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Journal article

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This is the accepted version of:

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Journal of Literary & Cultural Disability Studies (2021), 15, (1), 19–37.

<https://doi.org/10.3828/jlcds.2021.2>

Temporalities, a disability chronotope and empathetic horizons in *Still Human*

Abstract

This article engages with arrangements of time and space and how they conjoin to constitute a disability chronotope that combines with other textual elements to both expand and limit empathetic horizons in *Still Human*, a film about a physically-impaired middle-aged man and his Pilipino foreign domestic helper (FDH), set largely within a Hong Kong public housing estate. I distinguish between the text's declarative and descriptive layers, albeit while recognising the forced and perhaps violent nature of this division. Structuring the surface of the film are technical codes and a chronological, optimistic and sometimes humorous overcoming narrative through which protagonists triumph over tragedy. However, the surface of the text is intermittently disturbed by descriptive layers, or figurative currents. Although this troubling content appears peripheral to, and on the margins of, the text, this underlying and seemingly extraneous content is a crucial supplement which may more effectively realise authorial intentions to disclose the protagonists' humanness and engender empathy than the more prominent technical codes that structure the text's surface. Such coexisting layers illustrate how texts are stratified and how the content of texts and the intentions of authors are haunted by undecidability.

Keywords: Hong Kong; *Still Human*; declarative/descriptive content; temporalities; disability chronotope; empathy/empathetic horizons; undecidability; supplement

Introduction

Leung Cheong-wing—performed by Anthony Chau-Sang Wong, a famous, local, abled, actor—is a middle-aged man who uses a wheelchair having been paralysed from the chest down in an accident while working at a construction site. Arguably the central protagonist in *Still Human*,¹ Cheong-wing lives a solitary existence in a large public housing estate which constitutes the backdrop for much of the film. He has been left behind literally and figuratively, in ways that the Chinese title of the film *leonlokjan* 淪落人 (fallen behind person) registers. His former wife is now with a man seemingly from mainland China² and his relations with his college-aged son comprise merely sporadic and often uncomfortable web communications through Skype. Cheong-wing’s impairments are such that he requires assistance with eating and bathing, factors that conspire to bring Evelyn—performed by Crisel Consunji, in her first acting part—into his orbit when she takes up the role of Cheong-wing’s “domestic migrant worker”, or “foreign domestic helper (FDH).” From the Philippines,³ Evelyn becomes one in a line of persons employed by Cheong-wing who have either been dismissed or quit, seemingly as consequences of his irascibility and curmudgeonliness. The film documents the circumstances in which the characters become

¹ My unwillingness to state definitively Cheong-wing’s position in the film is because at times Cheong-wing retreats into the background, perhaps even becoming an ableist opportunity through which the other central character—namely Evelyn—may prove *her* worth. This may objectify Cheong-wing by denying *him* opportunities for subjectivity and agency, as Rosemarie Garland-Thomson observes of more general tendencies in representations of disabled characters (68).

² Although seemingly inconsequential, the decision to make the man who usurps Cheong-wing and takes his wife and son away originate from mainland China may predispose readers to identify with Cheong-wing given recent widespread opposition to mainland Chinese involvement—or some might say interference—in the purportedly special autonomous region that operates under the “one country two systems” constitutional principle.

³ “Domestic migrant worker” is, as Hans Ladegaard explains, the “preferred term” in both literature and migrant worker NGOs while the more commonly used local term “helper” is regarded as having derogatory connotations. However, because people in Hong Kong use the term “helper” to refer to themselves matters become more complicated especially since self-naming may index (positive) self-identifications (2020: 99). Two other ostensibly synonymous terms, namely Pilipino and Filipino (or Filipina for females), also require elaboration. The former is used by persons from the Philippines to refer to themselves while the latter term is Filipino is the Anglicized way of referring to both the people and the language. My deployment of the former term may index when the label may either be neutral or else likely to be claimed by the persons while the latter may index when the label is written on persons from the outside in ways that might be potentially discriminatory.

embroiled and their evolving relationship over five seasons. The film also includes Cheung Fai and Leung Jing-ying—Cheong-wing’s friend and sister—and other helpers with whom Evelyn spends time on her day off when they temporarily venture into the central city: to eat and chat amidst the banks and skyscrapers that conventionally signify Hong Kong.

During interviews, the writer-director Oliver Chan Siu Kuen produced various accounts of the origins and motivations for making *Still Human* (Peng, Kerr). For example, Chan described how while walking in her neighbourhood one day she saw a middle-aged man on an electric wheelchair and a Pilipino woman standing on the footstep behind him, meaning the man was, essentially, driving the girl around. This apparently “beautiful” moment also confused Chan, making her wonder why the man would be so “nice to a domestic helper”. Having confronted her own prejudice, Chan’s “goal was to show the audience that despite ... cultural and physical differences, we are all human and all equal,” believing that “empathy is a very good seed for erasing discriminations and prejudices” (Peng), sentiments repeated almost verbatim by the actors playing the leading roles in the film (e.g., McCarthy). Also seeming to contribute to the genesis of *Still Human* is Chan’s wheelchair-using parent, her feminist identifications (Kerr) and, perhaps, her own experiences of pursuing her dreams of becoming a filmmaker (that may echo and inform Evelyn’s dreams of becoming a photographer in the film). Despite such declared origins and intentions, similarities between *Still Human* and not only a much-lauded French film *The Intouchables* but also *The Upside* which began as a frame-by-frame remake of the French film may index growth in a “disability buddy movie” genre and trends for films centred upon disabled characters portrayed by unimpaired actors to be critically-acclaimed, award-winning and commercially successful.

The extent to which, if at all, *Still Human* is shaped through processes of intertextuality is peripheral to this article. Instead, the surface of this article is structured and organised around a discussion of the arrangements of time and space and how they conjoin to constitute a disability chronotope, a term which expresses configurations of space and time in language and discourse. The ways I deploy the term in this article is especially informed by Mikhail Bakhtin's essay "Forms of Time and of the Chronotope in the Novel: Notes toward a Historical Poetics" in which he gives the name "*chronotope* (literally 'time space') to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships ... expressed in literature" (84). For Bakhtin, a chronotope is not merely a "generic signifier" (Smethurst 67) but is instead "an optic for reading texts as x-rays of the forces at work in the culture system from which they spring" (Holquist 425-426). Michael Bérubé deploys the term intellectual disability chronotope to register how narrative "marks its relation to intellectual disability ... by rendering intellectual disability as a productive and illuminating derangement of ordinary protocols of narrative temporality" (83). For Bérubé, a "disability chronotope can offer a sublet into realms of temporal experience that exceed human perception" (104). The disability chronotope in *Still Human* is, by contrast, not only restricting and confining but also outside, albeit perhaps parallel to, ordinary "normal" timespace and constitutes a dimension from which protagonists strive to escape, with varying degrees of success.

In addition to attending to the character of the chronotope itself and its "relationship to an *actual* reality" (Bakhtin, 243, emphasis added), this article explores how it combines with other textual elements to expand and limit empathetic horizons in *Still Human*. Empathy, the declared intention of the author, encompasses a "wide range of psychological capacities that are thought of as being central for constituting humans as social creatures", enabling knowledge of "what other people are thinking and feeling, to emotionally engage with them, to share their thoughts and

feelings, and to care for their well-being” (Stueber). It may, more generally, refer to “the state of being emotionally and cognitively ‘in tune with’ another person, particularly by feeling what their situation is like from the inside” (Blackburn, 113). This article regards empathy as a conceptually and analytically productive notion which may manifest by virtue of “homologous experiences” and “radical imagination”, namely the “ability of subjects to imagine the world from the other’s point of view, *even if they cannot gain firsthand experience of this world*” (Kirtsoglou and Theodossopoulos, 109, emphasis added). Nevertheless, it is vital to concede that others may neither be fully knowable nor accessible. As Penelope Deutscher observes with regard to the work of Jacques Derrida, the other is always to some extent understood by one’s own “horizon of expectation. No matter how much we might take ourselves to be receptive to the other, our experience of another is always somehow restricted to *our* perceptions, *our* preconditions, *our* history”, to such an extent the other “may be ... ‘impossible’” (73, emphasis added).

My discussion implicitly and explicitly distinguishes between the text’s declarative and descriptive layers or, more prosaically, what an author “wishes to say” and what an author “says without [necessarily] wishing to say it” (Kakoliris, 181). Although I recognise the forced, and perhaps even violent, nature of this division, this article puts such a dissection to work, finding it useful as a tool with which to disturb notions like the unity and sanctity of texts as unproblematic reflections of authorial intentions. Structuring the surface of the film are technical codes (e.g., Fiske, 5) and a chronological, optimistic and sometimes humorous overcoming narrative through which protagonists triumph over tragedy that, to many readers, produces a “heart-warming” (e.g., Lee) text. However, the surface of the text is intermittently disturbed by descriptive layers, or figurative currents. Although this troubling content appears peripheral to, and on the margins of, the text, this underlying and seemingly extraneous content is a crucial supplement. This may more

effectively realise authorial intentions to disclose the protagonists' humanness and engender empathy than the more prominent technical codes that structure the text's surface. Such stratification and undecidability with regard to the content of texts and the intentions of authors also haunts this article. However, this article neither denies, erases nor writes over this with a monologic voice but, instead, repeatedly registers undecidability, contending this is central to *all* texts. There is because there are always and "inevitably points of undecidability that betray any stable meaning" authors may try to "*impose*" upon their work (Reynolds 46, emphasis added).

Temporalities

Although protagonists inhabit multiple, interwoven, overlapping and intersecting temporalities, they are largely confined in a disability timescape desynchronised and alienated from ordinary abled time while also being tyrannised—and seduced—by a past that similarly excludes.

Chronological, linear, time

Initially, Cheong-wing and Evelyn speak different languages, only communicating through an electronic dictionary. The flawed mistranslations this communicative device produces provide comedic interlude. Cheong-wing and Evelyn cannot, moreover, recognise either themselves or each other as other than the subaltern disabled and ethnic (i.e., Filipino) labels that have been written on them by dehumanising and stigmatising discourses. At the start of the film, for example, Cheong-wing is occupied by medical model discourse that he speaks himself, in ways that may exemplify the effects of psycho-emotional disablism (Thomas, 72). This occurs most vividly when Evelyn picks Cheong-wing up after he falls. "I am rubbish", he says, before going on to say "I just eat and shit in my pants", "I am a burden". That they cannot realise their humanness is registered

by their modes of address. “You maids”, Cheong-wing says early in the film, while repeatedly deploying the impersonal pronoun “you” as an appellation. Because both Cheong-wing and Evelyn are unable to conceive of a future, they are restricted to the mundane materiality of the present and the hardships characterising this temporal dimension.

Structuring the surface of the text is a chronological plot through which Cheong-wing and Evelyn learn to communicate, regard each other and themselves as human and imagine futures, a capacity that enables them to escape being “swallowed up in the existent”, thereby freeing them from reality (Sartre, 273). This shift is registered by Cheong-wing’s request for Evelyn not to call him by the formal, generic and distancing title “sir” and instead to call him Cheong-wing; something she gains proficiency in. Meanwhile, Cheong-wing begins to see himself other than a “loser”, as he described himself early in the film. The characters learn to understand and identify with each other outside stigmatising labels, to such extent they feel each other’s pain and suffering in a manner often ascribed to persons joined by kinship relations. They even appear temporarily to overlap and coincide with each other in ways that confounds the taken-for-granted separation of persons as ontologically bounded entities. This increasing intersubjectivity, or shared common understanding, is dramatised when Evelyn becomes temporarily disabled by virtue of an accident and Cheong-wing becomes temporarily abled. Instead of encoding this as harrowing, this scene has magical, hallucinatory and perhaps even mirage-like qualities and momentarily it even seems the characters will kiss. Such melodramatic encoding may obscure how this scene might disclose the fragility and porousness of “ability” and “disability,” especially since Evelyn quickly reclaimed, or returned to, her “abled” subject position (and Cheong-wing to his).

Such linear journeys are neither uninterrupted nor unimpeded by obstacles and there are moments of regression and reversal as Cheong-wing and Evelyn turn on each other *and* themselves.

The characters are, for example, tested by the discriminatory attitudes of their friends and relatives who by virtue of being unable to perceive the humanness in the other encourage, or tempt, them to reorient to them in stigmatising ways despite themselves having been subject to stigmatising and discriminatory practice and discourse. Evelyn's friends, for example, encourage her to forsake Cheong-wing and to find a better employer, namely someone not impaired. On another occasion, Fai questions Cheong-wing's apparent kindness to Evelyn, producing discourse suggesting her ethnic identity should preclude such an orientation while Jing-ying, Cheong-wing's sister, upon witnessing their increasing cordiality on a street asked if they were "together" before saying: "She's your maid, aren't you disgusted?" Despite such implicit and explicit pressures to cultivate inauthentic, or inhuman, practice with regard to each other, they remain true, or "human", in ways that might provide empathetic models which audiences may emulate.

Albeit with interruptions, the chronological plot structuring the surface of the text combines with other technical codes (e.g., and especially, music) that encode particular moments as e.g., poignant, moving etc., in ways that may predispose audiences to identify with the characters' trials and tribulations. Nevertheless, the ways events proceed orderly via a linear chain from a dispiriting beginning to an optimistic coda is ideological. This perpetuates the pervasive, pernicious and tenacious "overcoming narrative". As Tanya Titchkosky explains, this "honours the sort of humanness that belongs to the enlightened liberalism of late capitalism, in which lone individuals pursue ... competitive striving ... or otherwise displaying the strength of the human spirit" (179). Crucially, this "strength" is not intrinsic to humans but is, instead, a manufactured product, or outcome, of the way in an era of neoliberalism "responsibilities and risks are shifted downward, onto the individual" and crucially as "individual responsibility is stressed, structural inequalities are either ignored or denied" (Robson, 222). By intervening with a mobile phone camera to record

and resist the deceptive practice Evelyn was subjected to by a vendor in a wet market, Cheong-wing displays such entrepreneurial spirit. Although the effectiveness of such tactics may inadvertently silence the need for structural strategies and solutions to remedy micro-aggressions, how he and Evelyn operate as a team may register the promise and potential of sustained alliances between stigmatised persons and groups in disabling milieu.

Calendrical time

Calendrical, or Gaian time, namely “the cycles of the earth and life ... [and] the seasons of the year” (Hale 93), also structures the surface of the text. The film unfolds over five chapters, each of which corresponds to a season, namely summer, autumn, winter, spring and summer, the repetition of which seems to connote recurrence and cyclicity as opposed to linearity and telos time. Calendrical time, especially the climatory conditions of the seasons, has an ordering function, rendering the surface of the text readerly by virtue of how the temperature and weather may correspond to, and thereby inform, the psychic climate of the protagonists and the vacillating nature of their relations. For example, the searing heat of summer coincides with, and frames, Cheong-wing’s anger, irascibility and volatility and the heatedness of the protagonists’ early exchanges. Moving toward autumn, this cools down, like the weather, to more comfortable temperatures and the characters experience deepening intimacy. However, by selling the camera Cheong-wing bought her to pursue her dream of becoming a photographer in order to send money to the Philippines, Evelyn creates conditions that conspire to make their relationship cold as winter approaches before this thaws during spring and summer.

The ways the seasons render the characters’ personal journeys readerly is not only by virtue of their climatic qualities but also their cultural and symbolic connotations. This is especially

during spring when it becomes clear the associations attached to spring as a time of renewal, regeneration and resilience are to be read as a counterpoint to the qualities the characters are required to adopt—i.e., strength, resilience and fortitude, even in the face of harsh conditions. In so doing, the cultural code becomes ideological such as when Evelyn insists that although Cheong-wing cannot choose whether or not to sit on a wheelchair he can “choose *how* to sit on it”. While Evelyn’s exhortation is compassionate, such commentary may implicitly endorse an individualised model of resilience that may blame persons for “failing to overcome” adversity (Runswick-Cole and Goodley, 126) in ways that might further eclipse how adverse environmental, structural and systemic circumstances *do* impact the positions persons like Cheong-wing occupy in the world and *how* he sits on his wheelchair.

The resilience trope which transcends the film is most explicit during spring when the characters escape the suffocating world in which much of the film takes place and journey downtown. In this scene, the resilience of the flowers is made to echo that of the characters: “don’t underestimate these flowers” explains Cheong-wing, as if responding to another character’s assertion that “humans can be fragile” but also “very strong”. Calendrical time and the resilience it seems to oblige and perhaps even coerce, like chronological time, permits a comforting and consoling coda albeit while propagating cultural assumptions about the value of “standing up for yourself”, “walking tall” and so on (Swain, French, and Cameron, 22). These are qualities of the “self-enterprising citizen-subject who is *obligated* to become an ‘entrepreneur of himself or herself’” (Ong, 14; emphasis added) in neoliberal conditions of possibility.

Clock, disciplinary, time

Various iterations of clock time unobtrusively permeate the representation, their self-evident qualities indexing their hegemonic potency rather than a lack thereof. That clock time registers forms of disciplinary discourse is evident in the narration of Evelyn's routine timetable at the start of the film. A schedule is punctuated by a ringing alarm clock as her daily schedule is recited, including waking "at 4 am ... to help him [Cheong-wing] turn around". That this narration accompanies shots of Evelyn performing numerous tasks registers how disciplinary discourse impacts her daily practice and how schedules, calendars and watches "inculcate ... forms of temporal experience" (Freeman, 160) and "structure human existence according to the restrictive but profitable mechanisms of late capitalism" (West-Pavlov, 5).

Such a timetable controls activity and establishes rhythms which "regulate ... [through] cycles of repetition" (Foucault, 149). This produces a high pressure time dimension of "ceaseless activity" (Hale 93) albeit of a kind that does not generate upward mobility. Instead, Evelyn, like persons in conditions of liquid modernity, is "unable to stop and even less to stand still" (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 28). The ostensibly unremarkable alarm clock positioned beside Evelyn's bed further indexes the commanding power of disciplinary time, highlighting how the mechanical logic and temporality they impose may interrupt and colonise natural rhythms albeit, admittedly, while being performatively reproduced *through* Evelyn's practice. Although Cheong-wing also has a clock beside his bed, clock time does not hail him in the same way. Instead, Cheong-wing is desynchronized and perhaps even alienated from the clock time that positions and recruits Evelyn, only to position her on the margins or periphery of a neoliberal society. Such unsatisfactory circumstances dramatise the double bind of Capitalist clock-time: namely that you are damned if you are hailed (in the case of Evelyn) and damned if you are not (in the case of Cheong-wing).

Although weekends emerge as consequences of regulatory patterns in Capitalist regimes, they provide escape from the disciplinary routine of weekday clock time. On Sundays, for both Evelyn and Cheong-wing, the everyday structures of weekdays are displaced by practices suggesting liminality and *communitas* (Turner 273-274). For Evelyn, this constitutes a time when she can “make herself up”, as is most evident when she and her friends dress in new clothes they “bought” only to return in ways that index a swift return to their “normal” selves, albeit while having worn them while drinking, dancing and temporally playing *other* persons. Sunday is when Fai comes over to Cheong-wing’s apartment and they eat snacks and watch pornography.

A past/present binary and a bifurcating present, or disability time

A past/present binary operates within the representation. The past is pre-impaired time; a colourful, warm and populated realm communicated through conventional cinematic codes. The present, by contrast, or post-impaired time, is largely seen through the prism of Cheong-wing’s apartment. This by comparison is monochrome and empty. These are not hermetically sealed temporal realms. Instead, the past, communicated through photographs and flashbacks of the home he shared with his wife and son *before* the impairment that seemingly made them go away intermittently interrupt, and perhaps even invade, the monochrome, sparse, apartment of the present, strewn with everyday objects. Such memories, flashbacks and photographs demonstrate how the past is “fundamentally implicated in ... now” (Adam 121) in ways that obfuscate their taken-for-granted separation. The juxtaposition of present and past is most vivid early in the film when Evelyn opens the door to her room for the first time as Cheong-wing is beside her. We encounter the interior first through his eyes that see the present through the prism of the past. The room is warmly-lit and full of signifiers of endeavor and achievement (i.e., cups, and medals). His teenage son sits studying with his back

to the door before turning to face Cheong-wing, as he was before impairment and before his wife and son went away. “Dad” he says while smiling, after which a door literally and metaphorically closes in front of Cheong-wing’s eyes, only to disclose Evelyn inside the space as it is now: dimly-lit, sparse, worn and carceral-like. Such a scene dramatises Henri Bergson’s view of memory as “the survival of past images” that “mingle with ... the present”, although for Cheong-wing “present experience” does not enrich “experience already acquired”, eventually covering it up (70). Instead, the past not only demeans and tyrannises but also dominates the present, at least until Cheong-wing learns to hope and display resilience.

As Cheong-wing is alienated from a past that both governs and seduces him so he occupies a slow and sometimes seemingly static temporality desynchronised from ordinary Capitalist time—a temporal order of speed and relentless forward-moving momentum. These parallel temporal worlds may sometimes touch, like the past/present binary. As the film begins, for example, a lampshade in Cheong-wing’s apartment shakes while he sleeps. It is daytime. Cheong-wing is soon woken by the sounds of drills and jackhammers that may signify development, change and perhaps even progress within discourses of modernity. Such signs communicate that Cheong-wing has been left behind, cut adrift in contexts beating to the rhythm of forward-moving, neoliberal clock time and time-as-progress. The time Cheong-wing occupies is one he lacks control over. He, and to some extent Evelyn, are so subject to irresistible external forces that shape their practice (e.g., the accident that impaired Cheong-wing (or “bad luck”, as Evelyn put it), unenviable working circumstances, the discriminatory practice of others etc.) that they seem to inhabit a temporal realm comparable to what Bakhtin calls “adventure time”: a chance dimension in which “an individual can be nothing other than completely *passive*, completely *unchanging*” (105). This

is disability time is potent and restricting although protagonists' increasing propensities to hope and display resilience registers this is temporal dimension they may surmount.

Despite seeming to surrender to the overcoming that unfolds through chronological time, disability time has the capacity to rupture the collective dimensions associated with Gaian time when generations meet in ways that link persons to family and society. Rupture to Gaian time, seemingly as a consequence of Cheong-wing's impairment, is dramatised at Chinese New Year—the most important cultural event in Chinese communities, a time when families ordinarily meet in large numbers, typically to eat in celebratory, sometimes even raucous, affairs. The lunchtime New Year meal at Cheong-wing's house attended by his sister could not be more different. Evelyn has prepared dishes and Cheong-wing is dressed in special clothing but as soon as Jing-ying arrives she is clearly reluctant to be there despite Cheong-wing's efforts to welcome her. She mechanically hands over gifts with an expression that moves from blankness to irritation as she repels Cheong-wing's gift (and the blessings it communicates) to her and her immediate family both of whom have refused to attend the meal. Jing-ying also orchestrates Evelyn's separate eating arrangements. "We didn't eat with the previous maids", she says barely glancing at Evelyn. After scenes disclosing the melancholy behind Jing-ying's meanness, the virtually silent meal ends almost as soon as it began as she departs to visit her mother-in-law, propelled by Cheong-wing dropping food into her lap. This signposted scene shifts between the now of disability time and pre-impaired times, manifest in photographs on the wall and in her wallet of Cheong-wing before the accident. Jing-ying gazes up longingly and wistfully at a photograph of Cheong-wing before the accident, seemingly yearning to be there rather than in disabled time. She cannot depart fast enough, dashing away having left her wallet behind in scenes that reproduce the dominant and disabling "disability as tragedy" trope.

Haunted by the past and confined in a present outside normative temporal orders, the disabled time the characters inhabit is apart from others—except for brief instances when Fai and Cheong-wing’s sister fleetingly appear in their orbit. The decision to position Cheong-wing and Evelyn outside “ordinary” time in undoubtedly realistic. Nevertheless, subjecting the characters to a form of “temporal distancing” (Fabian, 30) might restrict feelings of empathy. As Johannes Fabian explains, “intersubjectivity ... is inconceivable without assuming ... participants ... are coeval, i.e., share the same Time” (30) although, arguably, the film may manufacture moments in which audiences and protagonists do inhabit the same time which Bliss Cua Lim claims is a prerequisite for intersubjectivity (Lim 248).

Occupying and escaping a disability chronotope

As protagonists are positioned in various temporalities so they are located in space. Their positions in time and space conjoin to produce a disability chronotope in which they are largely confined. For the majority of the film, Cheong-wing and Evelyn are situated within a restricted area, namely an apartment in a public housing estate. This rendering of space generates a “limited geographical imagination”: “a distinctly local space that ... defines the very limits of reality” (Schwieger 69). This realm is removed from signifiers of Hong Kong as a modern, metropolitan, cosmopolitan, capitalist city (e.g. neon signs, skyscrapers, exclusive condos, etc.). The relative absence of the city might realistically register its inhospitable, perhaps even exclusionary, qualities, factors that compel, and perhaps even oblige, Cheong-wing to remain at home. Cheong-wing’s position in a public housing estate—rather than, for example, more affluent surroundings—may also realistically disclose how impairment intersects with and perhaps even produces disadvantageous socioeconomic circumstances by virtue of factors like employment discrimination and insufficient

benefits or compensation (e.g., for the accident that Cheong-wing had *while working*). Nevertheless, spatialising characters' identities may also inadvertently ghettoise impairment, making it seem to exist, appear or function together with a relative lack of affluence *as indeed it often does*, thereby insulating audiences of higher socioeconomic statuses from the immediacy of the characters' circumstances.

Cheong-wing and Evelyn's restricted movements contrast markedly with the seemingly voluntary comings-and-goings of both Jing-ying and Fai and the global movements of Cheong-wing's ex-wife, her new husband and son who appear, from time to time, on Cheong-wing's computer screen during Skype calls. Such contrast between restricted movements (and perhaps even exclusion and separation) on the one hand and fast rhythms and movements on the other dramatizes those "space wars" to which Bauman has referred and the two worlds they produce: one for persons who find space oppressive and the other for mobile elites who effortlessly and pleurably master mobility, the worlds of vagabonds and tourists respectively (*Globalization*, 27, 77). These are the fault lines and stratifications of transnational timespace.

Cheong-wing and Evelyn occupy a chronotope in which there is an unequal local/non-local ethnic binary with Cheong-wing's impaired or disabled identity playing a role in this contrivance. Evelyn's circumstances in Hong Kong, while inescapably dire and precarious, are constructed as preferable to life in the Philippines. This Hong Kong/Philippines binary is partly constructed through the self-depreciating discourse of her Pilipino friends. "I'm going back to the Philippines", said one of Evelyn's friends before her face gave way to tears. "Why? Did you do something wrong and get fired?" asked another, unable to fathom why she would *want* to leave. To be sure, this may register the paucity of options persons like Evelyn may have in real life. Nevertheless, this unequal hierarchical binary may also implicitly legitimize and justify macro and micro

violence and aggressions: not only the contemporary state-sponsored strategies that commodify and exploit stratification to produce service classes like Evelyn who live with their employers but also the hardships and maltreatments they encounter in particular residential settings by virtue of their roles as servants of globalisation (Parreñas). In so doing, the film may implicitly function like those anthropological texts that “established a ‘civilized’ West as the pinnacle of universal human progress”, in ways that “helped to legitimize ... imperial projects” (Bunzl ix-x).

Confinement in this disability chronotope is not permanent. In fact, Evelyn and Cheong-wing venture from their locality in ways that may signify expansion to the limits of their reality, both alone and together. For example, Evelyn enters fast, Capitalist time-space, albeit only on Sundays when the typical occupants have vacated (e.g., businesspersons, bankers, cosmocrats, etc.). Accordingly, she is out of kilter with, or desynchronized from, the rhythms of the “normal” occupants of this world. That she also departs at the end of the day, rather than staying, makes Evelyn further resemble such sociological categories as the vagabond (Bauman, *Globalization*, 77), “migrants” and “exiles”, in the sense that she is “*in*, but not *of* the place” (Bauman, *Liquid Modernity*, 207, original emphasis).

They also depart the chronotope through technical codes (e.g., occasional swirling and more expansive camera shots) that temporarily lift them, and audiences, out of the claustrophobic space of Cheong-wing’s apartment and the corridors of the public housing estate where much of the story happens. When subject to such encoding, they are transformed into something beautiful and otherworldly. Occasional shots of the sky provide glimpses of a world outside the protagonists’ quotidian exclusion. These shots are accompanied by emotive, perhaps even sentimental, music which encodes such moments as unambiguously poignant. Cheong-wing also escapes the disability chronotope in an imaginary, magic realism, sequence that mixes the fantastic and the

mundane. In this scene to which I have already referred, Cheong-wing can walk and saves Evelyn after she falls, a well-meaning fantasy that may, nevertheless, inadvertently register the desirability of the problematic, and perhaps even insidious, normative position.

Evelyn's camera, and the award she achieves at a photography competition that coincides with spring, ostensibly offers *her* a more enduring way of escaping the disability chronotope. On their way there, Cheong-wing and Evelyn glide through central Hong Kong in a taxi amidst skyscrapers and banks: stock signifiers of Hong Kong's cosmopolitan modernity. They talk about the resilience of the flowers they apparently see although it seems these red blossoms come from a different place—as though they have been edited into their journey. The vertical city, meanwhile, reflects in the taxi window, behind which is Evelyn's face so that, momentarily, she seems to have identity with the place. Even at the ceremony that symbolically registers their escape from the chronotope in which they have been confined, they are subject to exclusions. As Evelyn holds the certificate textualising her achievement, real sounds cease and the ensuing silence gives the scene an otherworldly quality. Out of such silence emerges words, uttered in both Chinese and English: "A Filipino maid? How can a maid be qualified? It's crazy". Meanwhile, although Evelyn and, briefly, Cheong-wing dialogue with others, they seem mostly apart—as if they have been edited into an environment they are actually separate from, in ways that might register not only how disabled persons *are* marginalised and excluded from and in "mainstream" society but also how stigmatising processes pervade even apparently inclusive civilised contexts. Cheong-wing even disappears momentarily, in a scene that might anticipate the coda of the film. That Cheong-wing and Evelyn are there but not there, or included only to be excluded, is further registered by their make-up, the dye that has been applied to Cheong-wing's hair and their ceremonial clothing which

makes them seem different persons: either imposters or perhaps even spectral presences that haunt the ostensibly inclusionary setting.

Subsequently, they return home although they venture downtown again in scenes that act as plot devices which make possible Evelyn's departure in the truncated, perhaps even hallucinatory, summer that follows, having won an award at the photography competition and realised her dream of becoming a photographer. This optimistic coda discloses Evelyn's escape from the chronotope in which she has been imprisoned in scenes that also seem to elevate her to the central protagonist while positioning Cheong-wing as a member of a supporting cast and perhaps even plot device through which Evelyn, like other "special people" may "show" her "spirit" (Titchkosky, 181) in ways that might even make Cheong-wing an "ablest opportunity" (Titchkosky, 184) through which Evelyn can display *her* humanness. Nevertheless, that Cheong-wing helps her—as she helps him—not only reveals the bilateral benefit but also reciprocal feelings that may emerge through alliances between stigmatised persons and between impaired people and caregivers. In so doing, this may disclose a model of care maintained and practiced *through* differences, like those relationships Akemi Nishida describes (89-103).

However, because audiences do not see Evelyn arrive at her destination, the scene accumulates further illusory qualities that may register how structural and systemic factors limit not only the realisation but also capacity to imagine and represent such an optimistic ending so quixotic is it. That she leaves but does not arrive at her destination may position Evelyn neither here nor there but forever in-between, suspended in perpetual liminality. Meanwhile, Cheong-wing returns home and, presumably, to the disability chronotope. On the one hand, by making both characters disappear, the coda might teach audiences that not only disabled people "live unliveable lives", at least inside "ordinary" society (Rice *et al.*, 524) but also other stigmatised persons. Such

an ending, like those textual “prosthesis” to which David Mitchell and Sharon Snyder refer, “alleviates discomfort by removing the unsightly from view” and, by virtue of seeming to dramatise a ““quick fix,”” the film may further remove audiences’ need to be concerned or vigilant (8). Put differently, such an ending in which all has become well may remove the need for “audiences to take a moral stance vis-a-vis what they see on the screen and act in the present”, as Maria Kyriakidou notes generally of media witnessing (217).

Nevertheless, by returning Cheong-wing to his public housing estate, the film refuses to realise the “overcoming” hinted at during the film. Instead, Cheong-wing returns to where he started in a coda that neither vanishes impairment nor magically fixes him, aside from that brief magical realism interlude in which he becomes temporarily-abled. In so doing, *Still Human* may write against “individualised stories” of “triumph over tragedy,” reminding persons, like those writers to whom Cath Nichols refers, “protagonists with a disability might *remain* disabled ... rather than be ‘cured’” (115, original emphasis). By ending in this way, the film registers a world in which impairment has a place, albeit and admittedly in a position segregated from the iconic and iconicised downtown locations that typically signify global, cosmopolitan and abled Hong Kong in mediated forms and to which ordinary urbanites gravitate and identify with. Further uplifting scenes in the film’s final act disclose the rehabilitation of disability time. Photographs in Cheong-wing’s apartment have not only been rearranged but also supplemented with records of the chronotope the film depicts. Now pre-impaired and post-impaired time coexist side-by-side, as if they occupy the same ontological footing. Meanwhile, amidst such scenes, Evelyn places a diaper into a bin. The trace of excrement is on her hands. Although seemingly insignificant and not only extraneous but also perhaps even disturbing to the realisation of the narrative that occupies the surface, or foreground, of the representation, this crucial supplement acknowledges the messy,

visceral materiality of impairment and, more generally, disability, or difference, for itself. Because such elements have the capacity to “remind the human community of its frailty” and “visceral, animal, messy selves” (Hughes, *Fear, pity and disgust*, 73), in ways that obfuscate the taken-for-granted, yet socially constructed, pristine and hierarchically arranged ability/disability binary, they might even facilitate realisation of the author’s empathetic intentions.

Concluding thoughts

This article has distinguished between the declarative and descriptive layers constituting *Still Human*, exploring how time and space come together to form a disability chronotope, the elements of which seem both conducive and detrimental to the engendering of empathy—the declared intention of the writer-director. This article has implicitly sought to obfuscate the separateness of declarative (i.e., what the author wants to say) and descriptive content (i.e., what the text actually says by virtue of e.g., content that escapes, or evades, authorial intentions) albeit while deploying this duality as a device with which to ideate and tease out “hidden textual implications” (Kakoliris, 182). By virtue of apprehending such intra-textual layers, it becomes possible to conceive authorial meanings as other than “pure, solid, ‘self-identical’ facts which ... anchor the work” (Kakoliris, 183) and, instead, to attend to how authors can, as Derrida explains, always be understood as saying “more, less, or something other than what he [or she] *would mean*” (158, original emphasis).

With such caveats in mind, the surface of the text, constituted by elements like an overcoming narrative, may aestheticise impairment (e.g., by virtue of the well-known abled celebrity playing Cheong-wing), thereby producing a readerly text that may reassure audiences and invite readers’ identifications albeit while, perhaps, limiting potential for audiences to empathise with characters, their predicaments and so on. By contrast, descriptive content is

populated by more troubling elements (e.g., and especially, flickers of the materiality of impairment) that may engender empathy albeit while, perhaps, troubling audiences in ways that might undermine the production of empathy.

Despite such inconclusivity, the aforementioned descriptive layers that seem extraneous to the surface of the text appear to be a crucial supplement to the technical codes that produce the surface of the text. As Derrida explains, the concept of the supplement “harbours ... two significations”: it “adds to itself, it is a surplus” but also “the supplement supplements”, adding “to replace”: it “intervenes or insinuates *in-the-place-of*; ... it fills ... as if one fills a void” (144-145). Crucially, the supplement is a “surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude ... It cumulates and accumulates presence” (Derrida, 144). This supplement “makes something deficient in the same moment as it completes it” (Deutscher, 38).

Such a definitive ending, albeit one that is caveated and perhaps even enigmatic, may inadvertently expunge the undecidability which not only characterises the text to which this article refers and the empathy the author seems intent upon engendering but also this article itself. This might also erroneously, and inadvertently, betray the logic of the supplement which disrupts “what we think we understand by the ‘end’, as much as ‘the beginning’ (Royle, 56). We might, as an alternative “end”, embrace the notion that neither completeness nor totalisation is possible.

Acknowledgement

The work described in this article was fully supported by a grant from the Research Grants Council of the Hong Kong Special Autonomous Region, China (Project No. PolyU 256022/18H)

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