

FROM THE SILENCE OF SNOW TO THE BIRTH OF MUSIC - NOTES ON
CHIH-CHIEN WANG' SUBTLY MONUMENTAL *THE ACT OF FORGETTING*:
A Review of Chih-Chien Wang's *The Act of Forgetting* At Montreal's Darling
Foundry/ Fonderie Darling -Curated by Caroline Andrieux - April 2- May 24 2015

JO TO C-C¹:

" What I find the most poignant and lucky thing for you is all the empty moments (the dance on the floor, the very long moment during which the woman is putting on her makeup before her solo with that sacred traditional guitar) in the film - the empty moments become the glue... long empty spaces like where your son is eating the apple..those kind of empty spaces that just lag there...so that empty moments becomes a glue between the shifting moments and scenes...There are magic ineffable moments in art, not explainable... to me that is why the shifting is working in your film...that is why I love your film."

C-C TO JO

"I think the moment of waiting is being expanded throughout two days (of the filming) so that is why I think performance art is very strong for me....that kind of emptiness, waiting for the right moment, waiting for a dancer, waiting for the next instruction to the actors, waiting for the next stimulation we will feel a little bit but also miss something else, but time is still there..."

1²

Through the long stream of memory (memory on top of memory), a certain piling may occur till a point of atrophy. *The built-up, the decaying, the unused, untamed, untried, unobserved, "unbroached" memory might begin to entangle; it might begin to reproach, and or it might begin to bring us the pleasure that is inherent no matter the pain, in any memory.*

The latin etymology of memory being *memor* - "to be mindful", thus perhaps memory's provenance being its act (being mindful) and not what it contains, one might say.

2

We should begin by first saying Chih-Chien Wang's *The Act of Forgetting* deserves very serious attention. Chih-Chien Wang's extraordinary film, *The Act of Forgetting*, now on view at Montreal's **Fonderie Darling/Darling Foundry** <http://fonderiedarling.org/en/>. proceeds precisely from the registers of the not often valorized realm and notion of memory, *as a sort of mindfulness*.

However, the *sort of mindfulness* Chih-Chien Wang's film achieves is not a simply a status quo kind of *being mindful*, but a *mindfulness* that pierces through surfaces, and pierces through the at times cliché liberal strategies of sociability and being "respectful" of one's space which

¹ A question asked by James Oscar and answered Chih-Chien Wang in a talk on the exhibition.

² For this review of Chih-Chien Wang work which would have been a welcome delight to represent Canada at the Venice Biennale 2015, I have tried a little experiment of writing in aphorisms.

some commentators³ have suggested may at times impede interactions and become actions lined with "passive tolerance". The key here is that *The Act of Forgetting* with its various registers of language and interactions pushes for a radically transforming agenda for a community where deep interactions and kinships beyond mere tolerance can be experimented with: "Actors, authors, musicians, singers, and dancers open up through talking, performing, singing, playing, and improvising on camera." There is a set structure however which is key, as Chih-Chien has made very clear.

In Chih-Chien Wang's *The Act of Forgetting*, there are confrontations⁴, crossings of safe spaces, and a relational aesthetic⁵ that reaps a deep and very rich set of emotional exchanges. The context of Quebec and Canada⁶ is also important to take into consideration, in looking at the variant of contemporary malaise and joy spoken about in the film. Chih-Chien Wang Wang's view is that of an impassioned and *imaginative trespasser* looking in from the inside.⁷

3.

The Act of Forgetting may evoke the question : What are contemporary senses of voice and language that might be keeping us caught in a state of "passive tolerance" and keeping us from truly interacting? The Italian philosopher Giorgio Agamben asks a similar question - "Is there a human voice, a voice that is the voice of man, as the chirp is the voice of the cricket or the bray is the voice of the donkey?" Chih-Chien Wang's *The Act of Forgetting* seems to be looking for the cloaks over that voice and for the voice in- itself.

4.

³ In *Trouble in Paradise*, Slavoj Žižek used this term and also spoke of the problematic of the "liberal-democratic agenda of cultural tolerance (espousing to) save what can be saved, and put aside dreams of a more radical social transformation". See also his essay *Tolerance as Ideological Category*.

⁴ As Wang's efforts can be considered with the realm of "ethnographic film", one might think of the cutting edge work of Jean Rouch, especially in his *Chronique d'Un Été* and in his *Pyramide Humaine*.

⁵ See Nicholas Bourriaud's *Relational Aesthetics* and of course *The Poetics of a Relation* by Edouard Glissant which Bourriaud took his idea from.

⁶ ⁶ Heike Härting at Université de Montreal has explored the ambiguous and problematic sides of the Canadian humanitarian mission in her work on General Romeo Dallaire's book on his experiences in Rwanda, *Shake Hands With the Devil*.

⁷ Chih-Chien Wang is originally from Taiwan and has been in Quebec for 13 years.

The Act of Forgetting opens with an 18 year old Concordia University student recounting the “hard” travails of his life, but then he catches himself in his own *fashionable pessimism*⁸, “I’m Joey, an 18 year old male... I try to be involved in the arts as much as possible...well, I try and do it as much as I can, but its not exactly all that much since I’m in engineering. Anyways, I get by. It’s not the worst thing in the world I guess...Yes I’m 18...I shouldn’t be saying things are bad yet... Yeah the general human concept that nothing is really good...you know we’re all kind of trying to search for perfection...and then we never find it so therefore everything is bad. It’s like I’m kind of aware of being sort of idiotic in how I look at the world, but I guess I can’t really help it.” So right away we are introduced to a subtly faithless worldview (but one with an awareness of its false consciousness) *where phatic language cohabits with terminal actions*.

5

The *phatic* sense of language is that register of communication as sociability, for basic interactions. The phatic create first encounters, even found the basic building blocks of communities.

In the *The Act of Forgetting*, the 18 year old⁹ continues:

It’s like all the good things... I know they are good, but it always seems to be tainted by things that I view as not as good. It’s sort of like... going out and going to bars with friends is fun but it’s still like there is ... there is just a certain emptiness of the whole university life, kind of with all the socialization based mainly around alcohol, and, I guess I just not vey much actually getting to know people rather than just trying to further your own selfish interests, I guess..

What then becomes apparent is Chih-Chien Wang’s *always moving trajectory* of a greater and greater immersion of his characters in entering into deeper forms of communication (a deep song), as the film’s characters’ languages are always moving from phatic communication to deeper exchanges.

6.

Joey, the 18 year old, describes the role he is to play in a piece of theatre the film is attempting to document - the story of a son’s relation to his father. The father breaks down emotionally. The son must decide how to respond.

The Act of Forgetting carries on under the auspices¹⁰ of primarily documenting a “play”, in which a son consoles his father for the first time in his life, reversing the traditional roles.

⁸ Medhi Belhaj Kacem speaks about something that could be described as *fashionable pessimism* in contemporary life in his *La Psychose Francaise* about France, racism, immigration, and the inner cities. Of course “hipster irony” is not a far step from this “fashionable pessimism”.

⁹ It should be noted that the 18 year was sitting next to me by accident during my viewing on a random day. From what I gather Chih-Chien has encouraged his actors to attend screenings at random times. This has added a meta element among others to this film/ performance.

¹⁰ The french translation of this would be more precise in saying that “*L’Acte de Souvenir continue avec l’air de traiter les proces d’une piece de theatre...*”

The play that everyone worked enormously hard to prepare is supposed to be based on a true story told by one of the actors about the son and father. A quandary and breach occur in the process because the question comes up whether the “true” story told by the actor about his father was actually true. Had these actors emotionally invested in preparing to represent a story they were convinced had been true? We have landed in not just a simple examination of ethics but of language itself - language and voice, as the very building blocks that then allow us to construct our notions of ethics.

The Act of Forgetting “safely” makes its audience first believe in the film’s primary role as a search for the truth or falsity of this story. But Chih-Chien Wang may actually be examining the way people speak their experiences and not what they are saying (true or false)

Below the surface of things, we soon see that we may have landed in not a simple examination of ethics (of whether the story that inspired the play and film is true or false) but that Chih-Chien Wang’s examination may be in how people deploy language and search for a voice to express these concerns, not the actual concerns themselves.

7.

Among the moving scenes, such as:

1. The theater directress “teaching”/ showing the actor playing the father how to position his body to look as though he is distraught.
2. The extremely long take of a woman applying make up, who then launches into playing a traditional/ sacred guitar instrument.
3. *Chih-Chien*’s convincing his son to eat his apple which at first seems to be a too long take with the slow circling 360 degree camera, where we begin to only afterwards see that in this silent extended gesture, a large plane of silent reflection had been opened up to think through many of the questions that had been opened up in the film up to that point.
4. The epiphany like musical finale which might be the ultimate telling beyond the story of the father and son, beyond language - voice. For a voice, as described by Agamben cited above in point 3.
5. The breathtaking almost endless *floating* scene of Chih-Chien’s son eating the apple, as though he is carving out his own voice in *how* he wishes to eat the apple, not according to Chih-Chien’s specific instructions.

Among the many scenes, there is a dance scene that occurs where there is a true *embodying* of a search for a voice:

“So two in each direction. tu tu, and back, tu tu and forward, and hand on your partners back, tu tu, together. one back. you flip, and then on the back, and this way, and this way, just back and forth, stay in touch with the back. okay we're gonna slow it down”

8.

One young lady (Meredith), who has been speaking about her sex work in an aloof manner, after awhile begins to start speaking deeply about her life and intimacy, but first only through singing a song. One might feel the at first empty empty sociability of her talk, and then we come *to the transition in the film to another register of language that moves beyond the phatic and begins to start to imply a kind of relation.*

“My body is a cage that keeps me from dancing with the one I love. My body is a cage that keeps me from dancing with the one i love but my mind holds the key. I’m standing on a stage with fear and self-doubt, it’s a hollow play but they clap anyway. My body is a cage that keeps me from dancing with the one i love but my mind holds the key. You’re standing next to me. My mind holds the key. Im living in an age of fear and self-doubt though my language is dead ... the ... I have to stop. I don’t remember the words.” Meredith’s song in *The Act of Forgetting*.

Once through the song, she begins to speak of the true intimacy of her experiences and a man named Jean adds to her comments, in very profound tones:

“ I think acting is also, a way of putting arts into, into yourself. Like you’re, it’s weird, because you’re at the same time the artist, and the instrument. And you always have to uh like to go on the artist way or the instrument way, and you challenge both things and um sometimes the instrument wants to show off, and the artist is laid back. And sometimes the artist comes in and the instrument is no longer there, something like that, and... i think it’s well, when both are aligned together, there is, good music, or good sound, or real sound, or real music, I don’t know. A music we call harmony.”

9.

The very camera work, the constant shifting camera work, highlights the musicality in *The Act of Forgetting*, with its constant circling motion around the speaking subjects which lends itself to provoking both a meditative and *future trance state* reminds us of the larger plane of not just language, but of looking at a subject along a larger plane. As in 360 views, now popular again through the likes of companies like Oculus Rift, Chih-Chien Wang’s consistently circling camera moves beyond a portraiture view (in the typical “talking head” monologue/ “interview” done on camera) to invite a kind of transversality at the heart of his project. That transversality invites us to consider not just what is being said but how it is being said, the rhythm of how it is being said and **a larger field of consideration than normally considered** - the how and rhythm of how it is being said - the *interstices* of how it is being said.

11

The objects and the poured asphalt sculpture in the exhibition might act as devices and platforms. They , perhaps can be considered as objects/ platforms *to be deployed as talisman* or as staging areas. In the case of the poured asphalt sculpture, one might consider this a platform from which to start and stop one’s flight into finding one’s “voice”, if one can carry on with Chih-Chien Wang’s whole thematic of *searching out the sacred spaces of contemporary intimacy.*

12

The photos in the exhibition seem to flank the film *like wings that function to move or put the the body of the whole exhibition in flight or at rest.*

One could see the stillness of the snow photos¹¹ as evoking the importance of searching for a voice/s and the different registers of language- exploring all of its possibilities - from (snow's) silence to the sublime musical cacophony that ends the film. Both the silence of the snow photos and the Dionysian musical finale of the film, come to equally embrace the spectator. *From the silence of snow to the birth of an interior music....*

¹¹ "The silence of snow, thought the man sitting just behind the bus driver. If this were the beginning of a poem, he would have called the thing he felt inside him the silence of snow." Orhan Pamuk, *Snow*