonetheless contend that they subtly inform the social imaginary as it acclimatizes to a new emergent global order (and most especially for bypassed communities). One is less likely to discover how such issues impact the social and cultural imaginary in the heady statistics agglomerated around the financial sector of a given economy; rather, one needs to turn to the cultural imagining of these issues—even risk wandering into (pop-)cultural production.

II. Clearing the Road for the 21st Century: Taipei as Cybercity

“Taiwan is somehow within the world system as its citizens are in their city boxes: prosperity and constriction all at once . . . the failure of the classically urban to constitute itself standing in some intimate relationship and counterpoint to the failure of the classical psychic subject to constitute itself.” (Jameson 155)

If economic indicators are the authoritative source for measuring whether a given city is “global” or not, then it is easy enough to confer the title on Taipei. While notable econometric indexes like the UN’s annual “Table 1” in the *Human Development Report* and The World Bank’s *World Development Report* omit Taiwan for political reasons, the World Economic Forum (WEF) does include Taiwan in its annual *Global Competitiveness Report*, which ranks countries on “the ability . . . to achieve sustained high rates of growth in GDP per capita . . . over the next five to ten years, on the basis of each country’s current economic conditions and institutions.” Taiwan ranked fourth in 1999, tenth in 2000 and, most recently, seventh in 2001.⁴ Moreover, during the Asian financial crisis of the late 90s, Taiwan steered an impressively steady course in a tumultuous environment, falling back on its considerable holdings of foreign-exchange reserves to fend off any potential speculators considering mounting a raid on the Taiwan

dollar. Relatively strong and enforced bank regulations, moreover, have prevented bad loans and the accumulation of huge unpayable domestic debt—financial situations that proved disastrous for other countries in the region.⁵ In 1998, Taiwan was the world's seventh-largest foreign investor, and incoming foreign capital more often than not is direct investment (as opposed to portfolio investment) which solidifies Taiwan's interconnectedness in a global financial network. By these and other indicators, it is evident that Taiwan (and, by extension, Taipei as the island's financial and manufacturing center) is most assuredly integrated into a global structuration of capital flow, and Taiwan's recent admittance into the WTO only serves to further confirm this successful integration.

But imagining Taipei as a global city entails more than being able to quantifiably demonstrate the degree to which Taipei either is or is not successfully integrated into global flows of finance. Focusing exclusively on financial indicators as evidence of Taipei's status as a global city overlooks the anxiety of the city's own self-image as a (potential) global city. In part, this anxiety derives from Taiwan's unique historical and political situation, in which diplomatically it is by-and-large denied the status of a legitimate nation-state, and instead is recognized internationally only through "trade offices." This lends itself to two different reactions: one, an enthusiastic identification with globalization as an empowering social dynamic that circumvents the ever-present issue of Taiwan's status as a nation-state; or second, a source of profound dissatisfaction with globalization, since it further frustrates Taiwanese citizens from being able to declare themselves sovereign and hence free to decide their own fate—for if "globalization [is] a definite marker of a new crisis for the sovereignty of nation-states" (Appadurai 4), Taiwan experiences this crisis two-fold: first, by being denied the legitimacy of recognized sovereignty in a world system of nation-states, and then again by being denied the promise of any future sovereignty by the very logic of globalization. In any event, either reaction must contend with the very real security issues surrounding Mainland China's national claim on Taiwan that could at any moment undermine the island's stable economic, social

and political structures that are the bed-rock of Taiwan's local identity and from which it can project either a global and/or sovereign national identity.

Internally, moreover, there is a sense that while Taiwan has accommodated globalization forces, there is, in the end, little to show for it. A typical report on Taiwan in the 1990s reads as follows:

Taiwan's air is worse than that of Los Angeles. Less than 3% of its sewage is treated; its urban waterways are malodorous cesspools. Rates of disease, including asthma and cancer, have exploded, as have alcoholism and drug abuse. The divorce rate has doubled since 1980, becoming the highest in Asia. Increasing numbers of Taiwanese are seeking psychiatric counseling for such maladies as panic attacks. As fewer and fewer Taiwanese are willing to settle for the cheap wages and sweatshop conditions that produced the island's economic miracle, manufacturers are turning elsewhere for labor—Southeast Asia and even mainland China.⁶

A contradiction is being raised: Taiwanese citizens have gained the luxury to spurn manufacturing jobs that were the impetus behind its "economic miracle" (those jobs largely being replaced by jobs in the information technology sector), and yet environmental and social conditions are far from those of a "First World" country/metropolis. Herein lies much of the anxiety around how Taipei sees itself and is seen by others: on the one hand, technologically savvy and fully integrated into the global economy; on the other hand, ecologically and infrastructurally beset by all sorts of intractable problems that prevent it from entering the fold of "true" global cities.

These infrastructural inadequacies play heavily in the social imaginary of the city. One such infrastructural problem that figures prominently in representations of the city is road-vehicle density—a constant source of anxiety over Taipei's ability to maintain a global competitiveness and also a high quality-of-life standard. The same news report quoted above that highlights the darker side(s) of Taiwanese prosperity informs us that in the mid-1990s, road-vehicle

density was twenty times that of the United States! Relatedly, road-vehicle density is portrayed as a barrier to the city's status as a global city—for if one hallmark of globalization is the unhindered flow of goods, people and services, a city perpetually paralyzed with traffic congestion undermines its ability to convincingly represent itself as a global city.

Two high-profile city government projects have addressed this issue. The first was prominent during current President Chen Shui-bian's tenure as mayor of Taipei—namely, the construction of the Taipei Rapid Transit System (TRTS). Approved by the Executive Yuan in 1986, it took a full decade before the first medium-capacity line was opened for commercial use. In subsequent years, more lines have been opened, with the claim by the company of “ending perennial traffic jams” in the city (a dubious claim as anyone who has lived in Taipei can attest.)⁷ It is outside the purview of this paper to give a history of the system's construction (replete with citizen opposition to displacement and accusations of construction disproportionately benefiting the wealthier East side of Taipei vs. the more industrially oriented West side) or to give an assessment of the social and economic impact the TRTS has had on local communities (which is perhaps too early to tell anyway); rather, I'd like to turn to one representation of how the TRTS impacts the social imaginary of Taipei, as articulated in a recent publication, *Zai Taipei shengcun de yi bai ge liyou*, or *Taipei 100*.

A collective project, *Taipei 100* is a sort of alternative “underground” guidebook to Taipei published in 1998 which catalogues “100 reasons to live in Taipei.” Interestingly, since it is written in Chinese and makes repeated reference and comparisons to other “global cities,” its audience seems to be native residents who nonetheless either have lived abroad or possess the means to relocate. The purpose of the book, then, is to convince its readers (and itself) that Taipei is an emerging global city worth living in. But at the same time, it repeatedly voices a profound anxiety about Taipei's “unevenness”—an unevenness both within the city and vis-à-vis other global cities. This unevenness perpetually threatens to deprive Taipei with a global perspective and makes the city appear to be “deficient.”

In a section of the book entitled “Dreams,” the construction of Taipei’s mass transit system figures prominently. As one of the 100 reasons to live in Taipei, the MRT (as Taipei’s mass transit system is popularly called) is nonetheless anxiously fraught with contradictions. Both the Chinese and English titles highlight this anxiety-ridden aspect of the MRT’s contribution to Taipei’s attractiveness as a global city: the Chinese reads, “A Subwayless Third World City,” while the English reads “a bit too late but yes, we’ve got subway too . . . ”.⁸ The text proceeds by claiming that with the acquisition of the MRT, Taipei can console itself that even though it’s no Tokyo, London, New York or Paris, it also shouldn’t be grouped with such “Third World” cities as Ho Chi Minh, Panama City or Manila—at least Taipei has a subway! But what’s curious about the representation of the MRT in this text is its inability to thrust Taipei into ranks of “true” global cities. Written at a time when Taipei was serviced by only one line of the MRT, the book is highly self-conscious of how inadequately the MRT services the city in comparison with full-fledged global cities like New York, Paris, Tokyo, London or Hong Kong.

Even visually, maps are provided of these cities’ subway lines while Taipei is left out of the picture. Lines connect the Mass Transits maps of each city, giving the impression that while being individually distinct, their shared quality of possessing an extensive subway system connects these cities in some meaningful way. By extension, one prominent feature of the “narrative” that accompanies the maps is the contention that citizens of these cities are properly familiar with how to read and thus navigate the infrastructural make-up of a global city, and yet may find themselves lost in a “subwayless” city. In contrast, Taipei citizens are by default somehow less capable of navigating global spatiality; or, if the citizens themselves can acquire this ability to navigate global spatiality, Taipei as an urban entity cannot acquire or construct a common global spatiality that other citizens of “true” global cities could easily navigate (this is emphasized through the verbal depiction of a hopelessly lost foreigner trying to make sense of Taipei’s antiquated bus route system). Taipei being visually excluded, text which accompanies the map give historical reasons for Taipei missing

earlier opportunities to construct a more efficient and integrated subway (blamed on Jiang Kai-shek's single-minded objective of regaining the Mainland and ignoring the needs of Taiwan—a dead give away of the book's editors' political affiliation with the DDP) while also articulating a belated modernity that demonstrates why Taipei's MRT does not adequately function as a constitutive element in Taipei's bid to be a global city. The last paragraph of the section contrast the effects a stoppage of Tokyo's subway system would have on its economy to such effects on Taipei. Whereas Tokyo would experience a devastating loss, such an event would hardly impact Taipei. But this is no source of comfort—rather, it is evidence of the degree to which “true” global cities’ physical infrastructures contribute to their successful integration to the global economy, whereas Taipei’s lack of an efficient infrastructure that successfully integrates into the emerging global order. Hence the contradictory nature of the section’s title—yes, Taipei possesses a subway, yet it still functions and behaves as a “subwayless Third World city.”

The second project which addresses the problem of road-vehicle density is currently underway and headed up by the present mayor of Taipei, Ma Ying-jeou. This project focuses less on physical infrastructure and turns instead to cyber-structure as the promise of the future to relieve the intractable problems of traffic congestion in Taipei. An ambitious plan “to provide network services on the same commodity principles of existing public utilities,” Ma Ying-jeou outlined the objectives and planning structure of the project at The 2000 World Congress On Information Technology in June, 2000.⁹ Significantly, his speech is prefaced with statistics of population density that make the search for innovative solutions necessary:

Taipei's total landmass of 271 square kilometers is home to a population of 2.6 million residents. That works out to a population density of around 9,600 people per square kilometer. The number of vehicles per kilometer of city road is 1,058. To give you some perspective, Tokyo, Singapore, and Hong Kong have 141, 173, and 267 respectively.

Ma argues that such high-density necessitates abandoning the traditional mindset of building upon physical infrastructure as a solution and must turn instead to cyberspace as an expedient potential source of alleviating Taipei's congestion. Working closely with the private sector, Mayor Ma outlines Taipei's ambitious plan to integrate information technology into the operations of city government, explore educational reforms that will promote citizen participation in the project and, finally, provide the public interface network to non-governmental sectors that will promote economic competitiveness for the city. All of this is done on behalf of the citizens of Taipei, "to solve the issue of transportation . . . [so that] the citizens of Taipei will no longer have to spend time on the road running errands or even commuting to work."

While this plan has many worthwhile goals, it is important to point out that the entire project is predicated on public citizens having the resources to participate in the project—that is, owning a personal computer. Mayor Ma contends that "surveys showed that some 78.3% of Taipei's households owned computers, while 57.2% of people knew how to go on-line." While these numbers are encouraging at such an early stage of the project (and, one suspects, somewhat inflated¹⁰), they nonetheless should give pause to the discerning reader. How is "computer" being defined here? Is there an age differential in the breakdown of who knows how to get on-line? Is there a class differential? Any concentration in the residency of a know-how population vs. those without knowledge?

This ambitious plan conforms to some of the issues already touched on in this paper: a closely imbricated relationship between the public sector and the private sector creating a polarized population between valued users (those with PCs) and non-valued users (those without). Indeed, Mayor Ma envisions an emerging definition of citizenship in the new global order: "citizens will become modern 'net' citizens." The lingering question is, of course, what about those who fall through this net? What recourse will they have if they have no on-ramp to an informational highway that purports to be their best (perhaps only) access to the public services that will provide for them?

III. Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*

“ . . . the time is the near future, the period of choice for the kind of science fiction in which the future is not the result of miraculous evolution, but of the sinister statistics that already effect the present. This is not to imply that globalization will carry the day so that everyone shares the same vast and stable repertory of signs and affects. On the contrary, the gods that preside over our destinies, or rather over their deterioration, have been cast out of Olympus, here, there and everywhere. They are just as homeless as their creatures.” (Rehm 30)

Commissioned as part of a French TV anthology, “2000 As Seen By . . . ,” which solicited movies from up-and-coming directors around the world, Tsai Ming-liang’s fourth feature film, *The Hole*, is a dystopic representation of Taipei in the final week of the 20th century. The DVD capsule of the movie provides a narrative skeleton from which we can flesh out the significance of the movie vis-à-vis globalization:

Seven days to the 21st century: the rain will not let up in Taiwan, and a strange disease reaches epic proportions. Despite evacuation warnings, the tenants of a run-down public housing building stay put. A plumber has been sent to Hsiao Kang’s apartment, but instead of fixing the leak, he leaves a gaping hole in the middle of the living room. Through the hole, Kang spies on his downstairs neighbor, a woman who stockpiles toilet paper and dreams about singing and dancing in Kang’s arms.¹¹

Perhaps already we can see how allegorically this Kafkesque tale speaks to the issue surrounding globalization as conceptualized in this paper: public housing citizens being quarantined into a non-valued space which requires them to fall back on informal coping strategies for survival. Moreover, as a movie commissioned as a specific local

representative of the global preoccupation with the fin-de-siècle Zeitgeist (with its attendant anxieties over the millennium bug, millenarian terrorism, etc.), it clearly is being asked to situate itself within the confluence of, at the very least, cultural globalization. Thus, a closer reading of the film will demonstrate the degree to which issues of globalization are engaged, albeit covertly so.

The film opens with a stream of voices complaining about the government's insensitivity to the plight of residents in areas of Taipei that are being designated as quarantined zones and ordered to evacuate. Significantly, we do not physically see the speakers, rather they are disembodied voices speaking into the darkness of the screen—thus rendering them “in the dark,” out of the public eye (visually bypassed). The complaints voiced are that the government has simply waited until the disease reached epidemic proportions and then acted belatedly.¹² Moreover, their solution is one that seems designed to deprive these citizens of any real viable living options—“will we just become refugees (*nanmin*) living in tents,” asks one woman. The threat of revoking public services (i.e. trash pickup) is a prominent issue: one man says, “I’ll just throw my trash where I or no one else can see it,” while another angrily says, “they should just burn us and the trash together, there’s a solution!” Indeed, the revocation of public utilities (specifically, water service) is the government’s latest ploy to force the residents’ hand and evacuate the quarantined zones of the city, as the official representative voice of the Taiwan Health Administration warns will happen at midnight of Jan. 1, 2000.¹³

This opening social heteroglossia is not sustained throughout the film, as subsequent action in the film is almost entirely devoid of this confrontational set-up of government vs. the people; but precisely because it is framed as such, we are being encouraged to view what unfolds as directly related to social policy decisions (unique in Tsai’s otherwise rather uniform oeuvre to date). The rest of the film documents the deterioration of a woman who has “contracted” and eventually succumbs to the “Taiwan Virus” or “Taiwan Fever”—a sort of millennium disease whose symptoms include acute photophobia and a tendency to crawl around on the floor and behave like a cockroach.

The conflation of quarantined residents with cockroaches is made explicit on the news (which is a constant back-ground and eerily cheerful noise in the first half of the film; but which, significantly, we never see only hear, thus instructing us about the relation these citizens have with media and political structures—informed by them, but unable to meaningfully interacting with them). This conflation of citizens with household pests is also visually reinforced when we first see the hole that separates the two protagonists of the film—in a shot of her ceiling/his floor/the hole, a cockroach crawls out, foreshadowing how events will unfold.

We witness the woman's demise largely from the perspective of the man who lives above her, as a plumber has drilled a hole in the floor/ceiling in order to (unsuccessfully) discover and repair a leak. The exposure of the pipes is crucial, as it denotes the hidden agent partially behind the deteriorating conditions the woman is falling prey to. Her "illness" is best understood not primarily as a biological disease, but socially contracted through the deteriorating physical and social infrastructure around her, evident by the way in which her apartment becomes increasingly flooded throughout the film, mirroring the woman's own physical manifestations of the disease. Almost all the scenes which are shot outside reinforce how the epidemic is as likely to be caused by a failing social and physical infrastructure as "naturally" occurring: we see bags of garbage fall along with the unrelenting rain. At first viewing, this is incredibly surrealistic, as the overall impression imparted by the film is of a depopulated city—it's as though these bags of garbage are a natural byproduct of Taiwan's ecology! Upon further reflection, we realize that this garbage is the only evidence that the two anonymous characters live in anything resembling a community—a community which must, perforce, remain fragmented and concealed to forestall forced mass evacuation.

The visual depopulation of such a densely populated city as Taipei registers the dark side of how the discourse on globalization plays in the social imaginary. If the wholly laudatory goals of Mayor Ma's efforts to make Taipei a cybercity can in part be read as an attempt to make the home more efficiently integrated into the global forces

restructuring social urban life, *The Hole* vents an entirely different suspicion in which we see the consequences of individuals being rendered redundant, non-valued users; rendered physically immobile in a concerted social effort to accommodate to the mobility of global capital—that is to say, clear the streets and keep everyone home in a virtual community. Outside of the apartment building/home, the only other place where action takes place is in a deserted indoor market in the basement of the building where the man upstairs goes to work daily despite the lack of customers. This defiant attitude may either be read as incredibly valiant (persevering in the face of adversity with his daily routine), or as a profound denial of what’s happening around him. Or, perhaps most plausibly and most discouraging, this behavior should be read as total incomprehension of how the traditional marketplace is becoming obsolete as a meaningful social space. In any event, the abandoned market-space is the scene of the one time when we see city officials taking any action against the “disease.” After a scene in which we watch a butcher who has succumbed to the virus being hauled away, we see masked city workers armed with extermination canisters storm the market and begin a massive effort to spray the entire area with insecticide. This in turn convinces residents that they should spray their own homes too, as it is speculated on the news that cockroaches are the carriers of the disease. The following scene shows the woman downstairs furiously spraying her own apartment and very dramatically spraying the hole too, which has the effect of driving the protagonists out of their own homes. The question then becomes whether this extermination effort is directed at roaches or at people—a suspicion that is reinforced by the manifestations of the disease reducing those infected to bugs themselves, and visually reinforced when we see a little old lady in the background of the market/mass spraying scene scurry away like a roach herself.

While the “Taiwan virus” and its attendant social strains is never directly related to globalization in the film (thus making my reading vulnerable perhaps to charges of a reductive reading that some prominent critics have criticized as all too prevalent vis-à-vis “non-Western” texts¹⁴), I would nonetheless reiterate that a work

commissioned to envision what the turn of the millennium means for society is strongly informed by a discourse on globalization. Moreover, within the film, representatives from supranational health organizations figure prominently in explaining what course of actions local residents should take to effectively deal with their problem (the irony of Tsai's film distributed in 1998 coinciding with the Asian financial crisis being "treated" by supranational organizations like the IMF and World Bank shouldn't be lost on anyone). As such, the film expresses an anxiety that globalization experienced from below is one that threatens to infect and deprive a citizenry of valuable public resources—a virtual re-creation of the effects of infrastructural unbundling unfolding before our eyes.

One aspect of the film I have not touched upon are the campy song and dance sequences that punctuate the narrative of the film. In these scenes, we see the woman downstairs dance and lip-synch to the music of Hong Kong chanteuse Grace Chang (Ge Lan), a 1950s screen idol of the Hollywood-style musicals of that era. As a sequence, these counter-balancing scenes provide a conventional Hollywood love story subplot between the woman downstairs and the man upstairs. They are an important structuring principle in the movie as they remind us that the characters have more aspirations in life (romantic, erotic, etc.) than the heroic and exhausting efforts they go to in order to keep their daily lives at the threshold of subsistent livability. In contrast, I read these musical sequences as a version of articulating what Appadurai identifies as "[the] positive force . . . [of] an emancipatory politics of globalization . . . [in] the role of the imagination in social life." (Appadurai 6) Reading these scenes as signs of a nascent hopefulness in this otherwise bleak representation of life in the emerging global order culminates in the final scene where we see the arm of the man upstairs reach down and offer the woman (who at this point has fully succumbed to the virus) a glass of water. After taking the glass and drinking, the man reaches back down and offers his hand. After pausing, the woman takes hold of his outstretched hand and is lifted off screen and up into his apartment. The movie ends with the couple slow dancing while Grace Chang sings "I don't care who you are, I just want

you to hold me tight.”

How can these seemingly frivolous, campy fantasy sequences productively be read as articulating “an emancipatory politics” vis-à-vis globalization? I would argue that Tsai tactically and artfully constructs a temporal and spatial bridge to a psychic territory of nostalgic community. The song-and-dance numbers become a subtle politics of reminding the viewing audience of the potential of community. To convincingly engage this potential, let me turn to Andrew Ross’ seminal essay, “Uses of Camp,” in which he provocatively argues that camp needs to be defined “. . . in relation to the exercise of cultural power,” and is therefore used by “arriviste groups” in such a way that:

Because of their marginality, because they lack inherited cultural capital, and thus the accredited power to fully legitimize dominant tastes, these groups parody their subordinate or uncertain social status in a ‘self-mocking abdication of any pretensions to power.’ (Ross 64)

This is precisely how the song-and-dance sequences function in the overall structure of *The Hole*. They oppose the serious, contemporary dreariness of the protagonists living on either side of the hole in a beguiling effort to draw the viewing audience into thinking about them as other than defeated citizens in world plagued by the disease of globalization, consequently articulating a nascent politics of community in the process of creating the camp effects.

The camp nostalgia deployed in *The Hole* is at once a send-up of how nostalgia is constructed in much of contemporary Chinese cinema, and at the same time a send-up of how Hollywood musicals have traditionally mediated social relations of audience and film production. Rey Chow has extensively theorized on how best to understand nostalgia as it operates in 1980s and 1990s films of the PRC, Hong Kong and Taiwan, writing that

If the experience of technology means that human separation itself

need no longer be mournful because of diminished travel distances, it also means that our relations to the past are drastically altered because of the unprecedented disintegration of stationary places. Nostalgia now appears differently, working by a manipulation of temporality rather than by a simple projection of lack/loss onto space. If and when the past is to be (re)collected, it is (re)collected in compressed forms, forms that are fantasies of time. (Chow, "Souvenir" 135)

While most immediately applying this observation to her analysis of Stanley Kwan's *Rouge*, she explicitly speculates that this logic of nostalgia "may well be the episteme of Chinese cultural production in the 1980s and 1990s." (Chow, "Souvenir" 146) And, indeed, this understanding of nostalgia seems to go a long way in addressing how nostalgia operates in Taiwanese film, as especially exemplified in the films of Hou Hsiao-hsien (and, perhaps to a lesser extent, Edward Yang). Tsai Ming-liang's *The Hole*, however, deviates from this construction of nostalgia in significant ways. The implicit assumption of spatial mobility, for example, is precisely what is being fought for in *The Hole*. These characters do indeed mourn for a stationary social space where meaningful social relations can be nurtured. Instead of nurture, we see Hsiao Kang (the man upstairs) hide when someone rings his doorbell lest it be the authorities there to evict him. The upshot of this camp attitude towards nostalgic community as has been articulated in other Greater Chinese cinema is that Tsai eventually tries to circumvent how "in the nostalgic filmic image, the entire world turns into a sadly beautiful souvenir . . . if its compressed images always convey a sense of loss and melancholy, nostalgia also works by concealing and excluding the dirty and unpleasant elements of social hardships." (Chow, "Souvenir" 148) As is self-evident in the very synopsis of the DVD of *The Hole*, this is a film that if anything revels in "the dirty and unpleasant elements of social hardships;" thus, its deployment of nostalgia negotiates an entirely different politics than that ultimately critiqued as "mythic" (and hence not viable) by Rey Chow.

The camp politics of community being articulated in *The Hole* also strategically engage conventions of the classic Hollywood musical in an effort to both stir our inherited notions of how musicals construct notions of community and also to overcome our anticipated dismissal of such an articulation as being entirely outmoded; which is to say that camp, as Andrew Ross argues, “. . . is the *re-creation of surplus value from forgotten forms of labor.*” (Ross 67, his emphasis) Tsai intuitively plumbs the potential of this understanding of camp, attempting to retrieve from 1950s musicals an aesthetic that purports to “break down the barriers between art and life,” as Jane Feuer argues is the underlying “myth” produced by musicals. Feuer gives a detailed reading of three categories of myth integral to the classic Hollywood musical: 1) the myth of spontaneity, or how musical performance is represented as “spontaneous emergence out of a joyous and responsive attitude toward life,” creating an overall impression of “naturalness;” 2) the myth of integration, in which “successful performances are intimately bound up with success in love, with the integration of the individual into a community or a group” (447); and finally, 3) the myth of audience, which “manages to incorporate the immediate performer-audience relationship . . . into filmic space” in a concerted effort to have the audience “shown as participating in the production of entertainment,” thus consolidating the created effect of community to extend to the medium of film itself¹⁵

To varying degrees, Tsai’s use of musical elements contribute to the camp politics of emancipation. Upon first viewing, it may seem that the music sequences are jarringly disconnected to the overall trajectory of the woman downstairs’s eventual contraction of the Taiwan fever and subsequent demise. In fact, the trajectories of the two strands in the film are inversely related; which is to say that as the woman becomes increasingly ill and more in need of someone’s help, the song-and-dance sequences so too become increasingly elaborate, involve more people (including the man upstairs) and eventually intersect in the penultimate “Sneezing” (“Da Penti”) song-and-dance number in which the first evidence of physical symptoms of the fever segues effortlessly into the “A-a-a-choo! Gesundheit” salvo beginning

the song. Thus, while the first number (“Calypso”) seems to come out of nowhere, the myth of spontaneity with its attendant simulation of naturalness is gradually anticipated and accepted by the audience in the course of the film. Similarly, the sub-plot of a developing love relationship between the two protagonist is evidenced by the way in which Hsiao Kang eventually is integrated into the song-and-dance sequences, culminating in the final sequence in which the couple becomes the prototype for thinking about meaningful social relations in a dystopic space otherwise not conducive to social relations. And it is also the character of Hsiao Kang that simultaneously stands in for the viewing audience, as he clears a space around the hole and gazes longingly into the space in the same way the film audience gazes at the film. His various attempts to physically crawl through the barrier that separates them articulates a desire to create a community with this woman, offering “. . . a vision of musical performance originating in the folk, generating love and a cooperative spirit that includes everyone in its grasp and that can conquer all obstacles.” (Feuer 449) Implicitly, we are encouraged as an audience to identify and empathize with these wistful antics of trying to traverse the space through which they can only see each other, not interact (like a movie screen). After all, it almost doesn’t occur to the viewer of the film that the man upstairs would be more successful getting to the woman not through the hole, but by taking the stairs and going through the door. We willingly suspend that notion as it would undermine the “myth of the audience’s” participation in the emergent community of the film.

Of course it is doubtful that Tsai self-consciously engaged these elements of the self-reflexive musical as diagrammatically analyzed by Feuer; rather, it is that *The Hole* intuitively participates in the “ritual function of the musical:”

All ritual involves the celebration of shared values and beliefs; the ritual function of the musical is to reaffirm and articulate the place that entertainment occupies in its audience’s psychic lives. (453)

And given the perhaps bankrupt cultural capital musicals possess

when it comes to articulating a community politics, Tsai Ming-liang can only use the genre in a highly campy manner. But the surprising effect of the last scene in which the protagonists slow dance to Ge Lan's song "Wo buguan ni shi shei" is that Tsai manages to lift the film out of any campiness while simultaneously articulating a rudimentary politics of community for otherwise bypassed individuals in this globalized, dystopic future (now, ironically, already behind us). For if "camp, as Thomas Hess put it, 'exists in the smirk of the beholder,'" (Ross 63) the true measure of this film's success is that it wipes that smirk right off the face of the beholder and sobers him up to the underlying social effects globalization is producing in spatial territories not only increasingly bypassed by social infrastructure but also by too many academic accounts of globalization.

IV. Conclusion: Towards a Map of the Whole Picture

The impetus behind this paper came out of a sense of frustration with how indices of globalization were by-and-large predicated on mapping how the flow of capital can be represented spatially—hence, the emergence of a hierarchy of global cities. But while such a topography tells a compelling story, it leaves whole areas—whole *populations*—in *terra incognita*. Even within those cities that qualify as "global cities," the emerging social fabric is riddled with gaping holes of deprivation—environmental, educational, legal and nutritional deprivations, among others. I self-consciously structured this paper so that it starts in an abstracted discursive realm, turns to physical representations of how Taipei relates to other (global) cities, then to city governmental efforts to reapportion citizens' experience of space from physical navigation to virtual interaction in a cyber-space, and finally tries to get a picture of how by-passed citizens in this emergent topography might be represented and imagine themselves—imagine themselves not only as victims of the effects of infrastructural bypass, but also as a viable, resistant community with an identifiable politics, however rudimentary. In the construction of emergent topographies of globalization, one hopes that not only highly abstract models of the

capital flow will be mapped, but that to get at the whole picture, cultural production is explored in effort to hear communities that cannot speak in the language of traded capital and/or technical or academic expertise.

NOTES

¹ Harvey argues that globalization has been an integral factor in capitalist development from its very inception, and quotes the *Communist Manifesto*, "The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to production and consumption in every country . . . All old established national industries have been destroyed or are daily being destroyed. They are dislodged by new industries, whose introduction becomes a life and death question for all civilized nations, by industries that no longer work up indigenous raw material, but raw material drawn from the remotest zones; industries whose products are consumed, not only at home, but in every quarter of the globe. In place of the old wants, satisfied by the production of the country, we find new wants, requiring for their satisfaction the products of distant lands and climes. In place of the old local and national seclusion and self-sufficiency, we have intercourse in every direction, universal interdependence of nations. And as in material, so also in intellectual production. The intellectual creations of individual nations become common property. National one-sidedness and narrow-mindedness become more and more impossible, and from the numerous national and local literatures, there arises a world literature." Remarkably prescient, given the contemporary discourse on globalization! David Harvey, "Globalization in Question," *Rethinking Marxism*, vol. 8, no. 4 (Winter 1995).

² Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man*. (New York: Free Press, 1992), 275.

³ James H. Mittleman, *The Globalization Syndrome: Transformation and Resistance*. (Princeton, NJ: Princeton UP, 2000), 6.

⁴ <http://www.weforum.org/pdf/gcr/Overall_Competitiveness_Rankings.pdf> and <<http://www.weforum.org/publications/gcr/99rankings.asp>>.

⁵ Lynn T. White III, "Taiwan and Globalization," in *East Asia and Globalization*, ed. by Samuel S. Kim. (Lanham, Maryland: Rowman &

Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2000). 151–86.

⁶ Donald Smith, “Taiwan’s New Prosperity Is Exacting a Heavy Toll,” *Los Angeles Times*, May 14, 1995, 18.

⁷ <<http://www.trtc.com.tw/englishnew/abouttrtc01.htm>>

⁸ Please see attachment. From Huang Weizong, et al. *Zai Taipei shengcun de yi bai ge liyou*. (Taipei: Daguai Wenhua Publ., 1998). 187–190.

⁹ Transcript of his speech available on the web, <http://www.taipei.gov.tw/English/building_cybercity.htm>

¹⁰ Ping-hui Liao, in contrast, claims that “only 18 percent of the residents of [Taiwan’s] urban areas own at least one computer per family,” which is a practically an unreconcilable difference between the two! Neither quoted statistic, however, provides a credible source. At any rate, the main thrust of my argument stands regardless of which number one sides with. See Ping-hui Liao, “Postmodern Literary Discourse and Contemporary Public Culture in Taiwan,” in *Postmodernism & China*, ed. by Arif Dirlik and Xudong Zhang (Durham: Duke UP, 2000): 68–88.

¹¹ Tsai Ming-liang, *The Hole*, DVD/Fox Lorber Films. (New York: Winstar TV & Video, 2000).

¹² This fortuitously echoes complaints against the central government vis-à-vis constructing a functional mass transit system, as has been remarked on earlier.

¹³ A governmental strategy reminiscent of Chen Shui-bian’s tactics of “cleaning up” the seamier sides of Taipei during his tenure as mayor of the city, in which he forced the closure of thousands of video-game parlors and hundreds of saunas and karaoke nightclubs which were a front for prostitution dens. He also cut off power and water supplies to brothels in a concerted effort to force their hand. For a perceptive account of resistant communities to urban gentrification during this period, see Hsin-Huang Michael Hsiao and Hwa-Jen Liu’s “Collective Action toward a Sustainable City: Citizens’ Movements and Environmental Politics in Taipei” (Evans 2002).

¹⁴ Rey Chow, for example, criticizes “the tendency, whenever a non-Western work is being analyzed, to affix to it a kind of reflectionist value by way of geopolitical realism,” or what she has termed “coercive mimeticism.” See Rey Chow, “Nostalgia of the New Wave: Structure in Wong Kar-wai’s *Happy Together*,” *Camera Obscura* 42 (1999): 31–49.

¹⁵ ited passages assembled variously from Jane Feuer, "The Self-Reflexive Musical and the Myth of Entertainment," in *Film Genre Reader*, ed. by Barry Keith Brant. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1986): 441–455.

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