

A Thesis of Stillness: A Study of Edmund Yeo's *Aqérat*

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Abstract

Edmund Yeo is a prominent figure in the contemporary Malaysian film scene. A prolific filmmaker, he has directed fourteen short films and feature films to date and has won international awards. In his 2017 film, *Aqérat (We, the Dead)*, Yeo engages with the ethical dilemmas attendant to contemporary cosmopolitan existence, which this paper proposes presents itself as a limit-experience. The modern valorisation of mobility is a means of envisioning a future in a time when a future cannot be inferred – a means which, as recent mobility studies have highlighted, is accessible only to a privileged few. This paper examines the way in which Yeo's film deconstructs the myth of mobility through the portrayal of the struggles of disenfranchised minorities in Malaysia, namely the Rohingya people and the Malaysian-Chinese population. Beginning with a discussion of mobility's significance in the Malaysian context, it goes on to argue that *Aqérat* registers a critique of a capitalist progressive time. In its place, Yeo's film proposes a thesis of stillness through the citation of slow cinema – a humanist thesis that prioritises the forging of human relationships as a means of negotiating the limit-experience that is the present.

Keywords

Edmund Yeo, Malaysian film, mobility studies, cinematic temporality, slow cinema

Introduction

Edmund Yeo (b. 1984) is the youngest Malaysian director to compete in the Venice International Film Festival with his Japanese-language short, *Kingyo* (2009). Yeo also directed the first Malaysian film in history to screen in the main section of the Tokyo International Film Festival (*River of Exploding Durians*, 2014), at which his 2017 feature film, *Aqérat (We, the Dead)*, won him the Best Director award. The considerable attention his films have received on the

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international film circuit is more than sufficient reason to warrant Yeo a closer critical look than he has hitherto been given. As David C. L. Lim notes, Southeast Asian films (and their directors) have long been overshadowed by their more established East Asian counterparts and have only begun to gain recognition in the past decade (1). This article is an attempt at filling this gap in the conversation surrounding Yeo, who, along with his cohort of 'indie' filmmakers such as Woo Ming Jin (b. 1976) and Tan Chui Mui (b. 1978), are redefining the Malaysian, and therefore the Southeast Asian, film landscape.

Yeo's inspiration for *Aqérat* was the discovery of mass graves in Wang Kelian, Perlis on the Thai-Malaysian border in 2015, which were suspected to contain bodies of Rohingya refugees. In addition to the graves, a system of detention camps used for human trafficking was also found. The scale of the operation was such as to suggest the involvement of both the Thai and the Malaysian peoples, and it is this rather than the crisis proper that Yeo explores in *Aqérat*. "[It] was a wake up call," says Yeo ("Interview"), especially for a country whose top officials have repeatedly failed to address the situation (Beh, "Malaysia"). Yeo is less interested in condemning the perpetrators of the violence (be they Burmese, Malaysian or Thai) than he is in exploring the psyche of the traffickers who exploited and continue to exploit the situation. As he states: "I wanted to know what made us so desperate that we were willing to do whatever it takes to survive economically" (Gallagher, "New film"). As such, he places the personal drama of a young Malaysian lady, Hui Ling, who lives on the Thai-Malaysia border, in the foreground. Hui Ling is saving to move to Taiwan in hope of a better life. When the money is stolen, she resorts to working as a human trafficker.

This essay examines Yeo's engagement with the ethical dilemmas attendant to a twenty-first-century capitalism inseparable from cosmopolitanism, the basis of which is mobility. Tim Cresswell goes as far as to propose that today, mobility – which covers a range of issues including immigration, communication networks and infrastructures, and automobility – can be said to be "central to what it is to be human" (1). At the very least, mobility is an important factor in every modern country's development plans, particularly in the areas of emigration and immigration, and Malaysia is no exception. Malaysia being a multi-ethnic country comprising of *bumiputera* (or indigenous peoples) and settlers from greater Asia who arrived in the country in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries during British colonial rule, mobility and its ramifications here have always been talking points. Furthermore, in recent decades, economic growth has resulted in an influx of migrant workers, 'illegal' and 'legal' alike. The Thai-Malaysia border, in particular, has been an active human trafficking site for Rohingya migrants escaping persecution from the Burmese government at least since 1980. The historical conflict reached a new height in the 2012 Rakhine State riots, which

led to the displacement of more than 100,000 people (Lewis, “Mass graves”). For these refugees who have been long tried in the fires of persecution back home in Myanmar, the Thai-Malaysia border embodies the possibility of *aqérat*, which is ‘afterlife’ in the Rohingya language (Gallagher, “New film”).

These darker aspects of mobility have been covered in recent mobility studies that have given the lie to the conception of mobility, along with equality and individuality, as a principle of modern success. The failure of this narrative is especially glaring at a time when we exist, all of us, more apparently than ever before, in a state of constant flux. We are constantly coming up against the limits of experience – a state that can be clarified by way of the concept of limit-experience. In *Aqérat*, Yeo highlights the potential failure of mobility to redraw or overcome these literal and figurative limits despite purporting to increase connectivity. Furthermore, he also notes its potential to push us closer to these limits and to fix these limits in stone. His film registers a critique of a capitalist progressive time and proposes a thesis of stillness as a means of negotiating contemporary existence.

Limit-experiences and the Complexities of Global Mobility

Michel Foucault speaks of the ‘limit-experience’ as “that point of life which lies as close as possible to the impossibility of living” (31). Influenced by Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Maurice Blanchot (1907-2003), and Georges Bataille (1897-1962), Foucault conceives of the limit-experience as that limit of experience whereby de-subjectification occurs – that is to say, where the subject is torn from itself “in such a way that it is no longer the subject as such, or that it is completely ‘other’ than itself so that it may arrive at its annihilation, its dissociation” (31). As Rosi Braidotti points out, Foucault’s conception of the limit-experience “marks the threshold of (un)sustainability, i.e., it prompts the awareness of fragility and the recognition of contingency” (316). At the same time, it also allows for new relationships to be established between the subject and knowledge, and between the subject and itself “as a knowing subject” (316). For Foucault, the limit-experience is “the way out, the chance to free [himself] from certain traditional philosophical binds” (Foucault 48) – the chance for liberation and hence, transformation. In today’s cosmopolitan world, the potential for transformation is extended to the subject’s relation to others as well as to the material conditions of its existence.

Given the current state of our social, cultural, political, and environmental climates, we are constantly consciously living through limit-experiences. Technology continues its path of exponential growth, changing our very sense of lived experience. The political status quo is endangered by unstable and radical regimes that translate into sustained attacks on cherished ideologies. They continue to unearth the tensions that have always been inherent in the drama of citizenship, as exemplified by the Burmese

government's rejection of the Rohingya community's historical claim to their land, and the subsequent military crackdown and genocide. Meanwhile, we are all the time creeping closer to a climate tipping point; in 2020, the Doomsday Clock has us at 100 seconds to midnight ("Closer than ever").

Culturally, we are also in a period of transition as new relationships are being forged between art, criticism, politics, the environment, and ethics in the aftermath of postmodernism and the theory era; new 'turns' in critical thought are all the time being announced. This is in addition to a more general 'crisis in representation' in the field of aesthetics, which reveals to us, Peter Boxall suggests, "an extraordinary failure of the paradigms with which we have articulated cultural life, and the emergence, as a result of a new kind of inarticulacy, a strange sense of disconnection" (17). Refracted through the specific lens of contemporary Malaysian film, such a 'crisis in representation' involves the departure from a post-independence tradition built around a nationalistic agenda and a search for new forms of experience that are informed by the conditions of an increasingly globalised and visible Malaysia. The work of this generation of Malaysian filmmakers, including Yeo, reflects both the anxieties and the possibilities of being in uncharted waters. Not only is there greater aesthetic experimentation, Hassan Muthalib notes that there is also a distinct attention paid to one's position in contemporary Malaysia (23).

Today, more than ever, we live life on the edge, on a threshold, unable to extrapolate the direction of the world. In his body of work, Yeo frequently situates his characters at the limits of existence to play out the possibilities, devastating and empowering, that come with such an encounter. Physical borders are a common motif. In his *Love Suicides* (2009), for instance, a mother receives mysterious letters from her long-absent, never-seen, possibly dead husband who comments on and influences her and her daughter's day-to-day existence. Described as a tale of "oppression and abuse" ("*Love Suicides*"), the short speaks to and blurs the lines drawn between presence and absence, between love and violence. The unseen husband also figures as a revenant, the embodiment of mourning, which Derrida and Blanchot have spoken of as a limit-experience in *The Work of Mourning* and *The Unavowable Community*, respectively, insofar as death serves as the ultimate limit of human existence. Yeo's 2010 short, *Exhalation*, also confronts this limit: a woman's return to her hometown for a funeral becomes the occasion for a meditation on loss and grief as she is forced to face the reality of the Great Unknown.

Often, it is national boundaries that preoccupy Yeo, and it is here where the concept of limit-experience most evidently intersects the complexities of mobility, particularly as it pertains to movement.² A border is

² Boxall notably figures the crisis in representation as a "response to a world that is more closely connected, more wired up, than anything our immediate forebears could possibly have dreamt of" (17).

after all a mobile point (Adey 134) and mobility harnesses the potential of such a state of uncertainty while seeking to overcome it: it speaks to a specific engagement with time, space, and society and assumes that this relation can be parsed. As Cresswell argues, “Mobility, as a social product, does not exist in an abstract world of absolute time and space, but is a meaningful world of social space and social time” (5). By nature, mobility-as-movement also proposes a trajectory and therefore, a future – specifically a bright future of connectivity, accessibility, individual autonomy, and prosperity. Transport and communications systems and infrastructure are particularly emblematic of these mobile ambitions, harboured by any modern country that wishes to be competitive on a global stage. The attraction of mobility is intensified by the idea that “in the long view, mobility is the norm of our species”; after all, migration and seasonal movement have always been part of the human experience (Schiller and Salazar 3).

National boundaries form the cornerstone of mobility studies, as they also embody the tensions within, “representing potent interstitial moments within . . . homogenizing and reifying discourses [such as that of the nation]” (Cunningham and Heyman 291). Today, as Peter Adey points out, “new forms of flexible citizenship have emerged in response to the liquidities of capital and more permeable borders” (132). At the same time, national borders are increasingly reinforced as a result of global crises, “even as the crisis itself reveals the degree to which the world is intricately networked and interdependent” (Adey 2). The COVID-19 pandemic and the widespread Middle East refugee crises are some of the most recent examples.

***Aqérat*: Mobility and Modern Malaysia**

In *Aqérat*, Yeo depicts contemporary Malaysia as being very much in line with the project of mobility. The aspect of the country that he emphasises is its history of migration and the porousness of its national borders owing to its geographical location. Malaysia is figured as an intersection. The collision of languages in the full title of the film – *Aqérat (We, the Dead)* – enacts the central encounter in the film between the Rohingya refugees and the community living on the Thai-Malaysian border, who speaks a mixture of languages including English. *Aqérat* notably also evokes the Arabic-Islamic term *akbirah* for a similar idea. The very act of meeting suggests Yeo’s emphasis on the *porousness* of borders over the idea of them as impermeable demarcations – as do the multilingual capacities of the characters living on the border that speak to Malaysia’s multiethnicity, which is the result of a long history of migration and of colonisation. The film is set in Kelantan, adjacent to the Thai-Malaysia border. Yeo notes that people there “speak in a very unique Malay dialect that is influenced a little by Thai, so many of us who came from Kuala Lumpur, we needed translators with us” (“Interview”). This history of the porousness of

Malaysia's borders is also cited in *Aqérat* in the form of Buddhist temples, posters bearing the image of Hindu gods, and an old shadow puppet theatre.

In featuring the latter, Yeo evokes the history of Malaysian cinema, which also serves as a chronicle of the many cultures that have passed through and taken root in the country. As Muthalib notes, *wayang kulit*, a form of puppet-shadow play, is recognised as the precursor of Malaysian cinema and is believed to have found its way to the Malay Peninsula from Hinduist Java, Indonesia. Malaysian *wayang kulit* combines elements of Indian Hindu culture with that of Malay Islam culture. The Hindu epics it often draws from (the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*) are either “revised to suit a Muslim ethos: Indian religious figures [are] devalued and the polygamy . . . edited out,” for instance, or replaced with Islamic tales. Puppets are also highly stylised “supposedly to circumvent the Islamic prohibition on representing the human form” (Brandon and Banham 124). The tradition also bears traces of influence from Thai culture, particularly that in Southern Thailand. Thereafter, *wayang kulit* developed into *bangsawan*, a form of Malay opera, before taking on various forms of folk theatre as *bangsawan* troupes passed through Indonesia. Early Malay narrative cinema drew from these art forms in the region as well as from cinema in India, China, and the Philippines, where the industry sought its first directors and producers. Later, Malay film would also come to be influenced by foreign films. In an early scene depicting Hui Ling's visit to the puppet theatre, Yeo pays homage to his precursors in a pan shot of photographs of the luminaries of Malaysian performing arts, including director and actor P. Ramlee, *dalang* Dollah Baju Merah, and *dalang* Eyo Hock Seng – who makes a cameo appearance in the film as Pak Chu, the owner of the puppet theatre.

Yeo himself is a testament to the permeability of national borders, having been born in Singapore before moving to Malaysia. He then studied in Australia and later in Japan, where he is now based. His oeuvre is, unsurprisingly, a chronicle of highly-varied, international sources of inspiration such as Edward Yang, Bela Tarr, and Koreeda Hirokazu (Yeo, “Snapshots”). *Aqérat* draws its two-part structure from Roberto Bolaño's *The Savage Detectives* (1998), which moves between a first-person narration of a coming-of-age narrative and a polyphonic narrative consisting of interviews with a variety of characters on the topic of a fictional poetry movement. Similarly, Yeo's film moves from Hui Ling's personal drama, to Wei's memory, before returning to Hui Ling. Both instances significantly effect a widening of perspective (Yeo, “Interview”). The middle part of the film, which serves as a philosophical piece that delves beneath the material concerns of the film's framing narrative, also notably cites Andrey Tarkovsky's characteristic engagement with cinematic time, which the following discussion explores.

Malaysia's history of immigration and its present globalised modernity define her as being in a state of flux. As such, this makes her an apt setting for

an examination of how mobility can play out the productive and liberating possibilities of limit-experiences, as well as how it can function as a means of negotiating (and negotiating our way out of) limit-experiences. In the contemporary narrative of cosmopolitan capitalism, a border is emphasised as a, to borrow Ali Smith's words (126), "loaded, framed [space]" of magic "through which we pass from one state to another" literally and figuratively. Early mobilities studies tended to celebrate movement as "liberating" and "valuable" (Schiller and Salazar 4). Even in the case of refugees, mobility even if involuntary and limited is readily equated with freedom. As mentioned, in *Aqérat*, the Thai-Malaysia border (and Malaysia, for that matter) is imbued with the potential of an 'afterlife', a safe place if not a paradise, for the Rohingya refugees. For Hui Ling and Qi, the sister of Wei's ex-patient, it is Taiwan and Singapore, respectively, that promise a better life. As Chinese Malaysians, the two women are also seen as "outsider[s] in [their] own country," Yeo notes, "forever seen as foreign, tolerated until [perceived as] a threat" ("Human traffic"). The difference between their situation and that of the refugees, Yeo's film suggests, is one of degree and not of kind.

The Opposite Shore: The Violent Failure of the Mobility Myth

It is in this spirit of overcoming limits, literal and figurative, that the characters in *Aqérat* travel but cannot lay claim to the promise of mobility or the liberating possibilities of limit-experiences. Early mobility studies that valorise movement, speed, and fluidity come across as naïve in light of more recent research that reveals the complexities of mobilities such as their tendency to alter the structure of our societies in profound ways and generate stark inequalities (Adey et al 2; Cunningham and Heyman 289). Insofar as a threshold is a magical space of potential, it is also potentially wounding: an edge also suggests "keenness" and "sharpness" (Smith 126). If borders function as sites that project "the possibility of hybridities and crossings," they also simultaneously "make power [and the lack thereof] visible" (Cunningham and Heyman 291) – and potentially in more insidious forms than political apparatus. If the myth of mobility imbues borders with the potential for a better life, it similarly does so with the potential for the opposite as well. Uncertainty and danger are the other side of the coin.

Aqérat points out that for certain sectors of the community, it is this side that the coin tends to fall on, as the risks that come with limit-experiences are unequally allocated to them. Upon arrival, the refugees find themselves at the mercy of their traffickers who extort money from the relatives of refugees in exchange for their freedom. Those who are unable to find the money are beaten up or killed, their bodies buried in secluded beaches, consigned to oblivion. The words spoken by the ringleader of the traffickers to a refugee are telling: "Two choices. Die here? Or get 'cleansed' in Myanmar? Your choice."

An aspect of the horrors of the Rohingya refugee crisis is the horror of having no choice at all. Fittingly, the second half of the film's extended title, '(*We, the Dead*)', nullifies all connotations of hope and salvation inherent in the idea of *aqérat*. Similarly, Hui Ling fails to make her escape to Taiwan; at the end of the film, she is significantly confined within the boarded-up puppet theatre.

To be more precise, then, the film takes place against the backdrop of the *impossibility* of mobility for the minority, the persecuted, and the poor – as the Rohingya Muslim refugees and the Malaysian Chinese characters are. Not travellers, then, that people Yeo's oeuvre but the marooned and the beached.³ Involuntary mobility is met by involuntary immobility. What leads to Hui Ling's transgression of moral boundaries (another manifestation of limit-experience), and the answer to the question that lies at the genesis of the film, is ironically stasis, which Yeo addresses through the boredom of life in an unchanging, uneventful rural village. Like the Rohingya refugees, Hui Ling is a woman on a threshold: stuck in a rural village on the border, she is waiting for her real life to begin as she saves up for an eventual move to Taiwan. In the opening scenes of the film, Yeo skilfully captures the boredom of her existence: Low, the actress, cuts a sluggish figure as she shuffles to and from work, regularly drifting off into daydreams.

This boredom is compounded by Hui Ling's reluctance to participate in her present reality, in her anticipation of a 'better life': her sphere of meaningful experience is limited to her immediate surroundings, her social interactions with her roommate and an old puppeteer. She is also notably oblivious to the attentions of her suitor, a man who runs a nearby convenience shop. Hui Ling's emotional alienation from her reality is foregrounded in the scene in which she visits the nightclub where her roommate works. Even here, in a vibrant space, the film plods on as before at the same languid pace. The handheld camera is generally used in the film to evoke the documentary genre, particularly in the scenes with the refugees; here, following closely behind Hui Ling, it suggests intimacy, a slippage into the privacy of her mind. Yeo employs the jerky motions characteristic of a handheld camera and the off-kilter angles to great effect, visually enacting the instability and incongruity of a life lived on the edge, where one is neither here where one does not want to be nor there where one aspires to be. Hui Ling moves through the nightclub as if in a trance, her surroundings coming in and out of focus. Her lack of emotional investment is also communicated by the disjunction between the shots of people dancing and talking, and the discordant non-diegetic sounds that develop into a minimalist soundscape full of echoes and reverberations. Later, when Hui Ling returns to the nightclub in search for her roommate and her money, the soundtrack grows

³ Individuals who are literally confined to a certain place by illness or injury appear in *kingyo* and *Last Fragments of Winter* (2011), as Martin Saint-Cyr points out, as well as in *Aqérat*.

even more dissonant, ‘deteriorating’ into sonic distortions befitting her mental state.

A succinct commentary of emotional disconnection, this sequence culminates in what appears to be Hui Ling’s voyeuristic imagining of a heated kiss between her roommate and her roommate’s boyfriend. The lack of visible affect that this kiss has on both Hui Ling and her roommate reinforces the emotional impoverishment of the women’s unchanging existence. This impoverishment is also reflected in the cycle of abuse that Hui Ling’s roommate is subjected to in her relationship, which serves as an affecting parallel to the repetitive and static nature of Hui Ling’s days. The relation between stasis and violence culminates in Hui Ling joining the human traffickers in a desperate bid to fund her escape to Taiwan. Already uncommunicative and solitary before, she becomes increasingly disconnected from the world around her and from its values. Having moved past her initial hesitation, she nonchalantly rehearses for her role as a trafficker in the bathroom while brushing her teeth, going through the motions of demanding money from the refugees and dismissing them. Later, she casually documents the beating up of a refugee on her handphone. If Hui Ling is not already dead when she meets the refugees on the bank of the river as a trafficker, robbed as she is of her own hopes for a better future, she gradually deadens herself to do what she perceives is necessary.

The pervasive sense of stasis in the film is enhanced by the juxtaposition of the plodding pace of Hui Ling’s personal ‘drama’ of entrapment with the urgency of the real-life drama of the Rohingya refugee crisis in the background. Yeo’s depiction of the latter is notably understated. In fact, any action in the film unfolds in an uncomfortably muted way as if ‘contaminated’ by the deadness that permeates Hui Ling’s borderline existence. The audience’s first sight of the refugees, for example, is from behind Hui Ling, as the boat slowly paddles to shore. At a moment when other directors might have chosen to focus on the refugees, Yeo turns the camera around to face the traffickers, who stand solemnly as if gatekeepers to the underworld, with Hui Ling in the foreground. The arrival of another batch of refugees later in the film is captured at a similar pace, with a long close-up on the faces of the children. Inscribed with the audience’s knowledge of what awaits the refugees, the slowness of this repeated sequence translates into an atmosphere of looming danger and a sense of inevitability. Here, the postcard tropical backdrop of rural Malaysia is a cruel mockery of aspiration.

The immobility of Yeo’s characters is a harsh counterpoint to their shared desire to move (on, towards, away from) – and to the desperation that stems from their failure to do so, which further compels action. Their lack of mobility reinforces the literal and figurative borders drawn between individuals, communities, and countries. It also sets them in stone, even as these borders are paradoxically being drawn and redrawn around them. Placing them on the

physical Thai-Malaysia border, Yeo enacts the way in which they are forced to teeter between life and death, morality and immorality, entrapment and escape as a result of living through a limit-experience that they have no means of negotiating, given that they are denied the futural trajectory of mobility. This interplay between movement and stasis reaffirms the way in which borders can be “indicative of how power works in the uneven terrain of the global” within which movement is structured (Cunningham and Heyman 300). For the disenfranchised, the limit-experience can only be lived through as pure limit, pure fragility and pure contingency. They are excluded from participation in the potential for new relationships with the self, with others, with knowledge and with the world at large.

A Tarkovsky-ian Dreamtime: Slowness and Stillness as Rebellion

Having confronted us with the consequences of a worldview that prioritises an exclusive mobility as the means of securing a future, Yeo now carves out a space and time in which we can consider an alternative means of negotiating the limit-experience of the present: *to live through it as the present*. He does this by drawing on the techniques of and ideology behind the slow cinema movement, which Tiago De Luca and Nuno Barradas Jorge describe as “an unstructured film movement made up of disparate films and practices that are conceptualized as a grouping thanks to their comparable style” (4) – all of which work to foreground cinematic duration. In the second part of *Aqérat*, Yeo subverts the idea of immobility and wields it against this failed narrative of mobility that would exclude the minority. If the languid pace of the film speaks to the obstacles to mobility in the first half of the film, it registers a critique of capitalist progressive time in the second. In a world that consistently tells us to crack on with it, slowness and stillness figure as rebellion.

As mentioned earlier, *Aqérat* can be divided into two parts, and the second part intervenes at the point where Hui Ling is forced to confront the consequences of her participation in human trafficking: hunting for escaped refugees, she changes her mind after encountering a child refugee and decides to help the refugees elude capture instead. At a limit-experience of her own (both figuratively and literally as she is now being hunted by the traffickers), Hui Ling seeks refuge with Wei. He voices his belief that she is a mysterious expatriate from his past with whom he shared an intense connection and whose face he never saw. Initiating us into his memory of this woman, Wei closes his eyes, and it is here, more than halfway through the film, that we finally see the film’s title card. It is as if Yeo is signalling to the audience that the real film is just starting now and everything before it was prologue.

This ‘real film’ belongs to a different genre altogether. We are no longer in the realm of thriller or social commentary – or rather, we have reached the opposite shore of these genres: a memory that is also a philosophical meditation

on temporality that aptly inhabits a different texture of narrative time. This is a Tarkovsky-ian dreamtime or memory-time: self-reflexive, intimately connected to life's rhythms, spiritual. The earliest hint of this is the poetic passage that opens this part of the film, read by Wei's enigmatic patient whose face is swathed in bandages. This passage,⁴ which articulates the transience of experience, is a self-conscious reflection of time *through time*. Taking up significant screen time while offering little in terms of narrative progression, this scene is what Mary Ann Doane refers to as 'dead time,' a technique frequently employed by directors associated with the slow cinema movement including Tarkovsky: "time in which nothing happens, time which is in some sense 'wasted', expended without product" (160). Dead time emphasises the mundane, which in Tarkovsky's hands emerges as something miraculous and spiritual – as it does in Yeo's. In this sequence, Yeo's camera hovers over the two characters, holding our gaze, holding a chord, to borrow Jonathan Rosenbaum's image: "When you hold a chord for a long time it becomes meditative, because it gives you time to think and almost makes a demand on your imagination" (cited in Schrader 8-9). Here, the moment "stretches out beyond the frame and to infinity" (Tarkovsky 117), reaching for the miracle of an intensely felt emotional connection with an unknowable stranger.

Time, in the second part of *Aqérat* (and from here on), pulses with the rhythms of life, particularly those that most manifest the transience of experience: longing and regret. Yeo's camera highlights the tentative glances and caresses that embody the characters' longing for connection and their regret over mistakes and missed opportunities. These rhythms are explicitly addressed in Wei's and Qi Qi's visit to a lonely elderly man, who cautions them thus: "There are many who end up alone their whole lives." Longing and regret are emotions deeply invested in time and a Bergsonian lived duration: one looks to the future while the other turns to the past, and yet, they are both deeply felt in the present. This part of the film is taut with the tension created by these rhythms, this knowledge of duration and of duration as *flow*. Taking a leaf out of Tarkovsky's book, Yeo privileges diegetic sound over non-diegetic sound, specifically the sounds of nature (wind, rivers, rain, the chirping of insects), to draw our attention to the organic flow of time onscreen, to a particular awareness of time and a particular sense of time: time *as time* and not as it is controlled by and subjugated to a progressive capitalist logic.

Slow cinema's primary intervention in the temporality of modern experience is the concretisation of duration and presence, which allows it to participate as part of a "much larger socio-cultural movement whose aim is to

⁴ "Without noticing at all, you have become a girl on a train. The train rumbles towards its unknown destination. A pop song from a few years ago plays in the background. ... Suddenly, you are assaulted by forces of Time. You hold each other closely but the attack is relentless." (Yeo, *Aqérat*)

rescue extended temporal structures from the accelerated tempo of late capitalism” (de Luca and Jorge 3). The movement is commonly conceptualised against mainstream cinema, which, with its rapid cuts and emphasis on narrative progression, adopts the same capitalist logic that underlies the myth of mobility. That is to say, slowness and stillness can also figure as possible redemption. In the mode of slow cinema, Yeo employs slowness to place us firmly in the duration of the present and it is only here, in real time, that his characters come close to forging authentic emotional connections and negotiating the borders that separate self from other.

The concluding section of *Aqérat* takes place in the aftermath of Wei's memory-time, even as we return to Hui Ling's narrative. Despite the continuation of the action plot (which includes the firing of a gun, and the torture and murder of Hui Ling's suitor), the focus falls on the relationship between Hui Ling and Wei, which develops according to the memory-time of the previous part. The couple is shown roaming the forests of Malaysia, the same ones that Hui Ling navigates earlier in her pursuit of the runaway refugees. This time, the scene lacks all sense of urgency, and both characters are accompanied by the sounds of nature with the occasional non-diegetic chiming of a bell that elevates the scene to one of heightened spirituality – especially when the couple encounter a horse, a familiar Tarkovsky-ian symbol for life. Here, it is a suggestion of a potential for 'resurrection', for an afterlife. The horse appears in an earlier scene but where before it is ridden by someone else and away from Hui Ling, the horse is now within reach.

This turn towards the supernatural gestures to an ontological shift that is the legacy of the 'digression' into Wei's memory. Thereafter, there is the persistent sense of reality being askew as Yeo denies any easy separations between clock time and memory time, between the inner world of the psyche and the external world, and between dream and reality. For instance, a cut between a scene showing Hui Ling and one showing her boss at the temple with his family juxtaposes Hui Ling's face with that of his young daughter such that the latter scene takes on the suggestion of a flashback; it is as if David's reminder to his daughter to be a morally upstanding person is addressed to Hui Ling herself. Later, Hui Ling envisions the refugee child she saves outside the puppet theatre where she and Wei are taking refuge. At this point, the camera, hitherto positioned to give us the couple's point-of-view, moves beyond the theatre in which they are confined and follows the child into the forest, thereby establishing a continuity between Hui Ling's reality and her vision.

Yeo continually blurs the demarcations between different temporal realities towards the end of *Aqérat*. In a striking scene that stands out for its overt meta-aesthetics, Hui Ling and Wei are shown walking along the coastline on a path leading to a watchtower. Yeo then cuts to a shot of the leader of the traffickers smoking at the base of the watchtower, before panning to the other

traffickers, some of whom are in the process of disposing the body of Hui Ling's unfortunate suitor. The camera next returns to the foot of the watchtower, now vacant, before panning up to show Hui Ling and Wei at the top. Against Bazin's reading of the long take as adhering to temporal unity and therefore attesting to reality,⁵ Yeo allows timelines to collapse within the space-time of his long take such that reality itself takes on a different texture. The scene then cuts to and concludes in a shot of Hui Ling and Wei at the foot of the watchtower: the long oval shape of the entrance emphasises their confinement within a small space while visually drawing them closer to each other, and a ladder behind and between them leads upward symbolically as the couple contemplate their future. The deliberate aesthetic nature of this scene is a marked departure from the naturalistic first part of the film, creating the sense of time being out-of-joint, as if one is suffering from a hypnopompic hallucination.

Conclusion

To paraphrase Foucault, here is a film that functions as an experience, much more than as the depiction of a historical event⁶ – an experience of duration, which opens up a space for the other and therefore, for a relationship to be forged with the other. *Aqérat* illustrates how the encounter with the other can be thought of, according to Levinasian ethics, as a limit-experience itself. For Emmanuel Levinas, the other presents itself as a complete mystery to the self and any relationship with the other is hence one that necessarily “breaks with the world that can be common [i.e., known] to us” (*Totality and Infinity* 39). In this relationship, the self runs “a fine risk” (*Otherwise than Being* 120), the risk of being transformed⁷ – just as Hui Ling and Wei evidently are by their encounters with each other. *Aqérat* significantly ends by cutting to black just as yet another boat of refugees reaches the Malaysian shore. Here lies the limit of the film, of experience, a ‘threshold of unsustainability’ that prompts new relationships with others and with the world at large.

As interested as Yeo is in borders, he is more preoccupied with the possibility of transgressing them, with the possibility of things coming together,

⁵ See Bazin's “The Ontology of the Photographic Image” and “The Evolution of the Language of Cinema” in *What is Cinema?*.

⁶ Foucault makes this comment in relation to *The History of Madness* (1961) as a limit-experience that permits the reader to form new understandings and relationships with the subject matter at hand, that is, madness and psychiatry (36).

⁷ Levinas notably argues that art is unethical as the image violates the principle of reality by fixing time and existence in “the paradox of an instant that endures without a future” (*The Levinas Reader* 138). In addition, insofar as it possesses “a formal structure of completion” (131), it is also closed to the mystery of the other. As Yeo's film suggests, slow cinema poses an interesting challenge to this charge as it ‘mobilises’ slowness and stillness to depict the rhythms of life. This discussion is however beyond the purview of the present paper.

with the possibility of drawing lines of beauty rather than demarcation between one body and another. His cinema is a deeply humanist one that is ultimately about the ways in which we come together, and fail to come together, as a community in a modern, cosmopolitan world. In *Aqérat*, Yeo is not concerned with delivering moral judgements or offering solutions on the Rohingya refugee crisis or the social problems faced by the minority Malaysian-Chinese. Neither is he, by subverting the connotations of immobility, engaged in any facile 'empowerment' of the disenfranchised: Hui Ling notably remains trapped within the boarded-up puppet theatre, albeit with Wei as a companion. Her persistent desire to leave is also communicated in her imagining of an airplane beyond the window of the puppet theatre. Rather, Yeo is interested in directing our attention to one another in the present, which is after all one function of cinema. This is a matter of urgency because, whatever the promises of mobility are, the only surety we have in our present state of existence as limit-experience is the presence of the human other – who, as Levinas has it, is the epitome of all that is other, all that is uncertain, all that is contingent, all that is fragile in experience. To forge a relationship with the human other then, is to forge a relationship with a future we cannot infer.

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