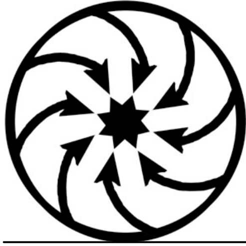

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Making Excuses: Criticism and the Psychology of Rationalisation in *Cape No. 7*

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The idea of an excuse is grounded on the complexities of articulating experiences along a temporal trajectory – past actions, present conditions, future expectations. Excuse-making is also a psychological gesture closely tied to the performative implications of acceptance and rejection. Excuse occupies a broad area of legal thought, for example; it in fact forms the basis of most legal defenses. Generally speaking, in jurisprudence, there are categories of circumstances under which liability and culpability may be reduced, absolved or exempted. Here, the terms excuse and justification are often used in close relation to one another – though they have distinctive functions in the legal vocabulary, just as exculpation and vindication are also distinctive legal terms. More to the point, an excuse – or to be excused – attaches a defendant to an act, but the excuse also determines the defendant's status in relation to the act, hence the level of liability. While the types of legal defense mounted may be set in neat categories (insanity, say, or self-defense), the extent of a defendant's liability – or the extent to which he/she may be excused – is far more complicated and ambiguous. The classic defense of Stockholm Syndrome in the Patty Hearst case in the 1970s is a case in point: where does duress and attachment disorder end, and criminal liability begin? Or we may turn the question around and ask where duress begins and liability end.

Obviously, the law is only one aspect of human dealings where excuse has a substantial function. We know that making excuses is an innate behaviour of – as with the law – defense. It is a process – in psychology, in logic, and in rhetoric – where actions or emotions are given explicit, articulated explanations in some manner of rationalisation, as a surrogate for an *actual* explanation, often as a way to temper or mitigate a situation or an outcome, or even an emergent cognitive dissonance. To this end, statements like "I didn't mean to do it" and "I meant to do that anyway" are not much different from each other, at least in intent. (Apocalyptic prophecies come to mind here.) The commonality in all instances of excuse is the inadequacy – perceived, imagined, actual – of a particular situation. The process, in any case, takes place *ex post facto*. And yet, excuses are meant to mitigate present circumstances in order to condition a reception/ response to come. More importantly, the inadequacy out of which excuse-making takes place is based on one other factor: failure (perceived, imagined, actual). J.L. Austin in "A Plea for Excuses", explains:

> ...to examine excuses is to examine cases where there has been some abnormality or failure: and as so often, the abnormal will throw light on the normal, will help us to penetrate the blinding veil of ease and

> obviousness that hides the mechanisms of the natural successful act. It rapidly becomes plain that the breakdowns signalized by the various excuses are of radically different kinds, affecting different parts or stages of the machinery, which the excuses consequently pick out and sort out for us. Further, it emerges that not every slip-up occurs in connexion with everything that could be called an 'action', that not every excuse is apt with every verb -- far indeed from it: and this provides us with one means of introducing some classification into the vast miscellany of 'actions'. (179-180)

And then also:

> If ordinary language is to be our guide, it is to evade responsibility, or full responsibility, that we most often make excuses, and I have used the word myself in this way above. But in fact 'responsibility' too seems not really apt in all cases: I do not exactly evade responsibility when I plead clumsiness or tactlessness, nor, often, when I plead that I only did it unwillingly or reluctantly, and still less if I plead that I had in the circumstances no choice: here I was constrained and have an excuse (or justification), yet may accept responsibility. It may be, then, that at least two key terms, Freedom and Responsibility, are needed: the relation between them is not clear, and it may be hoped that the investigation of excuses will contribute towards its clarification. (Austin 181)

What emerges from thinking about excuse in Austinian terms is: different circumstances, different actors/individuals will require different gestures or performances of excuse-making. The language assigned to each is different, as will be the rhetorical strategy out of which one is made. And, whereas an excuse is meant to mitigate or rationalise an error, the process straddles the differing, deferred position between success and failure. To the extent that the performance of an excuse is an articulation in relation to past failure, the successful outcome of the performance must involve an acceptance of the initial failure. But this does nothing to rectify the actual outcome of the initial failure itself. An excuse thus inhabits a kind of undecideability.

There are other ways of thinking about excuse. Procrastination, for example, renders unsatisfactory, or at least incomplete, the straightforward approach to thinking about excuse. Procrastination raises the stakes in any consideration of excuse-making. With procrastination, the failure (among other things, to act in a timely fashion) is itself an undecideability because its timeliness is confused by the excuse-making being a pre-emptive performance – the excuse here precedes the failure, but in preceding, does not prevent. There is, in procrastination, therefore, the element of premeditation, which is in itself – and legal logic – inexcusable, regardless of the quality of the failed act. The offense in procrastination is, thus, not merely delay but also omission – a failure to act. Here, the process of rationalisation transcends questions of success and

failure. And yet, procrastination is not merely a temporal gesture; it is also spatial – the process involves the displacement of one action by another, with the rationalisation affixing relative senses of importance or priority between the options available.

In the same vein of replacement and displacement, where procrastination necessitates the omission of (at least one) action, an excuse can also be deployed, pre-emptively, to rationalise the *doing* of something. This – we call it pretext – may have negative connotations – especially through military and political history (the letters 'WMD' will forever haunt our 21st century conscience) – but, as we will see in our textual example, can sometimes be used to benevolent ends.

The Taiwanese film, *Cape No. 7*, reverberates with various configurations of excuse, procrastination and pretext. The film centres on two main, inter-locking plots, from the past and contemporary Taiwan. What ties the two is a bundle of undelivered letters, written 60 years previously. The letters also coalesces the various ways of thinking about excuse-making, turning the idea of excuse into a motif: as narrative frame, plot impetus, and even the basis for social, cultural, historical and political discourse.

The seven letters written by the wartime Japanese teacher are narrated in voice-over throughout various meditative points in the film. As plot device, the letters explain the terminated love affair between the Japanese teacher and Kojima Tomoko (the first of two Tomokos), as a way to create a counter-point to the blossoming romance between failed rock musician, A-ga, and the modern-day Tomoko, in the present. The letters are meant to be the Japanese teacher's way of expressing regret, and explanation of his departure without Kojima Tomoko. In other words, they form the basis of his excuse. But as the letters are narrated over the course of the film, we come to a realisation that this extended excuse-making fails – expressions of sorrow and contrition do not an explanation make. It remains unclear *why* he left without Tomoko.

Beyond some inference of collective guilt and shame at the Japanese war defeat, the letters' effects are overwhelmingly sentimental and largely empty of redemptive quality in themselves. And yet, the film's success, in a large part, is due to the audience reception and sympathy for the lost love and its subsequent, implied, success through the surrogacy of A-ga and (the modern-day) Tomoko's love story.

Nonetheless, the letters' implications resonate. The film takes its title from the address to which the letters are directed, and is one that has fallen from use and thus no longer identifiable. This renders them undeliverable. It is their status in postal purgatory that gives A-ga the excuse to open them up – and the film the excuse for development; issues of postal law are suspended as a result, and in fact used as further excuse, as a bargaining chip when discovered by a veteran fellow postman.

A-ga's opening of the letters, and also the contemporary Tomoko's reading of them in fact makes the two of them surrogates for our access to the letters' contents. The notion of surrogacy is an interesting one in this light, as it brings attention to the replacement impulse that is involved in the processes of procrastination and pretext. More importantly, here, in opening up the letters, A-ga opens up the film's dramatic tension and fulfillment anxiety – his determination to locate Cape No. 7 in

order to deliver the letters, egged on by Tomoko, is the basis of his extended procrastination in completing the composition of the two songs for the concert at which he and his band mates are supposed to perform.

As the focus of the film's other plot, the concert for which A-ga and his fellow 'musicians' are meant to serve as the warm-up act is also the centre from which much excuse emanate. The Heng Chun locale of the film is caught in a kind of contemporary paradox. It is a rustic coastal town with its own local civic heritage, set in particularly clear contrast with the cosmopolitan Taipei skyline that we see at the beginning of the film. At the same time, its seascape and general quaintness have also made it a veritable tourist attraction, complete with resort hotel and year-long holiday atmosphere – all rather reflective of the real-life Heng Chun. The irony of this, of course, is that the town's implied globalised landscape – western fashion models, film crew, Japanese music star – is identified with an external social economy that encroaches on and estranges the local population. The town representative in the film riles against the B.O.T.[a] economic culture that has essentially placed the local economy in private (read: outsider) hands.

And it is on the basis of reclaiming a sense of local pride that the town representative demands a local act to open the concert by Japanese singer Kousuke Atari (as himself). The concert and A-ga's band thus serve as a pretext with a benevloent intent. Hilarity ensues, as a result of this plan – the audition of local talents, their selection, incongruity of abilities exposed during rehearsals, and final triumph. And yet, it also serves to reinforce a message of self-empowerment and self-reliance; one that had an obvious appeal to the Taiwanese public imagination caught in economic stagnation through much of the first decade of the 21st century – culminating, as it did, in the global economic meltdown of 2008.

All well and good. And the film's problems do not rest in its narrative design, but outside – in a realm autonomous of the film's own achievements and merits. History and ideology have a peculiar way of creeping into cultural and aesthetic discourse. To that end, *Cape No. 7* fell victim to its own success. And that in turn became subsumed into a discourse surrounding – but with very little to do with the – film. In other words, politics happened. The critical discourse became a pretext for the discussion of other issues, and venting of other contentions. At heart, is the controversy surrounding the – perceived, sympathetic – portrayal of Japanese characters and Japanese-Taiwanese history. Taiwan's history is one caught in the tensions between colonial past (viz Japan), as well as that of its long, simmering, post-World War 2 relationship with China.

With the latter, the level of mutual engagement is cautiously amicable in the best of times, and can – and have done – turn on the brink at the slightest misread gesture. Such is the reality in a Cross-straits tie that has repeatedly been tested throughout the 1990s and early 2000s. Key to this tension is any hint of Taiwanese assertion of independence from the Mainland. Another is the unique history and relationship that Taiwan has with Japan – the colonial master from 1895-1945 – one that was never as menacing as that between Japan and China, the latter relationship of which is

[a] Build-Operate-Transfer

often defined, almost exclusively, in terms of Japanese militarism.

So it is that a representation of the Japanese as *not* barbaric, as with *Cape No. 7*, can easily be misconstrued as deviation from standard Mainland Chinese historical narrative. One result is that Chen Yunlin, China's chief Cross-straits representative/ negotiator, who watched the film and praised it, very soon had a change of heart and warned that the film could provoke nationalist sentiments and threaten Cross-straits relations – presumably incitement through long, lingering landscape shots and colour saturated twilight vistas (qtd. in Chung; qtd. in "China"). More sinisterly, the film's release in the Mainland, initially timed to cash in on the lucrative Spring Festival/Golden Week holidays, was delayed *ostensibly* to provide proper subtitling – in the simplified Chinese script used in the Mainland, another site of contention in Taiwanese politics ("Taiwan"). By the time it was finally released – again rationalised to coincide with Valentine's Day, the film's marketing advantage had already been compromised – it being a far less significant occasion than it is in the West.

To reiterate a point suggested earlier: the film *Cape No. 7* itself has *nothing* to do with the politics that it found itself mired in. Granted, the overlaying plot context does involve post-defeat Japanese repatriation, and also residual Japanese cultural influence in this particular part of Taiwan (and Taiwan at large, for that matter). Some characters in Heng Chun speak and read Japanese (we assume A-ga does) – a common Taiwanese phenomenon. But these occur mostly in the service of plot, and not the other way around. The director, Wei Te Sheng's focus remains the denouement of, and metempsychosis between, the two romantic plots, as well as the progress towards the film's musical climax. Any trace of political intent is more contemporary than it is historical, and even then these are at best incidental. The Japanese dimension is afterall grounded in historical fidelity – this, we remember, is the part of Taiwan that served as one of the key landing points of Japanese entry to the island.

In fact, in one of the early scenes, the bus in which the modern-day Tomoko and her brood of foreign fashion models are riding in is unable to pass the low walls of a fortification. This is a short sequence, easily passed over. The fortification was in fact built in response to (and to repel) foreign incursions after the Taiwanese Expedition of 1874 (known in Taiwan as the *Mudan* Incident). This scene is richly symbolic – if we are of that sort of critical persuasion – but Wei Te Sheng makes no big deal of it. And he certainly does not use it as an excuse to mount any defense against pro-Japanese/imperialist accusations. If there is an ethical message at all, the film appears to align itself with the town representative's view: self-reliance and self-empowerment without being unnecessarily insular and xenophobic.

Interestingly, Wei Te Sheng embarked on *Cape No. 7* as a secondary effort, after his attempts to raise funds (and interest) for his pet project initially stalled. That one, a film called *Seediq Bale* ('Sieh-dik Bah-leh'), celebrates the exploits of the one of Taiwan's indigenous tribes, the Seediq, and their hero and chief, Mona Rudao) in what is known as the *Wushe* Incident of 1930, the biggest rebellion in Taiwan against the Japanese rulers during the colonial period. As excuses go, this is the big one for Wei Te Sheng. With his reputation secured through his debut

directorial effort, as well as the box-office validations of *Cape No. 7*, Wei has now gone on to film *Seediq Bale*, complete with its excuse-free engagement with one aspect of Taiwan's colonial history that might interest those commentators who have picked on *Cape No. 7* in the first place.

This paper has attempted to do two things: one, to offer an approach, however tentative, to the critical, psychological gesture of excuse; the other, to consider the ways that excuse is absorbed into the narrative, thematic and (inevitably) extra-textual treatments of *Cape No. 7*. Admittedly, what has emerged is a third strand: an excuse to defend the film against misguided criticism. While some of the contexts discussed here are geopolitically specific in nature, they are also reflective of certain contemporary realities. At the same time, the implications of the film and its reception are fairly indicative of the universality of excuses in all modes of behaviour and human transaction – giving their occurrence in the film a resonance that vitalises it and our recognition of their enactment. It is this, finally, that elevates any engagement we may have with art.

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