

From Non-Cinema to Non-Cityscape : Air and Cities in *The Poisoned Sky*

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Environmental movements have been prospering in the recent years in Taiwan, due to the public's increasing awareness of the irreversible impact of pollution on their everyday life. *The Poisoned Sky* (2012) a documentary on a group of citizens' protesting against the construction of a coal power plant in Changhua Coastal Industrial Park, discusses the issue of air pollution produced by heavy industry. Wenchang Chi, the director of the film, was born in Lukang, a beautiful small town with a long history in Central Taiwan. He was very concerned with the environmental changes, which have been taking place for a long time, in his hometown. Joining the Anti-Coal-Power-Plant Alliance in Changhua Coastal Industrial Park (CCIP), he started to document the organization's efforts to urge the government as well as the citizens of Lukang to re-assess the coal power plant construction plan. The Industrial Bureau of the Ministry of Economic Affairs approved the execution of the coal power plant plan in 2000. He poses a strong argument against the plan in the film. Taiwan Power Company built the Taichung Coal Power Plant in 1990 in Longjin, which is only 15 kilometers from Lukang. Since then, this plant has become the greatest CO₂ contributor in the world and has produced enormous amounts of air pollution. The film asks, "why do we need another coal power plant?"

One of the greatest challenges that Chi confronted when making the film lies in the issue that he chose—air pollution. It is difficult to make a concrete presentation of air pollution. The camera might catch the gray smoke emitted from the monstrous chimneys of a factory, and yet the polluted air "disperses" or flies away, escaping human eyes. Although the stench produced by the smoke could be detected by the human nose, it is difficult for us to identify the chemical substances that we breathe. Human eyes and noses might fail to discern

the scale of air pollution, but the camera can do something different with its potential of creating a cascade and flow of images through cinematic techniques.

Chi borrowing Bill Nichols' (1991) words, about employing "the strategy of the discourse of sobriety," presents his viewpoint with a movement of images of landscapes, pictures, scientific data, and interviews, which effectively merges his argument with visual and acoustic evidence. This strategy leads us to examine the potential for liberation in the form and content of the documentary. Resisting the framework of mainstream films, *The Poisoned Sky* demonstrates the qualities of non-cinema, namely, the cinema of liberation. I shall explain the term "non-cinema" later in this paper. The camera eye leads us to see the impact of air pollution beyond the images of polluted landscapes with the camera eye. The cityscape dotted by factories with huge chimneys is usually the conspicuous target of air pollution documentaries. Nevertheless, when observing the scale of the pollution, the industrialized cityscape should serve as the starting point to observe its influences on other cities, towns, streets, fields, cows, clams, numerous plants and people's everyday life. In other words, boundless and fluid, air floats from one place to another. The polluted air leaves its marks on many places, as well as animals, plants, and people. *The Poisoned Sky*, provides us a unique perspective to draw our attention to environmental issues, that is, non-cityscape in non-cinema, which liberates us from the confined perspectives of physical space.

Non-Cinema and the Documentary Film

William Brown addresses the term, non-cinema, in his essay, "Non-Cinema: Digital, Ethics, Multitude."ⁱ Brown's observation of features of non-cinema departs from his experience of viewing digital cinema. The virtual camera of digital cinema, which is able to see through everything and make aesthetic re-presentation of all objects, including the human body, the fluids, solids, and gases, by means of digital technology, has the potential of deconstructing the unique status of human beings. This is in stark comparison to traditional cinema which tends to adopt realistic perspectives (2015: 11). The virtual camera is no longer confined to

the human world since it can extend and expand its camera eye to the cosmos or to the micro world of any entity (ibid: 12). The “post human” potential of digital camera, in Brown’s terms, consists in its desire to escape from the mainstream cinematic framework dominated by Hollywood (ibid: 12-3). Drawing from Enrique Dussel, Brown suggests we should redefine cinema from the perspective of non-being, which might be regarded as equal to peripheral, brutal and miserable phenomena (ibid:13). Although Dussel’s conception of non-being might fall into the binary opposition of being and non-being, the merit of his theory lies in his concern for those who are oppressed and marginalized, the victims of the philosophy that asserts the superiority of the centre (1985: 4). He warns us that those who embrace the thoughts evolved around the importance of the center often believe that the center is the only reality (ibid: 4). Dussel writes,

Against the classic ontology of center, from Hegel to Marcuse—to name the most brilliant from Europe and North America—a philosophy is rising from the periphery, from the oppressed, from the shadow that the light of Being has not been able to illuminate. Our thought sets out from non-Being, nothingness, otherness, exteriority, the mystery of no-sense. It is, then, a “barbarian philosophy” (ibid: 14).

Inspired by Enrique’s philosophy of liberation, Brown points out that non-cinema, the cinema which is refused by or resists to be absorbed into the mainstream film, is cinema of liberation (2015:14). According to Brown, the concept of non-cinema does not stand at the opposite pole from that of traditional cinema, which, he believes, also contains certain features of non-cinema (2015:11). With the potential of liberating cinema from the overwhelming oppression of the mainstream framework, non-cinema is characterized by its politically active interference of the conditions of the marginalized and the oppressed, both in its form and content (ibid:14). Cinema produces images via light while non-cinema makes us experience things beyond light or beyond the scope of our vision. That there is always something flowing over or hidden in the scope of our vision is what Brown calls “‘incess’ of excess” (ibid: 26). When (re)presenting images, we do not have to rely on the criteria produced by the

mainstream filmmaking industry. The production of images that is viewed as a failure in terms of the mainstream standard should be re-assessed by the “barbarian” philosophy. The unsteady, dark, or rough movement of images shows us the periphery of the place where light fades away. Darkness coexists with light. As Brown reminds us, to see the “unseeable” (which is usually defined by the mainstream standard of cinema) is our ethical responsibility (ibid: 26).

In the case of *The Poisoned Sky*, Chi deploys the strategy of the “discourse of sobriety” as mentioned above and makes it a cinema of liberation by cultivating the “‘incess’ of excess.” According to Nichols, the discourse of sobriety, usually refers to rhetoric strategies utilized by science, economics, politics, and other related institutions, and “has an air of sobriety since it is seldom receptive to ‘make-believe’ characters, events, or entire worlds (unless they serve as pragmatically useful simulations of the ‘real’ one)” (1991: 4). Those discourses are sobering because “they regard their relation to the real as direct, immediate, transparent” (ibid: 4). Nichols argues that documentary has a kinship with the discourse (4). First of all, most documentary films take shape around the movement of a logic, which “requires a representation, case, or argument about the historical world,” operating in terms of problem-solving (ibid: 18). As a result, Nichols points out, the principle of sound is given particular importance (ibid:19). Nichols remarks that “[i]nstead of organizing cuts within a scene to present a sense of a single, unified time and space in which we can quickly locate the relative position of central characters, documentary organizes cuts within a scene to present the impression of a single, convincing argument in which we can locate a logic” (ibid). Therefore, as Nichols indicates, “a documentary film can sustain far more gaps, fissures, cracks, and jumps in the visual appearance of its world even though it represents the familiar, historical world” (ibid).

It may raise some doubts when we attempt to link the discourse of sobriety, a strategy that focuses on the power of words, argument and logic, with the concept of non-cinema, an

idea relying on the Barbarian Philosophy. Nevertheless, the two are not exclusive to each other. The power of a documentary comes from its movement of images, involving both visual and acoustic effects, with its purpose to present a historical or social event in a convincing and affective way. The movement of images, more than a visual support, activates something new for the discourse, that is, the potential of liberating words from its confinement. In the case of *The Poisoned Sky*, following the discourse of sobriety, Chi explores the environmental issue of air pollution by recording the Anti-CCIP Movement, an event which did not draw much attention. The choice of this event itself resonates with the ethical responsibility that Brown urges us to take—to see the “unseeable”. In terms of cinematic techniques, Chi explores several ways to present the impact of air pollution. The director is good at juxtaposing several images to create sardonic effects or to produce affective effects. For instance, at the beginning of the film, he juxtaposes three episodes: the image of a smoking chimney, an interview with an owner and some workers of aqua farms, and the episode of President Ma Ying-jeou’sⁱⁱ intruding on a meeting on environment protection. While the president intended to show his concern for environmental issues by attending this meeting, his intrusion, forcing a speaker to end his talk, ironically shows his disrespect for the meeting. Moreover, this episode, going along with the image of smoking chimneys and the episode of the aqua farm owner’s complaints about his losses because of the acid rain caused by air pollution, arouses viewers’ attention to examine the efficacy of the government’s policies on these issues. The smoky sky, which occupies half of the image, reveals the “barbarian” side of those environmental policies. The gray smoke covers and taints everything that it sweeps while the government does little to prevent it. The dark sky with the smoke continuously produced by the factory also leads us to go beyond the framework of the image to think of the scale of its pollution.



Photo 1.

Another strategy of Chi's lies in his presentation of parallel images of scientific data of the impact of the air pollution produced by the Taichung Coal Power Plant and the enormous losses produced by the pollution for aqua farmers, dairy farmers, and rice farmers. Also, we learn of the unusual increase in cancer patients in Central Taiwan. The information, including the statistics of farmers' losses and the percentage of the rising number of cancer patients, is significant in the recent years. All the statistics are embodied by a variety of images of the farms which have been damaged by air pollution. One of these images is a huge quantity of dead clams. Clams are one of the most popular kinds of seafood in Taiwan. However, it is seldom noticed that air pollution has caused an enormous number of deaths of sea life. The image of these beautiful but inedible dead clams makes a strong impact on viewers since it reminds us of the fact that these clams might have been consumed by us without our knowing the truth. It serves as a strong critique of heavy industry that has a severe but sometimes barely detectable influence on the environment. The director brings to the centre, issues which have long been marginalized and neglected.



Photo 2.

The most powerful strategy of Chi's is his inclusion of non-cityscapes in his movement of images. On the one hand, the movement of images of the film is interwoven with the discourse of sobriety. On the other, the movement of images enfolds and unfolds different spatial images, including the changes of the sky, various landscapes, factories, streets and historical sites in Lukang, and maps of Taiwan. It has a rhythm of swiftness and fluidity of the air floating from one place to another, imitating the uncontrollable air whose influences are not confined to one city or one town. It also challenges our conception of space as natural and physical one. As Henri Lefebvre tells us, "(social) space is a (social) product" (26). However, space is more than a social product. It is interwoven with non-space. The representation of space in *The Poisoned Sky* shows us the coexistence of space and non-space.

Space and Non-cityscape

When Lefebvre claims that "(social) space is a (social) product" (1991: 26), he intends to examine the philosophy of space in the Western tradition by offering a Marxist perspective of space. He develops a tripartite schema of space: perceived space/ spatial practice, conceived space/ representations of space, and lived and endured space/representational space (33).

According to Klaus Ronneberger's interpretation,

perceived space refers to the collective production of urban reality, the rhythms of work, residential, and leisure activities through which society develops and reproduces its spatiality. Conceived space is formed through knowledge, signs, and codes. Conceived space refers to "representations of space" by planners, architects, and other specialists who divide space into separate elements that can be recombined at will. The discourse of these specialists is oriented toward valorizing, quantifying, and administering space, thereby supporting and legitimating the modes of operation of state and capital. Finally, Lefebvre talks about lived and endured space: "spaces of representation." Users of space experience lived space every day, through the mediation of images and symbols. Lived space offers possibilities of resistance. (2008: 137)

Lefebvre's conception of space urges us to reveal the production and reproduction of social relations in a space. Space is not a neutral site that awaits people to utilize it. It is a practice,

an epistemological arena, and a place people are living in. Nevertheless, there is always something beyond the tripartite schema of space suggested by Lefebvre. The sky serves as the best example of the insufficiency of Lefebvre's schema. The sky, very different from the land or the sea, is characterized by its incorporeity, immeasurability, and changeability. It might be debatable as to whether it is a space. However, it is undeniable that the sky is a part of the environment that has an indivisible relationship with our everyday life. It is, therefore, a peripheral space, or non-space. It is difficult for us to "use" the space of the sky and interpret it in terms of the production and reproduction of social relations since it leaves no traces of history.

So how should we present the polluted air that floats in the sky? The director of *The Poisoned Sky* tries to explore the images of non-space/ incorporeity from those of space/ corporeality. As mentioned above, Chi produces a movement of images of non-cityscape. His concern with his hometown, Lukang, propels him to trace the source and impact of air pollution. This film is not merely a record of an environmental movement, but also a travel of non-cityscape, leading viewers to visit the landscapes, ocean, farms, and streets which are exposed to air pollution. The site of the Coal Power Plant of CCIP, a plant which has not been built, is the starting point of the trip. The pictures of the blueprint of this plant, a symbol of modernity and industrialization, are juxtaposed with an episode of Dr. Jiayang Tsai's public talk, explaining the problems of the plan of this plant. Although the blueprint of the modern buildings shows us the beauty of advanced technology, its future can never be beautiful since the construction will definitely generate a large scale pollution. The equipment that will produce pollution is deliberately eliminated in these pictures. The glossy pictures of these buildings are an ironic contrast with the image of the dark and smoky sky that we have seen earlier at the beginning of the film. The virtual space on the foreground is merged with the gray sky, making the viewers suspicious of the vision that the manager confidently states. Dr. Jiayang Tsai's public talk further reveals the ugly side of the blueprint that is wrapped by

advanced technology. Later on, the movement of images flows from the Taichung Coal Power Plant, to a chaotic public hearing intended to persuade people to approve of the plan, and then to a dairy farm, to an aqua farm, and to several other landscapes that have been severely affected by air pollution. This movement discloses the real problems of the plan, pointing to the possible consequences of it. The virtual space, the real landscapes and non-space are inter-related in these series of images.



Photo 3.



Photo 4.

In this movement of images, one episode in particular reveals the marginal status of farmers in Taiwan to the viewers. It consists of an interview with the owner of an aqua farm who constructed a building to protect his aqua farm from acid rain. However, without sunshine, the clams and shrimp in his farm grew to a smaller size. The director presents a parallel scene of two images, making a contrast between the dim aqua farm and the bright

one out of the window. The scene symbolizes the owner's dilemma of having to make a choice between two flawed methods of breeding his clams and shrimp. The scene seems to summarize and dramatize the farmer's difficult situation: he has to fight the worsening weather conditions alone although there is little he can do. He is trapped in a dark future, like the image of the dark building. This is a peripheral space interwoven with the invisible polluted air that changes the landscape as well as the farmer's future.



Photo 5.

Conclusion

At the end of the film, the director shows us a picture of Lukang, in which a group of students and professors are walking in the streets carrying banners to support the Anti-CCIP Coal Power Plant Movement. These pictures are woven with those of historical sites in Lukang. This interweaving initiates a temporal movement of this beautiful small town, as if the past, the present, and the future coexist in it. The message is very clear here: the sky as the non-space is the key to the conservation of this historical town. The “poisoned” sky destroys the environment on a scale beyond our knowledge. It has produced enormous pollution of the air we breathe, the milk we drink, the rice we eat, and the water we drink. Unfortunately, it is not easy to collect immediate and direct evidence to prove where

pollution is generated. By means of the mode of documentary, Chi offers a movement of images to show us how to examine the environmental issue of air pollution via the perspective of non-cinema and non-cityscape, to make a strong argument about the importance of the peripheral space.



Photo 6.

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ⁱ Brown presented the main idea of this paper in *Film-Philosophy Conference 2014: A World of Cinemas*. He was invited to publish the paper in a Chinese version in *A / C / T*, a domestic journal in Taiwan. Brown himself mentions at the end of the paper that he will re-publish the paper in his next book, *Non-Cinema: Global Digital Cinema and the Multitude*.

ⁱⁱ Mr. Ma Ying-jeou is the current President of Taiwan.

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