

## **Visible Sound, Audible Colour**

**David Chan**

I have always wondered who first invented melon with cured ham. Of course, good quality melon and cured ham are delicious each on their own. But when put together and eaten in one bite, a magical fusion and alchemy takes place between the two flavours. The rich sweetness and moisture of melons slightly balance-off the salty and astringent flavours of cured ham; while the greasy aroma of cured ham, mixed with the fresh fruity flavour, becomes more vivid and heightened. Moreover, the crisp thick chunks of melon and the thinly sliced, chewy cured ham is a pair of contrasts in texture. When I was small, my mother instructed me to eat savoury and sweet foods separately, or my hair would fall out. Hence it was incredible when I first experienced the magical effect of sweet fruits wrapped in salted meat. How familiar one has to be with the food, how much insight one needs, before one can invent something so subversive and contrary to our conventional understanding? Or was it purely accidental, when hundreds of years ago, some famished Italian in the middle of the night found nothing but melon and cured ham in the kitchen?

I believe there are many sounds and images in the world that are awaiting such a consummation to happen. Waiting to be discovered, elevated, distorted, triggered. A mysterious fusion that does not change the essence and content of the sound or the image, while increasing their depth and width.

In the programme booklet of ‘unconstrained tone,’ artist-facilitators Steve Hui and Wong Yan-kwai write about their respective experiences in reassembling ready-made images and sounds from everyday life. The former systematically (described by Hui in terms of ‘addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division’), through trial-and-error, tests the combinations of different images and sounds; while the latter accidentally (here the image is as of a flash of light) finds an image from the melting furnace of subjective memory and imagination that echoes with a sound. Neither of the two methods is about the ‘matching’ or ‘corresponding’ of sound and image in a narrow sense; instead, they discuss how—through a breakthrough in thinking—sound and image are combined to produce a new perception, a new conception, or an elevated understanding of that sound and image. This goes beyond simply discussing whether a sound and an image ‘matches’: sound and image may contend with, interfere with, complete, or question each other.

The seven compositions of sound and moving image jointly created by the sound artists and image creators in ‘unconstrained tone’ are a rare attempt in this regard. The seven compositions encompass a wide array of themes and styles, ranging from internal monologue to social commentary, from direct cinema to lavish manipulation and editing. On the one hand, the compositions demonstrate how a group of young Hong Kong artists who, in the midst of the difficult and eventful 2020, communicated and collaborated with their peers, to express their current concerns and moods. On the other hand, the seven compositions, through their respective strategies of combining sound and image, attempted unprecedented combinations, in order to move the boundary of sound-image creation, even if just by a little bit.

## **The Journey**

Both *You tread on my dreams* (Tim Chan Ting-cheung, Wong Cheuk-man) and *Distancing—A Mirror of Absence* (Sam Cheng Kui-sum, Lau Sai-wing, Guyshawn Wong) are about journeys, employing scenery from a journey as the backbone of their images. Although the two ‘journeys’ are quite different in themselves—the former composed of four pieces of footage of a narrator wandering Tai Po, Causeway Bay, Prince Edward, and Tsim Sha Tsui in the aftermath of the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement, the latter a series of images from a journey to Venice—they both exude a sense of loss, drifting, and instability. *You tread on my dreams* opens with a continuous stream of electronic music with distorted environmental sounds and a prolonged reverb, as the subject of a 360-degree first-person perspective walks into the ‘Lennon Tunnel’ outside Tai Po railway station, where the sound (coupled with the unnatural 360-degree perspective) renders eerie and fantastic the passage used by the community on a daily basis, as if journeying through mystic lands. The combination of sound and image interprets stylistically the narrator’s sense of unreality regarding the ‘Lennon Tunnel’ and the entire Movement, the endless self-examination, the resurging images of past and present in the mind. In the moving image the narrator keeps walking, passing by the iconic sites of the Movement, his chattering monologue on the soundtrack sentimentally, feebly, looking back.

In *Distancing—A Mirror of Absence*, pleasant and pleasing travel images of Venice are interspersed with noises and sounds from the streets of Hong Kong. Vendors hawking “Thai mangosteen” through a microphone; patriotic groups advocating the prosecution of Falun Gong with the ‘National Security Law’; the recurring, enticing female voice from a speaker, coaxing people to become a member of McDonald’s... Everything in Hong Kong, even the tiniest breaths, the most vulgar bawls, lingers, always ready to evoke the Hong Kong one wishes to avoid. This sound-image combination in *Distancing—A Mirror of Absence* disrupts the beautiful scenery of the City of Water and the romantic imaginary of Continental Europe (Who can leave Hong Kong behind completely to immerse themselves in the exotic?), and mocks the ‘absence’ of the creator from Hong Kong. In the latter part of the work, images of Hong Kong enter the frame from right to left, at first juxtaposed with the image of Venice, gradually replacing it altogether. On the soundtrack, sounds of vehicles, people, and the clicking of streetlights repeat. Field recordings of street sounds remain till the end, concluded by the broadcast of the train’s arrival at the terminal. Here in an intriguing way, sound and image illustrate a ‘homecoming’ – the traveller ever reluctant to leave.

## **The Dialogue**

*Phantom Muuyu* (Wong Chun-hoi, Peace Wong, Daniel Yung Tsz-hong) is the most inconsistent and incoherent among the seven compositions. Probably in an allusion to the game of Solitaire that is referenced in the programme booklet, the work can be roughly divided into three relatively independent parts, permeated by a certain confusing atmosphere and a mystical female image. This composition can be regarded as a dialogue between three creators with different personalities and creative directions, through their separate sound and

image works on the same theme. At the beginning of the first part, the image seems to be still, the visual arrangement reminiscent of the small CD booklet with lyrics and information: a spread of an open book, neatly arranged text, the gutter in the middle. Looking closely, one sees that the image is actually zooming in very slowly, while butterflies and spots appear intermittently; one sees an image within an image (in the initially plain grey square frame is hidden waves and whales), the armpit and shoulder of a mysterious woman, a bold strip of yellow and orange enlarged excessively. In terms of sound, there is a set of electronic music with a simple yet varied melody, mixed with the sounds of a woman's indifferent chanting and that of hitting a phone keyboard. The wandering electronic music leads us through layer after layer of hidden images, which are edited and fragmented from the first image, and never become discernible, unlike the girl on the 'cover image'. This sense of a fragmented vision continues through to the middle part of *Phantom Muyu*. Deliberately out of focus, the iris shot, intermittent appearances of wind instruments, all reinforce this atmosphere. But when we arrive at the final part, the form somehow takes an opposite turn: Everything is revealed and played out to you. The image comes from a 360-degree camera worn by a girl on her head. She follows her partner, starting from the moment she wakes up in the house, walks outside, passing elevators, housing estate facilities, roads, slopes, finally arriving at a green open park. The soundtrack faithfully reproduces the environmental sounds of a housing estate neighbourhood in a quiet afternoon. The divergence and differences between the three parts in *Phantom Muyu* reject homogeneity and completeness, like a dialogue that allows expression without the need for a conclusion.

*G4 Summit* (Annisa Cheung Ching-yu, Hui Tsz-ho, Don Tsang Yuk-hei), despite its name, does not involve any form of 'discussion' nor 'dialogue' (in the same vein, the fourth member of the summit is hidden throughout the work). The sound and image of the work are extracted from the increasingly common video conversations and online conference experiences. On the one hand, we see the same video image (a participant riding in a vehicle) reproduce itself through repeated recording and projection/playing, the resulting images of varying sizes occupying a corner of the dark room. On the other hand, a gradual dissolve is employed intermittently, deliberately extending the time for a second video source to overlap, creating a visual effect of dizziness and obscurity, as the participant carries on the conversation on the streets, in search of the way to the dark room. This participant on the street is the only one who speaks, but what is interesting is that what he says (displayed as subtitles at the beginning of the work) displays almost no intention (or possibility) of communication. The uttered words and phrases are wilfully broken, incomplete, a somniloquy composed of random associations. At the same time, the creators make extensive use of microphone feedback and the noise from poor reception, making it harder for the audience to hear the speech of the participant on the street. Between the four participants, between the work and the audience, there exists this amplified and consciously manipulated sound-image interference. Instead of focusing on what is conferred, *G4 Summit* first and foremost criticises and deconstructs the form of 'conference' itself.

*Tugging Diary* (Tsang Hoi-yu, Wong Tsz-ying, Winnie Yan Wai-yin) is comparable in form to *You tread on my dreams*. For both, narration constitutes the major part of the soundtrack, both narrations reiterating the narrator's memories and reflections on the Anti-Extradition Law Amendment Bill Movement. While the narration in *You tread on my dreams* is relatively objective, in which the narrator examines the development and

changes of the movement from a macro perspective, the narration in *Tugging Diary* sounds more personal and delves deeper into some of the more subtle psychological responses. In addition to different choices of word and tone, the essentially contrasting images utilised in the two works contribute significantly to their difference. *Tugging Diary* combines still photographs, found footage, images edited and processed with various stylisations (ghost imaging, adding of gradient colour stripes, image masking, etc.), to highlight how the real images of Hong Kong and the movement have been filtered and processed by the narrator's subjectivity. Towards the end, the narration, from recounting memories (about a boy crying behind a tree), gradually evolves to an interrogation of the everyday, of the act of documentation ('In fact I am not sure why I have to record this with a low-resolution toy camera.') and of the self ('If you were not called Hong Kong, what would I be?'). Here the image begins to sway hysterically, the subtitles on the screen and the narration in the soundtrack fail to synchronise, and in the end the image of the city becomes an abstract colour block, distorted and shattered by a digital glitch, seemingly echoing the emotions in the narration, metamorphosing simultaneously.

### **Chaos and Order**

*χάος* (Intuon Chau, Brian Chu, Prescott Law) is a Greek word, meaning 'emptiness, vast void, chasm, abyss'. In this work, colourful light beams flash about, yet it is not as chaotic as it seems. Visually there are two major imageries: irregular coloured patterns and laser lights projected onto the canvas, a burning red veil. Among the seven works in 'unconstrained tone', *χάος* can be considered the most abstract. Most of the time one has the feeling that it is purely experimenting with different combinations of sounds and colours (this is also the only work without the human element in both sound and image). Still, the arbitrarily vibrating laser beams in the work easily evoke the strategy of the protesters who used laser pointers to confuse the police during the Movement (images of the riot police momentarily appear in the work). In one of the images one can see the silhouette of an arm pressed against the canvas, as if calling for help. Probably due to such associations, and the restlessness in the image itself (the burning image is always accompanied by a kind of destructive and dangerous elegance), on the whole *χάος* exudes a repressive melancholy. Sounds of hitting and rubbing permeate the soundtrack, encompassing a rich variation of materials (cymbals, rattles, strings, even cicada song), in pursuit of the limit of tone among repeated homophonic sounds.

Seemingly at the other end of the spectrum, *Synchronization* (Kong Chan, Wong Hoi-yin) by comparison demonstrates a certain precision and order. Both the image (ocean waves and mountains projected behind the dancer) and music (the later part adapted from the Naamyam classic 'The World of Dreams') point to an irreversible natural and cosmic framework. In it, man can only be as narrated in the Naamyam: 'Birth, old age, sickness, death: The cycle of life is infinite... Dreaming or awake, we are shrouded in mystery.' In terms of form, *Synchronization* combines three distinct parts: image (including edited images and improvised mixing), sound (musicians performing dongxiao, gong and narrative singing) and physical performance. Responding to the solitary sound of the dongxiao, the dancer searches meticulously for a balance of the body; then, as the gong kicks in—and inspired by it—they boldly spread their limbs, flying and swinging alternately; then during the narrative singing, the dancer springs from the ground, as the mirror image breaks into a million pieces,

superimposed by a fine line like smoke or ripples, reinterpreting the moment of enlightenment in music. There is no clear hierarchy between the three performance elements in the work; all lead and respond to each other at the same time, changing their positions depending on the perspective of the viewer.

The seven compositions of sound and moving image in 'unconstrained tone', each with its own character and style, are dedicated to the exploration of new ways to combine sound and image, to search for perceptions hidden in the gap between mainstream music and image production. Judging from the results, one must agree that sound and image, when treated as equals and experimented with in their collisions and collaborations, can definitely be a creative methodology that responds to the many important issues of the personal, the social, and of the times. After the plague year, the conventional production and publishing models for all art creation are facing definite challenges, prompting creators in various media to reflect on their own positions and strategies. Perhaps, emphasising 'the breaking of boundaries and conventions' and 'interdisciplinarity' in sound and image creation, is particularly akin to the post-epidemic atmosphere of an urgent need to find a new way out and reflect on past habits. Who says one cannot catch a glimpse of colour in sound, and hear singing in image?