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Jonathan Liu

Tracing Troeung: Debilitation and Memory in Postcolonial Cinemas

Visual essay: <https://vimeo.com/publicnotice/Y-Dang>



Fig. 1. Still from Wen Kong et al., *Tracing Troeung: Debilitation and Memory in Postcolonial Cinemas* (00:15:06). 2025, Vimeo.

In this omnibus visual essay, *Tracing Troeung: Debilitation and Memory in Postcolonial Cinemas*, film essayists draw upon Y-Dang Troeung's *Refugee Lifeworlds: The Afterlife of the Cold War in Cambodia* (2022) and *Landbridge: [life in fragments]* (2023), applying the late scholar's ideas and concepts to trace debilitation and memory in postcolonial cinemas, broadly defined. By way of an introduction, film scholar Mila Zuo draws from Troeung's writing on the Cambodian filmmaker Rithy Panh to explore Panh's material re-enactments of memory and, in particular, his use of clay to reanimate his relatives, including his parents, who died during the Cambodian genocide under the Khmer Rouge (*L'Image*). Further to this, Zuo examines the ways in which a vibrant, "soiled" history counteracts

both official state memory and the global amnesia about what Troeung has described as a “minor genocide” in the eyes of the West or Global North. Placing Troeung in conversation with two other scholars of trauma and postcoloniality, Neferti X. M. Tadiar and Yvone Margulies, Zuo urges us to consider what an expansive Asian American/Canadian solidarity can look like today.

Following from this, Lee Jung Soo considers debilitation within the South Korean context. In *Refugee Lifeworlds*, Troeung cautions against the idea of transposing one trauma theory onto another context, the process of which has the potential to “obfuscate the particularities of specific conflicts and locations, lending priority to some genocides of the twentieth century as paradigmatic while ‘anecdoting’ others as minor or peripheral” (11). This so-called “universalization of trauma” (11), “defining a group of individuals merely as afflicted with the same ailment” (Berlant 761n20), is precisely what Lee attempts to avoid when applying Troeung’s idea of debilitation to South Korea. But because of its supposed affluence and growing cultural power, South Korea’s internal illness remains largely ignored by those residing outside the nation, presenting a distorted image that conceals the debilitation within. In its obsession with following the American model, South Korea may have improved its quality of life, but only in the most general, superficial sense. The nation’s teenage and overall suicide rates are two of the highest among the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development nations, while the birth rate continues to plummet. After an ominous miracle was hastily performed on the Han River, the bewitched spectators are now awakening from the illusion, and the disillusioned are now saying: “No more.”

Jasmine Sanau examines the camera in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *A City of Sadness* (1989), which steps back and stays still in scenes of violence and chaos. This recalls Troeung’s discussion of the kapok tree, a metaphor used during the Cambodian genocide to convey that “only the deaf, dumb, and mute would survive” (Vaddey Ratner qtd. in *Refugee* 113), like trees. For Troeung, the kapok tree metaphor reveals something ironic, in that the ability to resist by being silent showcases a queer, covert resistance. Despite its melancholic ending, the film, which centres on a family during the Taiwanese “White Terror,” also foreshadows the start of a new era through the child of characters

Wen-Ching and Hinome (Hsin Shu-fen) and the survival of the family, all of whom stay still and silent, even in the midst of violence and death. These works by Troeung and Hou signify resilience and strength through silence and disability, qualities that can foster new life and produce new worlds in spite of pain and horror. The greatest takeaway from Troeung's work, here, is the refusal to let a profound suffering become all-encompassing and definitive. We must remember and honour these national tragedies yet simultaneously not allow them to "choke us" and swallow us in the process of locating their trauma (Audre Lorde qtd. in *Refugee* 3).

To this end, Chuiwen Kong creates a textual-visual conversation between Troeung's works and the cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul that exemplifies the irreducibility and difficulty of storytelling experienced by the Global South. Such irreducibility and difficulty are anchored in Apichatpong's storytelling and fabulation, in which histories refuse to remain unspoken and feelings originate from a cluttered web of time. Erin Manning's observation about Apichatpong's cinema applies to both bodies of work: language in these works contains uneasy "thinking-feeling that resists stable time signatures" (190). Troeung's stories in *Landbridge*, which weave back and forth through time and disrupt linear chronology, collaborate with their own fragmented form; as Troeung writes in the preface, theory, fiction, and autobiography become blurred in a "perforated language of cracks and breaks." Combined with the images from Apichatpong's *Mysterious Object at Noon* (2000), Kong's contribution underlines what the refugee can do, rather than what they are, and places specific stress on Troeung's view of the language of trauma as one of disability, understood as both a lived embodiment and a system of differential impairment of racialized and gendered bodies.

Finally, Jonathan Liu asks that we follow Troeung in recognizing refugee status as one that arises from sustained infrastructures of war, genocide, and forced displacement perpetuated by colonialism and imperialism, creating what Achille Mbembe terms "*death-worlds*" where individuals become the "*living dead*" (92), stripped down to a bare life constantly under threat of extermination. According to Troeung, the lifeworld emerges in the "fissures in the apparatus of colonial power" (*Refugee* 10), highlighting what she calls, via Mbembe, refugees' "languages of life" (10), efforts that attend to pleasure,

creativity, and the heterogeneity of life. Indeed, Troeung views the lifeworld as an aesthetic of resistance, which we can also trace in the motivations behind the “pixelated revolution” (Mroué and Martin), where cinematic media serves not as an artistic endeavour, but as evidence of atrocities. In Hassan Fazili’s *Midnight Traveller* (2019), a film about an Afghan family’s three-year journey to find asylum, Fazili’s use of iPhone footage demonstrates the authenticity of the family’s travel, as well as the injustices that haunt it.

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*Mila Zuo is an associate professor of Cinema and Media Studies at the University of British Columbia. Her book, *Vulgar Beauty: Acting Chinese in the Global Sensorium* (Duke UP, 2022) won Outstanding Achievement best book award in media, performance, and visual studies from the Association for Asian American Studies. She is interested in transnational Asian cinemas, film-philosophy, abject and enchanted epistemologies, and critical theories of gender, sexuality, race, ethnicity, and decolonization. In addition to her scholarly work, Zuo is a filmmaker whose award-winning short films have screened at numerous international film festivals and universities.*

Lee Jung Soo is an MA student in Cinema and Media Studies at UBC. His research interest is in Samuel Beckett's TV plays. Previously, his thesis was to be a reflection on Korean mass media and its ideology analyzed through reality TV shows. His segment explores some of the ideas that were abandoned.

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Chuiwen (Wen) Kong is a second-year MA student in Cinema and Media Studies at the University of British Columbia. She holds an MA in Film Studies and a BA in Education Studies from University College London, UK. She presented her video essay entitled "Faces Unveiled" at the 2024 Film Philosophy Conference. She has recently presented "The Minor Gest(ure), Cinema's Intertextual Dives" at the 2025 SCMS (Society for Cinema & Media Studies) conference, and her video essay "The Unbearable Light(ness) of Palestine" at the 2025 ACSS conference.

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