

A New Hong Kong Cinema That Lives On: On Tiffany Sia's "On and Off-Screen Imaginaries"

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By Jenny Wu

THE MOVING IMAGE is paradoxical—it facilitates the creation of radical artwork even as it enables state surveillance; it connects people across borders but can also promote nationalist fantasies that override vernacular histories. These are some of the tensions probed in Hong Kong artist and filmmaker Tiffany Sia's new essay collection, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries*. The six pieces gathered here, occasioned in part by Sia's own participation in the 2019–20 protests, dissect the visual landscape of post–Cold War Hong Kong and offer a methodology for fugitive image-making informed by both her activism and a broad network of artistic and political interlocutors.

A book of criticism as well as an artistic manifesto, *On and Off-Screen Imaginaries* situates Sia—known for works including *Never Rest/Unrest* (2020), a short film documenting the civil unrest in Hong Kong in 2019, and *Salty Wet* (2019), a chapbook that mourns the island's political status through a collage of texts and pop culture imagery—within a group of politically attuned diasporic image-makers. Sia's chosen cohort, which includes the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers group, director Chan Tze-woon, and photographer An-My Lê, strategically opposes threats of surveillance, censorship, and metrics-driven journalism in the form, content, and circulation of their works.

This group belongs to a new era of Hong Kong cinema which began in 2014, the year of the Umbrella Movement, and extends through what are commonly termed the “anti-ELAB protests,” the 2019 movement against the Extradition Law Amendment Bill. (Had it passed, the bill would have allowed Hong Kong to detain and transfer fugitives to other territories, including mainland China.) Sia's generation has cleaved from an old guard defined, on one hand, by the kung fu flicks and “bullet ballets” of the 1980s through the early 2000s—think *Police Story* (Jackie Chan, 1985) and *Infernal Affairs* (Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002). To understand this generational divide, compare the finale of *Police Story*—an action comedy about an affable cop trying to clear his name—to images captured in *Taking Back the Legislature* (Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers, 2020), a case study in Sia's book. In the former, “we experience a concerto of chaos,” Nick Pinkerton writes: “multistory free falls, bodies squeezed into the interstice between escalators, off-road biking in the sporting-goods section, and end-over-end dives through shattering sugar-glass display cases—so many of these that the crew took to calling the movie *Glass Story*.” By contrast, *Taking Back the Legislature* presents the police as menacing auxiliaries of state control—not comic foils—and turns *Police Story*'s signature set piece on its head. In one scene, protesters storm the Legislative Council Complex in Hong Kong's Central District in July 2019. Sia writes:

Unlike the fictional films of Hong Kong's past that featured chase scenes between cops and criminals crashing through glass, the shatterproof glass that protects the halls of the Legislative Council from intrusion does not shatter easily. [...] [I]t takes the protesters four hours to break through.

Hong Kong cinema in the 1980s through the early 2000s was also known for nostalgia-laden auteur films, which are currently enjoying retrospectives in art-house theaters around the world. Sia critiques such films for their tendency to bury political references under romantic saudade. Consider how, as Sia points out, the lovelorn protagonist of *Chungking Express* (Wong Kar-wai, 1994) buys pineapples every day thinking that, by the 30th day of his routine, his emotions, like the fruit, will expire. For some, the expiring fruit is clearly a proxy for Hong Kong, where British colonial rule “expired” on July 1, 1997, and whose existing governmental structure as a special administrative region (SAR) of China is set to expire in 2047; however, for viewers unfamiliar with Hong Kong’s politics and history, Wong Kar-wai’s pineapples signify little more than a young man’s magical thinking. For the sake of surviving the city’s next “expiry date,” the makers of Hong Kong cinema today must, first and foremost, contend with the conditions and consequences of visibility.

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In her opening essay, “Handbook of Feelings,” Sia discusses the aftermath of a guest lecture she gave in her friend’s class at a Hong Kong university, during which she showed students her film *Never Rest/Unrest*. Since her lecture, Sia writes, “surveillance cameras, including one that looms over my friend’s desk, have been installed throughout the faculty offices.” The cameras reinscribe the consequences of political dissent for filmmakers on the island: the accused risk bankruptcy, disappearance, arrest, doxing, assault, and forced exile. What results is an “epistemic crisis,” writes Sia. “You cannot know about what you cannot see.”

What stories are told and what images are circulated, by and for whom, have everything to do with the threats explored in Sia’s book: surveillance and censorship, which go hand in hand, and mainstream film and media’s preference for sensationalism over stories of sustained resistance. Within this environment, activist filmmakers are caught between the need for visibility and the dangers therein, as the nature of their medium becomes a liability. Sia writes:

Filmmaking today, especially that which is made at the front lines of revolt against state power, elaborates on the contingency of cinema such that the afterlives of images, circulated broadly or leaked, make their capture potentially incriminating. The images they convey serve as evidence, as snares, as open wounds and spilled secrets.

Responding to this paradox, Sia positions Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers as a model for navigating the precarious terrain of visibility. In the book’s second essay, “Phantasms of Dissent: Hong Kong’s New Documentary Vernacular,” Sia focuses on the collective’s use of blurring as a tactic in two recent works: *Taking Back the Legislature* and *Inside the Red Brick Wall* (2020), the latter of which documents protesters’ occupation of Hong Kong Polytechnic University in November 2019 and the 12-day police kettle that ensued,

resulting in 1,300 arrests. The group, Sia explains, “themselves anonymous to ensure their own security [...] proposes a filmmaking that itself joins the subjects portrayed in anonymity and fugitivity.” Formally, “figures—opaque, obstinate, and abstracted by blur—avoid the camera’s capture.” In *Taking Back the Legislature*, the collective goes as far as to blur out a protester’s shoes, which could be used to identify the individual. At times, Sia writes, entire frames are “occupied by blurred bodies and faces.”

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While reading Sia’s book, I went to see the Guggenheim exhibition *Going Dark: The Contemporary Figure at the Edge of Visibility* (2023–24), which reflects on the implications of being seen or erased in the world today. What stood out was a work by the contemporary new media artist American Artist, titled *Security Theater* (2023). Located on the museum’s fifth floor, the installation resembles a makeshift surveillance office that visitors can enter so long as they agree to lock away their phones for the duration of the experience. Inside, live video footage from a camera hanging in the center of the museum is displayed on a wall of monitors. From this perch, those within the installation are privy to the images of every museumgoer outside. During my viewing, their actions immediately became the subject of scrutiny: Who, for instance, was that woman on the third floor waiting for? Why did that child bend over and disappear beneath the banister? Those being watched were susceptible to the surveyors’ projected emotions and narratives. Xu Bing made an entire feature film this way: *Dragonfly Eyes* (2017) was created using 10,000 hours of footage appropriated from mainland China’s then–200 million security cameras, on which a surreal—but ultimately convincing—narrative was imposed. The slipperiness between evidence and fiction may be why, as Sia writes, image capture in our “age of surveillance” becomes “a process of dispossession”—and why it is imperative for Hong Kong’s activist image-makers to get ahead of “any narrativization to be produced by historians, news anchors, or even elite activists.”

A few weeks after my visit to the Guggenheim, I learned that Sia had a piece featured in a group show at a Lower East Side gallery. The work, a ceiling-mounted sculpture titled *Antipodes II* (2024), exhibited characteristics of surveillance art, though without its sinister overtones. The sculpture repurposed a car’s rearview mirror, which Sia rewired to loop 24 hours of footage she shot at the port of Okinawa through an appropriated nature cam. With its lens pointed exclusively at a body of water, *Antipodes II* pays tribute to Okinawa’s colonial and military history without instrumentalizing the images of any human subjects. Moreover, by displaying the footage inside a car’s rearview mirror, Sia subtly conveys how, in the act of looking back—in space and time—one can only ever glimpse a sliver of the full picture. In short, this work, with its truncated seaward gaze, offers no fodder for sensational narrativization.

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In her third and fifth essays, “Elliptical Returns: Reconfiguring Publics in Former and New Hong Kong Cinema” and “No Place,” Sia brings her ethos of place-based, reparative image-making to bear on Chan Tze-woon’s film *Blue Island* (2022) and the work of photographer An-My Lê. Both Chan’s film and Lê’s photographs document processes by which scenes from history are recreated in the present. *Blue Island*

features activist-staged reenactments of 1970s Communist Party assemblies in the Chinese countryside, while many of Lê's images are shot on film sets. Chan's work, Sia argues, attends to "minor histories and a strategy of looking not at the events themselves but at their aftermaths, of focusing not on the leaders or the front-liners but on various people on the margins of the pages of history." In *Blue Island*, Sia writes, "the crowd's chants echo back at the speaker, who has the famous Little Red Book in his hand," before the film cuts to a conversation with an elderly man in Hong Kong who fled the Cultural Revolution at the time when these assemblies were taking place. "Was the mood like this back then?" the man is asked, to which he responds, "No, not so fervent."

What Sia calls "televisual and photographic memory" can come to supplant documentary evidence and eyewitness accounts in collective imaginations. This became clear to me when I visited Lê's MoMA retrospective, *Between Two Rivers/Giữa hai dòng sông/Entre deux rivières* (2023–24). There, a large inkjet print stopped me in my tracks. Titled *Veterans/Extras, Film Set (Free State of Jones), Battle of Corinth, Bush, Louisiana* (2015), the photograph shows two actors on the set of Gary Ross's 2016 film of the same name, who sit spackled in stage blood, leaning on one another for support. For a split second, before my eyes registered the ladder and camera cranes in the background, the actors' grisly injuries looked real, their grim expressions sincere. In "No Place," Sia argues that this conflation of original and remake, event and interpretation, can turn entire nations into "dispersed fantas[ies]." In this way, popular films such as *Apocalypse Now* (Francis Ford Coppola, 1979) and *Full Metal Jacket* (Stanley Kubrick, 1987) have given rise to what Lê terms a "Vietnam of the mind." However, by foregrounding the material conditions of reenactment rather than seamless performances on or off camera, Chan and Lê shine light on the sutured edges of the past and present. For this reason, they too, like the Hong Kong Documentary Filmmakers group, have come to stand for a new mode of image-making that privileges criticality over nostalgia and myth.

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Sia's fourth essay, "Toward the Invisible," is the book's outlier, or, rather, it marks the point at which practices of resistance within a surveillance state are retooled to confront the Western gaze. Here, Sia proposes not a specific film or photograph but instead an opaque and unreadable "blank image" as metonym for "Asian American" art. "Where, for us, does Asia begin?" Sia asks.

Does it begin in Palestine? After all, Edward Said—the author of such a monumental work for the fields of Asian studies and Asian American studies as Orientalism—is a Palestinian intellectual. And on the other end, does our definition of Asia include Australia and Hawai'i? If the definition of Asian American identity opens up a discourse about solidarity, where might we locate the bounds of our relations?

The blank image can also refer to the blank sheets of A4 paper Hong Kongers held up in 2020 in protests against the "national security law," which criminalized speech advocating for Hong Kong's secession from China, and which mainlanders held, in lieu of potentially incriminating signage, to protest Xi Jinping's Zero-COVID policy. "What are other methods," Sia writes:

beyond simply summoning ourselves, that might be mobilized to materialize a cultural formation, or restless histories, in experimental forms? To embrace incoherence? Beyond the permissions of genre, nation, or institution, this blank image as form withholds information as much as it offers a space of contestation.

Just as Sia's cohort of image-makers resists surveillance by "thinking beyond visibility" and maintains opacity by adopting "postnational" frameworks of art-making and criticism, the filmmaker proposes, through her style of writing, yet another method of resistance. The book's sixth and final essay, "A Blurred Conceit," is an homage to the late Hong Kong– and Taiwan-based Chinese wuxia director King Hu's use of artificial mist. "Hu constructed a makeshift device to create the appearance of mist in his films," Sia explains, "tying grass and twigs together in a barrel punctured with holes. Once lit, the air would move through the device, lifting the white smoke and permeating the frame." Hu serves as a spiritual guide for Sia, whose film *The Sojourn* (2023), an "action-less martial arts epic," retraces the journey Hu made to shoot his breakthrough film *Dragon Inn* (1967) through the misty mountains of Taiwan. Mist—that which blurs and obscures, allowing figures to emerge at their own pace, on their own terms—functions as motif and method for Sia and her cohort. "I figured if the reader had made it this far," Sia writes in the book's final pages:

unhindered by my many attempts to thwart the inattentive, or deter the bored state agent who was given the unfortunate assignment of trawling this text for sensational or incriminating details, then I would bury my most obtuse lessons yet here, at the end. I hope I have last at least the agent by now.

Her discursive smoke screen is precisely the countermeasure necessary to establish "a new Hong Kong cinema that lives on"—past the censorship, past the propaganda. This "exilic, fugitive" visual vocabulary relies on neither spectacular, glass-shattering chase sequences nor myths of nationhood cloaked in nostalgia, but rather on a sense of shared responsibility for a collective future.

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