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Towards a poor cinema: ubiquitous trafficking and poverty as problematic in Midi Z's films

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ABSTRACT

In his seminal essay, 'Towards a Poor Theatre', Jerzy Grotowski advocates a new form of theatre that will strip itself to the bone in order to reveal the quintessential nature of the art form. Borrowing this notion for the medium of cinema, this article proposes that the production practice of the Burmese-Taiwanese director Midi Z operates on a similar principle of a skeletal scale that demands a rethink about the nature of cinema. Midi Z's homecoming trilogy, which comprises his first three feature-length films, was shot on a shoestring budget involving minimal cast and crew. This article seeks to advance, in the spirit of Grotowski's conception, poverty as a paradoxically positive premise for a mode of filmmaking that will be termed 'poor cinema'. It draws on Midi Z's filmmaking career to illustrate two dimensions of poor cinema: the ubiquity of trafficking as a condition of production, and poverty as a problematic in the diegeses of the films. It argues that Midi Z's poor cinema sets out to circumvent censorship through trafficking and, in this invariably transnational *modus operandi*, also to stage poverty as a problematic that interrogates the ethics and aesthetics of filmmaking.

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Introduction

In his seminal essay, 'Towards a Poor Theatre', Jerzy Grotowski ([1968] 1969) advocates a new form of theatre that will strip itself to the bone in order to reveal the quintessential nature of the art form. Borrowing this notion for the medium of cinema, this article proposes that the filmmaking practice of the Burmese-Taiwanese director Midi Z (Zhao Deyin in pinyin) operates on a similar principle of a skeletal scale that demands a rethink about the nature of cinema. It should be qualified, from the outset, that the use of the term 'poor' here avoids a sociological definition and measurement of poverty and also a negative discursive and representational history of poverty marked by a strategy of 'othering' (Lister 2004). Rather, this article seeks to advance, in the spirit of Grotowski's conception, poverty as a paradoxically positive premise for a mode of filmmaking that I will call 'poor cinema'.¹ I draw on Midi Z's filmmaking career to illustrate two dimensions of poor cinema: the ubiquity of trafficking as a condition of production, and poverty as a problematic in the diegeses of the films.

Before I expand on these two dimensions in the sections below, I want to firstly address the question of digital technology, which underpins Midi Z's filmmaking and has had an impact on our understanding of and relationship to the film medium in at least the following ways. To begin with, digital technology fundamentally upends the very materiality of the cinematic image, prompting a reflection about the ontology of film in the digital age (Rodowick 2007). Secondly, film and other audio-visual media, whilst remaining distinct in their own forms, have also increasingly undergone a process of massive, frequent and rapid remediation (Bolter and Grusin 2000) into a new composite digital form that merges, changes and erases their original properties. Thirdly, these old and new media forms can now be disseminated and accessed readily on a wide array of screens and platforms to the extent that it might be conceivable to call for a reformulation of the discipline of film studies as screen studies (Berry 2014). Fourthly, the ubiquity of this mediality (Grace 2013) has also been evident in the significant reduction in the cost of filming equipment with the advent of the digital camera (and now, as part of a smartphone). This has brought about a democratization of film production at the same time as the digital camera has made trafficking – by definition, a clandestine and cross-border activity – of images much easier, thus enabling transnational filmmaking to take place at an unprecedented level.

Nevertheless, the discourse of ubiquitous digital media needs to be tempered if only for what it might have concealed in reality. If 'a film's availability online is predicated on its digitization' (Jordanova 2013, 48), its accessibility is also dependent on platforms such as the World Wide Web and devices such as smartphones. The Internet penetration rate (expressed as a percentage of a country's population) in Myanmar, however, is 22. This figure is more or less in line with those of the country's South-East Asian neighbours such as Laos (18), Cambodia (19), Thailand (39), and Vietnam (53), but far less than in world leaders Bermuda and Iceland (both 98) as well as Andorra, Luxemburg and Norway (all 97) (figures dated 2015; The World Bank 2017a). As for mobile phone subscription, of every 100 people, Vietnam has 131 subscribers, Cambodia 133, Thailand 153 (meaning a person would have more than one phone subscription on average in these three countries), whereas Laos has 53 subscribers and Myanmar has 76 (figures dated 2015; The World Bank 2017b),² although these figures do not tell us whether the phones used by subscribers are smartphones. Putting these two sets of figures together, it would be fair to say that not that many people in Midi Z's homeland of Myanmar often watch films on their mobile phones.

Celebratory discourses of ubiquitous digital mediality often conceal not only the economic poverty that makes access to the Internet and ownership of smartphones too expensive for much of the world's population, but also the role of political censorship on the production and consumption of media output such as cinema. In the case of Myanmar, film censorship was reintroduced in December 2014 (Aung 2014), and an Austrian-directed film, *Twilight Over Burma: My Life as a Shan Princess* (dir. Sabine Derflinger 2015), was recently banned at an international human rights film festival held in Yangon (Fisher 2016). On the film production front, permits are required for shooting and they can be difficult to obtain, especially if a film's theme is deemed to be sensitive or taboo. Yangon Film School, the only film school in Myanmar, started life as an unofficial organization because of a 'climate of fear' (Eimer 2016). Hence, cinema in Myanmar is circumscribed by economic poverty and political censorship so that it is not so much ubiquitous as precarious. Midi Z's poor cinema, then, sets out to circumvent censorship through trafficking and, in this invariably transnational *modus operandi*, also to stage poverty as a problematic that interrogates the ethics and aesthetics of filmmaking.

From Myanmar to Taiwan

Midi Z is a fourth-generation Yunnanese Chinese migrant born in 1982 in Lashio, northern Shan State in Burma (Chang 2016, 43).³ Midi Z's great grandfather moved from Nanjing to Yunnan to help build the Burma Road that would link Kunming in Yunnan to Lashio in eastern Burma, and Midi's grandfather took refuge in Burma during the civil war of 1945 to 1949 between the Chinese Communist Party and the Nationalist Party (or Kuomintang, the KMT) (Zhao 2015, 30). Thus, Midi Z is a descendant of a Yunnanese refugee who belonged to a diasporic Chinese community that resided in the mountain areas of Shan and Kachin States in Burma, and which maintained a close relationship to the KMT regime during the cold war era (Chang 2014, 5). That is to say, even before he was born, Midi Z's lineage already provided him with a transnational connection to Taiwan, where the KMT retreated to in 1949 following its defeat in the civil war. In fact, Midi Z had benefited from KMT's educational policy for overseas Chinese, which gave him the opportunity to study in Taiwan at the age of 16, although the policy's implementation in Myanmar, by Midi Z's account, was fraught with corruption by local intermediaries (Zhao 2015, 52–54).

Like many poverty-stricken Burmese-Chinese, Midi Z's main reason for going to Taiwan was not to study but to make money to send home, and on the second day after arriving he began working on a construction site (Zhao 2015, 18; Chang 2016, 54). He studied printing and photography at high school, and specialized in graphic design at university and graduate school (Chang 2016, 54; CineVue 2017). He started making short experimental films as part of his college coursework and soon realized that these films could make money if they won awards in competitions (Zhao 2015, 18). His college graduation piece, *Baige/Paloma Blanca* (2006), was selected for several international film festivals; another short film, *Huaxingjie jishi/Huasin Incident* (2009), was made under the auspices of the first Golden Horse Film Academy founded by the veteran auteur Hou Hsiao-hsien (18, 19). Midi Z made his first feature-length film, *Guila de ren/Return to Burma* in 2011, and soon followed with two more films, *Qiongren, liulian, mayao, touduke/Poor Folk* (2012) and *Bingdu/Ice Poison* (2014), which, together, are known today as the 'homecoming trilogy'. *Ice Poison* was selected to represent Taiwan in the Foreign Language Film category at the 2015 Academy Awards, signalling Midi Z's acceptance by the Taiwanese authorities as one of their own (Midi took up Taiwanese citizenship in 2011; Chen 2016). His fourth feature film, *Zaijian Wacheng/The Road to Mandalay* (2016), won him the Outstanding Taiwanese Filmmaker of the Year award at the 2016 Golden Horse Awards. Besides feature films, Midi Z also made two documentaries on the jade mining trade in Myanmar, namely, *Wa yushi de ren/Jade Miners* (2015) and *Feicui zhi cheng/City of Jade* (2016).

The homecoming trilogy, which will be the focus of this article, draws on Midi Z's own experience as well as those of his family and friends in Myanmar. The films touch upon issues of poverty, drug addiction, drug trafficking and human trafficking, migrant labour, and dreams of leaving Myanmar. According to Midi Z, the three options for Burmese who want to change their fortune are drug-dealing, jade mining and working overseas, and the first two films in the trilogy are really about the 'Taiwan dream' (Zhao 2015, 29). The films' diegeses thus centre around scenes of border crossing, illegal trafficking, drug-taking, and so on, whose common ground is an economic impoverishment that structures these means and modes of existence.

My aim here, however, is not to approach poverty in a literal, representational manner, such as how Midi Z ‘*portrays* the lives of poor people from his community and the underlining cultural and structural features in relation to the socio-political scenarios of the country and Yunnanese migrant’s culture of mobility’ (Chang 2016, 45; emphasis mine), although such representations are certainly present in his films. Rather, in the two following sections, I want to propose poverty both as a method for film production during which trafficking becomes ubiquitous and as a problematic that foregrounds *how* the poor characters in his films *deal with* poverty (instead of how they might have suffered because of their poverty). The former discussion is inspired by Grotowski’s notion and gestures towards a poor cinema, whereas the latter aspect will also demonstrate how poor cinema shares the ethics and aesthetics of earlier and contemporary film movements. In the concluding section, I will review the relevance of the notion of poor cinema in light of Midi Z’s career development, in particular, in relation to his latest feature *The Road to Mandalay*.

Ubiquitous trafficking

For Grotowski, ‘[t]he acceptance of poverty in theatre, stripped of all that is not essential to it, revealed to us not only the backbone of the medium, but also the deep riches which lie in the very nature of the art-form’ ([1968] 1969, 21). This stripping to the bone in order to reveal the paradoxical riches of poverty is an ethos shared by Midi Z’s digital filmmaking, if only as a result of financial constraints. As Midi Z claims:

To make a film in Hollywood, you need a bank and an army as backup. People throw around ten million US dollars to make a film, but I have to make do with less than one million New Taiwan dollars [around 33,000 US\$]; people shoot films in broad daylight, but we have to toil in secrecy (Zhao 2015, 24).

In this sense, Hollywood can be counterpointed as a ‘rich cinema’, which corresponds to what Grotowski calls ‘Rich Theatre’, a conceptualization of theatre ‘as a synthesis of disparate creative disciplines – literature, sculpture, painting, architecture, lighting, acting (under the direction of a *metteur-en-scene*)’, that, for Grotowski, is ‘rich in flaws’ (Grotowski [1968] 1969, 19). Therefore, for both the theatrical and the cinematic art forms, poverty signals a departure from the conventional modes of production which depend upon substantial investment in cast, crew, set and equipment, relying instead on a skeletal operational scale to achieve its artistic aims.

Indeed, it is precisely the bank and the army that Midi Z had had to work without and against in his filmmaking. Let us first look at the homecoming trilogy’s conditions of production. *Return to Burma* was made with a crew of three people (including Midi Z) and shot in 15 days; a Burmese producer came up with 80% of the money (around US\$10,000 dollars, which essentially paid for the return flights for the crew) and the other 20% came from Midi Z’s own personal funds (Zhao 2015, 22). *Poor Folk*, set in Thailand and focusing on the Burmese migrant labour community there, was shot in 14 days with a crew of four and a budget of around U.S. 15,000–20,000 dollars (Chen, Zhang, and Zheng 2015). The making of *Ice Poison* was more incidental and spontaneous. Midi Z’s *Anlaoyi/Burial Clothes* (2013) was part of an online short film project entitled ‘Homeland and Diaspora’ by China’s Phoenix New Media. This afforded him a crew of seven and a shooting schedule of 19 days (Zhao 2015, 43, 44), a luxury for a 15-min short film compared to the conditions of production for his first two feature-length films. On the third day of shooting the short, Midi

Z began to contemplate the possibility of expanding it into a feature-length film, although he kept the idea from the cast and crew until after the short film had been completed on the sixth day (164, 165). He utilized the remaining time to raise the budget from Taiwan and to shoot more scenes for what would become *Ice Poison* (CineVue 2017), whose budget amounted to around U.S. 25,000–30,000 dollars (Chen, Zhang, and Zheng 2015).⁴

Besides having to shoot on a shoestring budget and to depend on the kindness of his family and friends to provide other forms of support in kind, Midi Z's productions also had to operate in a clandestine manner, and deceit, bribery, and trafficking became commonplace. For a start, the camera and other equipment had to be dismantled and distributed evenly among the luggage of the crew members to avoid suspicion by custom officers (Zhao 2015, 46). Next, borders were often crossed illegally with a small amount of bribery. For the shooting of a short film, *Motuo chefu/Motorcycle Driver* (2008), Midi Z and his childhood friend travelled to the border between Myanmar and China, crossing the border by climbing over the fence during the night; on their way back, after they had purchased a motorcycle, they were stopped by three soldiers on the Burmese side and got away after handing over 1000 Burmese Kyat and a basket of mandarin oranges (138, 139).⁵ During a location shooting for *Ice Poison*, Midi Z had to give another soldier 10,000 Kyat (around seven U.S. dollars) to get out of a situation; he also lied about the iPhone which a soldier wanted to take from him by claiming that it was a gift from a general in Yangon (187, 188). For a scene set in a busy bus terminus, after putting up a front in the negotiation process and lying that they were making a travel documentary for a Taiwan media company, Midi Z even convinced the chief of a police bureau located next to the bus terminus to assist in the filming process by sending policemen to help control the traffic and by allowing the crew to shoot from the upper floors of the police station; this time, Midi Z prepared 30,000 Kyat (around 22 U.S. dollars) as gift money (103, 104).

As we can see, Midi Z's modus operandi resonates with practices of guerilla and underground filmmaking, bordering on the margins of legality, circumventing censorship, and dealing with corruption by any means possible. The key to such a mode of operation, according to him, is to keep a low profile, to dress like a country bumpkin, and to be totally ruthless (Zhao 2015, 46, 47). As Midi Z said matter-of-factly in an interview, 'the way you shoot a film relates to the way you usually live your life; because this is how I usually survive when working, this is also how my filmmaking survives' (Hsiao 2016, 354).

It is against this production background that I consider Midi Z's films as constituting a poor cinema, which mobilizes the condition of poverty as a filmmaking premise in order to get to the essence of the art form itself. Just as Grotowski's conception of a poor theatre is predicated upon a process of 'gradually eliminating whatever proved superfluous,' from make-up, costume, lighting and sound effects to set and stage (Grotowski, [1968] 1969, 19), Midi Z's modus operandi of skeletal crew, minimal budget and limited shooting time similarly puts to the test the potentiality of poverty. Moreover, the ethos of Midi Z's poor cinema recalls a film movement known as a 'cinema of poverty' (cinema povera), started by Bruce Conner in the 1950s in the United States.⁶ Inspired by Guy Debord in its use of found footage for the construction of its work, practitioners of 'cinema povera' adopt the method of 'using what you have' (Cox 2001; 2005, 169). Midi Z's poor cinema champions, in a spirit similar to cinema povera, 'a deliberate and consistent turning away from the offerings of the mainstream' (Cox 2005, 170) by 'not relying on crews, big budgets, and adapting what is lying around' (169). In Midi Z's view, there is a misconception about what is commonly

known as ‘independent cinema,’ which, for him, is not about the lack of money but rather about a way of making films that liberates oneself from the standard mode of thinking about filmmaking (Sun 2014). As such, the literal sense of poverty opens onto a metaphorical sense of riches that can only be attained when the material conditions of production have been stripped to their bare limits.⁷

In borrowing Grotowski’s conceptualization of theatre for cinema, it is necessary to qualify how the notion of poverty would manifest in medium-specific ways within each art form. For Grotowski, because theatre ‘will remain technologically inferior to film and television’ no matter how it ‘expands and exploits its mechanical resources’ ([1968] 1969, 19), the essence of theatre is about ‘finding the proper spectator-actor relationship for each type of performance and embodying the decision in physical arrangements’ (20). Cinema, however, differs from theatre in that the enactment and composition of the performance (that is, shooting and editing) seldom happen before a live audience; besides, its staging of the final product (screening) is not site-specific (unlike theatre), and is not only multiple and mobile but also increasingly taking place in the non-places (Augé 1995) of digital screens. The technical properties of cinema dictate that the art form’s moments of creation, dissemination and reception must be divorced both temporally and spatially, traversing and transgressing borders of all kinds – even between the real and the virtual – thanks, precisely, to the invention of digital technology that has made file sharing, downloading, live and scheduled streaming, and piracy as ubiquitous (at least where economics and technology allow) as watching films on digital screens – from computers and laptops to tablets and smartphones.

In what ways, then, can the ‘infinite variation of performer-audience relationships’ in theatre (Grotowski, [1968] 1969, 20) be reconfigured in cinema? Or, to put it differently, given the spatial and temporal separation between the performer and the audience in the medium of film, how can Grotowski’s notion of poor theatre, stripped to the bare bones, take concrete form in the working of poor cinema? What strategies can cinema adopt to bridge the gap between actor and spectator, given that the latter’s reception of the former’s performance is always already delayed and also mediated by properties of the cinema (from camera angle, shot distance, editing, music and special effects to the scale of projection, depending on the platform on which the film is viewed)? To address these questions, we will move from the context of ubiquitous trafficking in Midi Z’s conditions of production to examine the strategy of poverty-as-problematic in the film texts that enables an ‘encounter’ between actor and spectator – the ‘core of the theatrical exchange’ for Grotowski (Wolford 1997, 1) – to materialize, albeit in a vicarious manner.

Poverty as problematic

Because the diegeses of Midi Z’s films are centred around issues such as drug-taking and migrant labour, the direct representation of poverty cannot be avoided. Coupled with the autobiographical nature of his source materials and of interviews given as well as accounts provided by the director, such representation of poverty can be said to possess a documentary quality that makes a claim to realism (reinforced by the use of long takes).⁸ Here, however, I am more interested in the ways in which Midi Z’s films gesture towards a poor cinema by closing the gap between the actor and the spectator, staging poverty as a problematic so that the audience is put in a situation whereby poverty is not so much represented

in a literal manner but is, instead, dealt with in the hope of finding a solution. That is to say, while watching the performance of the actors, the offscreen spectators (however delayed and mobile) are placed in a scenario in which they cannot but participate (however remotely and vicariously) in the onscreen financial dealings of the characters. As a result, poverty is no longer something that happens elsewhere (in the physical sense of both the setting of the diegesis and the screen) but rather a problematic that the spectators are cognitively (and emotionally) invested in. I shall illustrate this argument with some examples below.

Midi Z's debut feature film, *Return to Burma*, opens with the only scene set in Taipei where the protagonist Xing-Hong, a migrant construction worker, is about to embark on a journey home over the Chinese New Year holidays. Xing-Hong had arrived home at a time (November 2010) when an election had just been held and the Burmese Kyat appreciated in value as a result. The first conversation he has with his younger brother, at a construction site where the latter works in their hometown of Lashio, is about working conditions: the younger brother's salary of 3000 Kyat a day is one-tenth what Xing-Hong is paid in Taipei (all figures cited below are in Kyat unless otherwise stated). The conversation, carried on over dinner, swiftly turns to the younger brother's plan to find work in Malaysia and the cost of a little over a million for the passport for which he is applying. The father joins them and Xing-Hong immediately asks him about his pay (just over 4000 a day and with no prospect of a rise). The topic of conversation – about money – would be repeated throughout the film as Xing-Hong contemplates his future. Furthermore, the high frequency of trafficking, bribery, and deceit in the films' production process also manifests in this diegesis. For example, Xing-Hong discovers in a conversation with his mother that his sister has been sold into marriage with a man in Hunan province in China on the false promise of work at a hotel in Ruili (in Yunnan) for 300 Renminbi a month, but the sister now has a two-storey house and, according to the mother, is 'not poor at all'. Like the challenges encountered during the film production process, adversity in the film's diegesis can be turned into (or perceived as) opportunities for improving one's circumstances, a problematic to be resolved rather than an existential crisis that defines one's subjectivity.

This obsessive attention to monetary figures creates scenarios in which the spectators find themselves engaging in mental arithmetic *at the same time* as Xing-Hong makes his calculations. In one scene, Xing-Hong goes into an electronics shop and checks out the price of individual items (for example, 15,000 for a microwave oven), the profit margin (1000–2000), and where the goods come from (China). He even asks the owner how much it would cost to open a shop like this (around 20 million) and the monthly rent (150,000), and inspects the physical environment of the shop at great length. In another scene, he visits an oil-pressing factory and enquires about the cost of installing an electric meter (one million), the stability of the electricity supply, the cost of the made-in-China machine (two million), and the worker's pay (40,000–50,000 a month).⁹ Yet another scene showcases a convoluted list of costs relating to the running of a tricycle business. There is even a scene in which the price range of prostitutes is clearly spelt out: 30,000 for those aged between 27 and 29, 35,000 for those aged under 20, and 50,000 for 15-year-olds (Xing-Hong asks the pimp for a 'high quality but inexpensive one'). About halfway into the film, when asked by an old friend if he will be going back to Taiwan after the New Year holidays, Xing-Hong replies, 'Probably not' and 'We'll see', a clear indication that he has been weighing his options since returning home.

These scenes offer poverty not so much as a direct portrayal as concrete cognitive processes with which the characters – and the spectators – are constantly engaged. They allow the otherwise invisible mental reckoning (that is, whether these sums add up) to become visible by presenting, on screen, poverty-as-problematic in the form of contemplation about the possibility of transforming oneself from an employed labourer to ‘a self-employed little capitalist’ (Wang 2017, 169). Cinema, in Deleuzian terms, ‘concretely produces a corresponding image of thought, a visual and acoustic rendering of thought in relation to time and movement’ (Rodowick 1997, 6). This capacity of the cinematic medium is, in Midi Z’s films, realized in an almost literal fashion insofar as the image is not only a representation of thought but also contains the thought processes which unveil themselves through time (use of the long take) and action (Xing-Hong’s endless questions). More importantly, Midi Z’s poor cinema adds a new dimension to this capacity so that the distance between the actor and the spectator – typically separated in time and space in the cinematic art form – can be collapsed to take place at the same time (the duration of the shots) and in the same place (the onscreen space).

Midi Z’s strategy of poverty-as-problematic can be read in light of an earlier film manifesto, ‘For An Imperfect Cinema’, proposed by Julio García Espinosa in 1969. Like the ethos of poor cinema and of cinema povera, discussed in the previous section, an imperfect cinema opposes a ‘technically and artistically masterful’ perfect cinema that it deems as ‘almost always reactionary’ (Espinosa [1979] 2005). The motto of imperfect cinema is, according to Glauber Rocha, concerned not with ‘the problems of neurosis’ but with ‘the problems of lucidity’. Expounding on Rocha’s statement, Espinosa advances this thesis:

Imperfect cinema finds a new audience in those who struggle, and it finds its themes in their problems. For imperfect cinema, ‘lucid’ people are the ones who think and feel and exist in the world which they can change. In spite of all the problems and difficulties, they are convinced they can transform it in a revolutionary way (Espinosa [1979] 2005).

While Xing-Hong’s financial calculations might have sprung from a more personal motivation to improve his own lot rather than from a desire to achieve revolutionary aims that would benefit the masses, he is evidently one such lucid character who believes he can change his circumstances and who thinks through his options. By staging long takes in which mental thought processes can be crystallized if not quite literally visualized, Midi Z’s strategy coincides with imperfect cinema’s call to ‘show the process which generates the problems’. Showing the process of a problem is ‘not exactly equivalent to analyzing it’, and imperfect cinema’s preference to submit the problem ‘to judgment without pronouncing the verdict’ (Espinosa [1979] 2005) places the onus of critical reflection upon the spectators, thus avoiding a didactic approach. Midi Z’s films similarly do not analyse the cause of the characters’ poverty or elicit sympathy from the audience by dwelling on the characters’ sufferings. Rather, they grant agency and lucidity to the characters and illustrate the ways the characters deal with their problems in their attempts to find solutions. Poverty, then, becomes a problematic that can be solved and resolved, not a condition of existence – with no end in sight – that traps the characters.

How is this process – this staging of poverty-as-problematic – realized in Midi Z’s films? Almost all of the above scenes in which Xing-Hong does his mental calculations are rendered in long takes, the duration of which ranges from 47 seconds (the first conversation with his younger brother) to, more typically, over two-and-a-half minutes (the scenes set in the electronics shop and the oil-pressing factory), with the longest one running for just

over four minutes (dinner scene with brother and father). Midi Z's extensive use of long takes places him in the tradition of Taiwan New Cinema auteurs Hou Hsiao-hsien and Tsai Ming-liang as well as that of contemporary slow cinema, although Midi Z's long takes, compared to the stillness and silence of Tsai's (Lim 2014), tend to have slightly more action and also more sonic elements.¹⁰ Moreover, to recall the context from which André Bazin formulated his meditations about the long take and Gilles Deleuze developed his ideas on the time image, Midi Z's films share the practices of Italian neo-realism in the use of non-professional actors, natural lighting, location shooting, and so on. Taken together, Midi Z's poor cinema and these other film movements (neo-realism, cinema povera, imperfect cinema, slow cinema) are kindred spirits in both ethical and aesthetic terms to the extent that, on the one hand, they are 'a cinema of deliberate self-exile from the mainstream, and active opposition to it' (Cox 2001) and, on the other hand, they constitute a 'new poetics' (Espinosa [1979] 2005).

However, although Midi Z's poor cinema resonates with the ethics and aesthetics of the abovementioned film movements, most of which date to the mid-twentieth century, the different material conditions under which Midi Z is currently operating in the first two decades of the twenty-first century must be recognized. That is to say, his career trajectory should be taken in its own terms rather than be measured solely against the more austere demands of some of these earlier film movements. I conclude by reviewing the relevance of the notion of poor cinema for Midi Z's latest film, *The Road to Mandalay*.

Conclusion

To conclude, let me first return to Grotowski's notion of a poor theatre. Grotowski and his collaborators were 'seeking to define what is distinctively theatre, what separates this activity from other categories of performance and spectacle' (Grotowski [1968] 1969, 15). In an interview, Midi Z similarly raised the question of 'What is the nature (or essence) of cinema', stating that what he had always been trying to grapple with is 'the fundamentals of art' (Sun 2014). In a book in which he recounted his life journey and the making of *Ice Poison*, Midi Z regarded his first two feature films as having achieved only 20 to 30 marks (out of 100) because there were too many imperfections. He asked: 'What's the point of carrying on making films if my work can only be this raw?' (Zhao 2015, 24, 25).

Midi Z's reflection is borne out of his frustrations about the conditions of his films' production being constrained by finance and by restrictions from the Burmese government, leading to most scenes being secretly shot in guerilla style (Zhao 2015, 24). His disquiet about 'rawness', however, deserves more analysis because it, like Grotowski's idea of poverty, can be regarded as an asset rather than a liability. Or, to put it differently, what happens if Midi Z departs from the modus operandi of a poor cinema? What if trafficking is no longer a necessary condition of production and poverty no longer staged as a problematic? What if he prefers refinement to rawness? *The Road to Mandalay*, Midi Z's latest film, provides an apt case study through which to explore these questions.

Described as his 'best work yet' (Kulpers 2016) and as a 'march toward mainstream accessibility he began with *Ice Poison*' (Tsui 2016), *The Road to Mandalay* features a star, Kai Ko (Ke Zhendong), most famous for his leading role in Giddens Ko's 2011 hit, *Naxienian*, *women yiqi zhui de nühai/You Are the Apple of My Eye*, and infamous for his involvement in a drug-taking scandal in China in 2014. The film also boasts the biggest budget to date

for *Midi Z*, reported to be New Taiwan Dollar 30 million (Fang 2017, 93). Shot in Thailand over 23 days, the production had a 20-strong Taiwanese crew working closely with around 40 Thai crew members, a production designer who has collaborated frequently with Thai auteur Apichatpong Weerasethakul, a French editor who worked with Jia Zhangke on *Tian zhuding/A Touch of Sin* (2013) and *Shanhe guren/Mountains May Depart* (2015), music composer Lim Giong (a long-term collaborator of Hou), and renowned sound editor Tu Duu-Chih (Wong 2016).¹¹ The film won the FEDEORA (Federation of Film Critics of Europe and the Mediterranean) award for Best Film at the Venice Film Festival in 2016 (Cheng and Low 2015), the first time *Midi Z* has received an award at one of the top three international film festivals (the other two being at Berlin and Cannes), thus joining the pantheon of his Taiwan New Cinema predecessors Hou, Tsai, Edward Yang and Ang Lee as crowned auteurs in the hallowed halls of European cinematic glory.¹²

Midi Z's career trajectory, therefore, began with frequent trafficking via digital filmmaking to filming openly in broad daylight, moving from a skeletal crew of three to expanding the budget exponentially (about 1000 times greater than before), with a narrative form that adheres more and more to the mainstream and an aesthetics that has become more refined. In following the footsteps of his Taiwan New Cinema predecessors to the international film festival and arthouse cinema circuits, *Midi Z*'s poor cinema poses a particular irony or conundrum in light of the ethos of the above-mentioned film movements. After all, Espinosa's call for an imperfect cinema was one of the key manifestos of Third Cinema, which was opposed to an auteur cinema defined as Second Cinema (Solanas and Getino 1997, 42). Espinosa even objected to Latin American cinema gaining the 'applause and approval of the European intelligentsia', perceiving the conferment of such accolades as a sign of not only 'political opportunism' and 'mutual instrumentality' but also 'a certain standard of quality [having] been reached' (Espinosa [1979] 2005), thus betraying the spirit of imperfection. Besides, imperfect cinema rejects the commercial exhibition circuit and the appearance of 'director as star' (Espinosa [1979] 2005), both features of which would have written *Midi Z*'s recent success at Venice out of the picture.

About 50 years after the theorization of Third Cinema, the terms of reference for the global world order and social injustice must be reframed in the current geopolitical dynamic.¹³ If the crowning of *Midi Z* as an auteur of poor cinema in Europe can be read as ironic in the terms of Third Cinema, this irony or conundrum is equally applicable – retroactively – to imperfect cinema, for it is precisely the digital technology trafficked by *Midi Z* that has fulfilled Third Cinema's wish to achieve 'social justice – the possibility for everyone to make films' (Espinosa [1979] 2005). Espinosa ended his manifesto with the statement: 'Art will not disappear into nothingness; it will disappear into everything' (Espinosa [1979] 2005). The future that Espinosa then perceived, of which the present moment counts as one, does not perhaps lie with the folk art that he envisaged but with the (qualified) ubiquitous digital technology that has enabled *Midi Z* to produce 'raw' images of poor cinema that are, in fact, of recognized 'quality', resulting in *Midi Z*'s entry to crowned authorship. Furthermore, it is arguably digital technology into which most (if not quite all) art forms have now disappeared, the remediated and composite qualities of digitality functioning as a meta-media that converts everything into digits of zeroes and ones, readily transformable and retrievable at one's fingertips on the keyboard or via a swipe across the screen.

In the second decade of the twenty-first century, the evolution of film technology has led to a democratization of filmmaking. It is noteworthy that Espinosa's idea of an imperfect cinema was partially premised upon a refutation of Grotowski's claim that 'theater should be a minority art form because mass art can be achieved through cinema' (Espinosa [1979] 2005). Writing in 1969, Espinosa argued that '[p]erhaps film will be the art form which takes the longest time to reach the hands of the masses,' and he could only speculate then that 'the evolution of film technology' might one day make it possible that it 'ceases being the privilege of a small few' (Espinosa [1979] 2005). Today, cinema can undoubtedly be claimed as a mass art form compared to theatre. Midi Z's career attests precisely to the liberating potential of a poor cinema aided by digital technology, which has now propelled Midi Z to international stardom in the arena of global art cinema.

Yet, to return to Midi Z's complaint about 'rawness,' his digital images are, quite literally, the diametrical opposite of what has been called a 'poor' image, which is marked by low resolution and circulated online in compressed and remixed forms, with little regard for copyright or privacy (Steyerl 2009). In Hito Steyerl's terms, Midi Z's poor cinema would instead be classified as 'rich image' and would belong to a cinema that 'takes on the role of a flagship store' where 'high-end products are marketed in an upscale environment' (Steyerl 2009) – not unlike the sites of film festivals and arthouse cinemas. Inspired by imperfect cinema, Steyerl's call for the poor image shares the former's utopian vision but also acknowledges that '[t]he circulation of poor images feeds into both capitalist media assembly lines and alternative audiovisual economies' (Steyerl 2009). In fact, in global art cinema today, it is increasingly the case that European institutions are funding filmmaking in the so-called Third World, raising the question of neo-Orientalism (Halle 2010). Midi Z's *Poor Folk*, for example, received the Hubert Bals Fund from the International Film Festival Rotterdam (IFFR's Hubert Bals Fund Announces Spring Selection 2012). The integration of Midi Z's poor cinema into the global art cinema ecology bespeaks very different material conditions and geopolitical dynamics that govern filmmaking practices today.

Indeed, ubiquitous trafficking may no longer be necessary for Midi Z's filmmaking as *The Road to Mandalay* received one special screening in Yangon in November 2016. While 'an image of a Buddha splattered with blood [in the final scene of the film] was physically covered up by censors manning the projector' during the screening (AFP [Agence France-Presse] 2016), and while it remains unclear whether censorship in Myanmar will be reduced in the future, this screening still marks a 'historical moment' for Midi Z (AFP [Agence France-Presse] 2016). On the other hand, the staging of poverty as a problematic continues in *The Road to Mandalay*, which features a scene in which the character played by Kai Ko attempts to convince the female protagonist to stay and work with him at the factory, verbally counting out the amount she would earn there compared to what she is getting in her current job. In the final analysis, this verbal articulation of the sums is symptomatic of Midi Z's move towards the mainstream insofar as the arithmetic problematic is no longer an invisible mental process taking place in the character's mind but one in which the spectators might also participate while watching. Rather, this poverty-as-problematic has to be spelt out clearly, relieving viewers of the task of calculation just as mainstream cinema typically makes the job of comprehension – whether in relation to plot element or characterization – easy for the audience. As the condition of his film production departs from poverty in both the literal and metaphorical senses, poor cinema, for Midi Z, may have become a thing of the past rather than a *modus operandi* he will continue to adopt in the future.

Notes

1. To the best of my knowledge, no film scholar has theorized a poor cinema along the line of Grotowski's notion. I have located only a few blog entries that bear the title of 'Towards a Poor Cinema', but the concept of 'poor cinema' remains underdeveloped in these postings. See, for example, Horwatt (2007), Kaelan (2015), and Mai (2015). Erik Knudsen (2010) has drawn on his documentary filmmaking experience to write about 'a cinema of poverty', although his article makes no mention of Grotowski's idea or of 'cinema povera', to which I refer below.
2. The world leaders on this front are Macau (324 subscribers), followed by Kuwait (232) and Hong Kong (229) (The World Bank 2017b).
3. The name of the country 'Burma' was changed to 'Myanmar' in 1989 by the ruling military junta. In this article I use both terms more or less interchangeably, referring to the country's people and currency as 'Burmese' and the nation-state in the contemporary period as 'Myanmar'. For an account of the change of the nation's name, see Holliday (2011, 4–10).
4. Note that Midi Z cited different average budget figures for the homecoming trilogy, ranging from US 10,000 dollars (Zhao 2015, 66) to US 25,000 including post-production (Chen, Zhang, and Zheng 2015).
5. Although Midi Z's account does not state the type of currency, I am assuming (here and in the following account) that the money handed over was in Kyat. Please note that the amount of 1000 Kyat (which equates to around US 73 cents) is not insubstantial given that the GDP per capita in Myanmar in 2015 was US\$ 1161 (UN World Data 2017).
6. I thank Valerie Soe for bringing my attention to cinema povera.
7. Caution must be made against a romanticization of the notion of poverty. Knudsen suggests that the poverty of resources in filmmaking can lead to 'beneficial consequences' that might include 'enhanced creativity, the discovery of simplicity, the power of humility and exercising courage' (2010, 4), consequences that are, for me, potentialities rather than inevitabilities.
8. I thank the anonymous reviewer for emphasizing the importance of qualifying the existence and implications of direct representation of poverty in Midi Z's films.
9. It is worth noting that, after Xing-Hong has asked his final question, which is about the worker's pay, the worker in question abruptly – as if to contradict Xing-Hong's mercantile calculations – breaks into a song about how 'life would feel empty if you don't have that special someone' and 'people need companionship and family', yet 'every time you are involved with a woman, you will have bad luck'.
10. Luke Robinson discusses the differences among Midi Z, Hou, and Tsai in their use of long takes in a paper entitled 'Going South: Midi Z, Informal Colonialism, and the Politics of Taiwanese Art Cinema', presented at the conference 'Taiwan Cinema: A New Historiography' that I organised at The Chinese University of Hong Kong in June 2016.
11. Another report (Fang 2017, 94) puts the crew figure as close to a hundred.
12. See Lim (2013, 162–163) for a list of awards won by Taiwan cinema at the top three film festivals.
13. For critical reviews of Third Cinema, see Willemsen (1989) and Guneratne (2003).

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