Article

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Dreaming Time, Remembering Space: Memory, Dream, and History in Bi Gan's Cinema

Kaili Blues

Introduction

The image of the hometown and Chinese cinematic aesthetics have been profoundly shaped by the competing legacies of modern China's enlightenment and revolutionary traditions. In recent decades, a generation of filmmakers has returned to their native landscapes to interrogate the dislocations of urbanisation. Emerging from this background, the 26-year-old Bi Gan, hailing from Kaili, Guizhou, burst onto the international stage with *Kaili Blues* (2015), a debut that garnered accolades at Locarno, the Asia Pacific Screen Awards, and other major festivals, signalling a new poetics of memory, place, and time in contemporary Chinese cinema. In *Kaili Blues,* Bi Gan follows Chen Sheng (Chen Yongzhong), a doctor who journeys in search of his nephew Weiwei (Feiyang Luo). Along the way, Chen moves through a dreamlike terrain of recollection, where figures from the past, present, and future converge.

This poetic exploration of memory and temporality finds an elevated expression in Bi Gan's second feature, *Long Day's Journey into Night* (2018), which premiered at the *Un Certain Regard* section of the 2018 Cannes Film Festival. The film deepens the director's meditation on loss, longing, and the evasive nature of memory. Here, Luo Hongwu (Huang Jue) returns to Kaili, the hometown he

fled years earlier, driven by an unresolved yearning to find Wan Qiwen (Tang Wei), the woman he loved and has never been able to forget. Returning after a seven-year gap, Bi Gan unveiled *Resurrection* (2025), which earned the Jury Special Prize at Cannes and awards at Busan, extending the conceptual and thematic aspects of *Kaili Blues* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* into a grander, more explicitly historiographic register, where personal memory and collective history converge through the medium of cinema itself. Set in an epoch in which humanity has surrendered the ability to dream in exchange for immortality, the film follows a 'Big Other' (Shu Qi) who captures a Deliriant (Jackson Yee), a dissenter who still dreams, thereby threatening the stability of time itself. More than annihilating him, she grants him a merciful death by installing a film projector in him, allowing him to live out his dreams as cinematic worlds while she bears witness to their unfolding.

This study considers how Bi Gan, through his films, constructs a novel temporality in which memory and dream unsettle the distinction between past, present, and future. The article analyses how cinematic form enacts rather than merely represents the temporal and perceptual dynamics of memory. Fragmented narratives, repetition, extended takes, and unstable transitions among memory, dream, and waking perception suspend chronological time and produce a dislocated temporal experience in which unassimilated pasts return belatedly to reorganise the present. The study further demonstrates how *Resurrection* expands this personal and affective temporality into a historical and cinematic register, transforming film into an active archive of cultural memory and historical experience.

Bi Gan

For a scrupulous understanding of the study, the article is divided into three core sections. The first section considers how Bi Gan spatializes the entanglement of memory, dream, and loss. It investigates how his cinematic spaces function not exclusively as settings for remembered events but also as sites through which the past becomes active within present perception. The second section studies the temporal effects of these spatial formations. It asks what it means to remember when the past cannot be separated from present perception, yet remains as an active, unassimilated force within it. The third section reviews how *Resurrection* extends Bi Gan's exploration of personal memory into historical and cinematic memory. Through *Resurrection,* he constructs cinema as an active archive: not a static repository of images, but an evolving process that

reassembles historical memory through dreams, sensory encounters, and narrative forms.

Spaces of Remembering: A Spatial Poetics of Bi Gan's Cinema

"She was always disappearing and reappearing. As mysterious as that abandoned house."- Long Day's Journey into Night

Bi Gan's films externalise the inner consciousness of their central characters through the spaces they inhabit. Their wandering is not simply geographical but existential: as they move through unstable, memory-laden environments, they confront fractured identities, unresolved pasts, and the question of what gives their lives meaning. As *Kaili Blues* progresses, Chen Sheng passes through a tunnel; he arrives in Dangmai, which initially seems like a recognisably realistic town. As the sequence unfolds, however, Dangmai emerges as a liminal, temporally unstable space wherein the boundaries between past, present, and future begin to dissolve. In Dangmai, Chen encounters a woman who resembles his deceased wife (Linyan Liu), as well as figures who recall Pisshead (Shuai Zeng) and an adult version of Weiwei (Shixue Yu), the very person he has set out to find. These uncanny repetitions destabilise not only his sense of identity but also the space's ontological status, rendering it hard to ascertain whether Dangmai belongs to reality, memory, or dream. Chen articulates this uncertainty near the end of the 42-minute-long take: *"It's like being in a dream."*

Throughout *Kaili Blues*, cinematic space is inseparable from the psychological and emotional states of its characters. The film does not present reality as a stable ground against which memory and dreams can be measured; instead, actual and imagined spaces coexist as mutually constitutive dimensions of its world. The fictional village of Dangmai and the real city of Kaili are connected through recurring objects, gestures, and everyday practices. The red band that Yangyang (Guo Yue) gives teenage Weiwei in Dangmai, for instance, has already appeared on Crazy Face's (Lixun Xie) bicycle in Kaili, while the rice noodles enjoyed by the younger Weiwei in Kaili reappear in Dangmai as food shared by teenage Weiwei and Chen. These repetitions bind the two locations together, suggesting that Dangmai is neither an entirely separate realm nor merely imaginary, but a spatial and temporal extension of the places Chen Sheng has inhabited throughout his life. This relationship between space and recollection recalls Maurice Halbwachs's account *in The Collective Memory*: "It is to space—the space we occupy, traverse, have continual access to, or can at any time reconstruct in thought and imagination—that we must turn our attention. Our thought must focus on it if this or that category of remembrances is to reappear" (Halbwachs 1980: 139-40). The recurrence of objects and everyday practices across Kaili and Dangmai illustrates this process: memory is not located solely within Chen's consciousness but is reactivated through the spaces he moves through and the material traces they contain.

In *Long Day's Journey into Night*, Bi Gan stages spaces stripped of their original functions: abandoned buildings, decaying interiors, mines, tunnels, and waterlogged

rooms, as affective landscapes that refuse a recoverable past. Rather than restoring history, these sites compel repeated encounters with absence and incompletion, their constant humidity, dripping water, and darkness rendering the architecture animate and mournful, as if those walls remember alongside Luo Hongwu. The film's spatial environment acquires meaning only through Luo's memory, desire, and loss, so his passage through humid tunnels and derelict coal mines reads as a descent into both the city's industrial subconscious and the convoluted ruins of his own psyche. Upon reaching his long-lost lover Wan Qiwen's last known location, Luo slips into a dream that reorganises perception, memory, and desire as a spatial descent: beginning in an underground mine and moving toward a repopulated prison-village. The dream does not merely resurrect figures from Luo's past, like Wan, his long-absent mother (Sylvia Chang), and an unnamed boy (Feiyang Luo) who functions as a spectral double of both his childhood friend Wildcat (Lee Hong-chi) and the unborn child he would have had with Wan. It redistributes them within a transformed spatial environment, turning memory into an encounter with multiple versions of identity and temporality.

In his newest feature, *Resurrection*, Bi Gan expands the spatial imagination of *Kaili Blues* and *Long Day's Journey into Night* by structuring the film as a series of historically distinct worlds, each rendered in a distinct cinematic style and texture. Framed by a movie theatre at both its beginning and end, the film uses cinema itself as an archival space for the memories, dreams, and emotions that mark every phase of modern Chinese history. These span from British occupation and civil war to the Cultural Revolution, Dengist reform, the socialist market economy, and contemporary techno-nationalism. At the same time, *Resurrection* unfolds as a sweeping tribute to film history and to the persistent power of global cinema. Making a film that is as much a dream as it is a movie allows Bi Gan to paint 'cinema as a mélange of past, present, future, and beyond' (Xie 2026). The film operates through the Deliriant's reincarnations from a troubled young theremin player, a former Buddhist monk, a middle-aged swindler, and a small-time hoodlum in search of love on the last night of the second millennium, in which changing locations, textures, and cinematic idioms show how intimate lives become embedded within historically specific social and spatial worlds. The film's historically differentiated spaces, therefore, expand Bi Gan's spatial logic from the intimate terrain of personal memory toward a more expansive historical imaginary, where individual experience becomes embedded within multiple social and cinematic temporalities.

Beyond Chronology: Memory, Duration, and Cinematic Form in *Kaili Blues* and *Long Day's Journey into Night*

"Yangyang says she'll only come back from Kaili if I can turn back time."- Kaili Blues

Bi Gan establishes narrative discontinuity as a central stylistic principle of *Kaili Blues*, preventing the viewer from situating events within a stable sequence of past and present. Even before Chen Sheng enters Dangmai, his present is haunted by material and visual traces of loss: the blue shoes evoke his deceased mother, the disco

ball recalls his late wife, and the recurring images of clocks register the impossibility of escaping or suspending time. Through these motifs, memory appears not as a completed past but as a constant force that continually interrupts and reshapes the present. After entering Dangmai, Chen Sheng encounters a temporal discontinuity in which past, present, and future become interwoven. The village brings his unresolved past into perceptual experience: his memories of being abandoned by his mother in Zhenyuan resurface through his encounter with teenage Weiwei, whose life echoes Chen's own childhood. Dangmai's temporal loops also make it possible to revisit unfinished emotional experiences belatedly.

Dangmai's temporal dislocations enable Chen Sheng to re-enact and symbolically revise relationships that remain unresolved in his life. He sings to a woman who closely resembles his deceased wife, performing a gesture of intimacy that he had been unable or unwilling to offer during their life together. Similarly, when he wears the shirt Guanglian (Daqing Zhao) sends for Lin Airen, the man who left him during the Cultural Revolution, Chen temporarily assumes Lin's identity and fulfils Guanglian's uncompleted promise to buy him a shirt. The act allows two distinct relationships and temporal moments to overlap within a single gesture. At the end of the sequence, Chen observes teenage Weiwei through the telescope given by adult Weiwei. This image reverses the direction of ordinary recollection: the future appears to look back toward the past. It suggests that Chen's care for Weiwei endures across temporal divisions, transforming kinship into a relation that connects different stages of the same life. Dangmai, therefore, does not simply reproduce the past; it creates a temporal continuum in which unresolved memories can be re-enacted, revised, and reconfigured throughout various moments of Chen Sheng's life.

As Bi Gan moves from *Kaili Blues* to *Long Day's Journey into Night*, remembering appears not as the retrieval of a stable past but as the belated reconstruction of it through Luo Hongwu's present perception. This conception of memory echoes Pierre Nora's observation that "Memory… remains in permanent evolution, open to the dialectic of remembering and forgetting, unconscious of its successive deformations, vulnerable to manipulation and appropriation, susceptible to being long dormant and periodically revived" (Nora 1986: 8). Luo's return to Kaili is motivated by his desire to recover Wan Qiwen, yet the past never becomes available as a complete narrative. Instead, it emerges through disjointed recollections, objects, locations, sounds, and the persistence of desire. The torn clock and watch, for instance, materialise the fractured temporality of Luo's memory: they evoke a past that remains irretrievably incomplete.

Luo's present experience continually reshapes what he remembers, so that Wan Qiwen returns not only as the woman he once knew but also as Kaizhen, a figure produced through the convergence of memory, fantasy, and present longing. Alongside Kaizhen, Luo encounters a red-haired woman who closely resembles Wildcat's mother and assumes the role of his long-lost mother. This encounter illustrates the reconstructive nature of Luo's memory: he no longer retains a clear image of

his mother's face. Instead, he reconstitutes it through the figure of Wildcat's mother with red hair, which becomes a proxy for maternal recall. The colour emerges from a speculative exchange: Wildcat's mother asks what Luo's mother might have chosen if she dyed her hair, and he replies hesitantly, "I don't know, maybe red." In this moment, memory is not retrieved but remade, stitched together from conjecture and visual displacement. The film's transformation of Wan Qiwen into Kaizhen, together with the recurring image of the red-haired woman, demonstrates that memory does not simply preserve identity. By processes of substitution and repetition, *Long Day's Journey into Night* presents remembering as an active reconstruction in which discrete experiences of loss converge, overlap, and acquire meaning through one another.

Bi Gan's long takes render time feeling less like measurable chronology. The duration exceeds the time required to communicate immediate narrative information, redirecting attention from chronological order toward the experience of remaining within a space. The director believes that long takes are necessary for conveying the elusive essence of time (Tian 2024: 750). '*In Kaili Blues*,' Bi Gan points out, 'what I wanted was to convey the perception of time, not in a scientific way, but as normal people perceive it. For *Long Day's Journey*, I used the long take to portray memory, which has a spatial aspect to it—going downward into memory' (Gan 2025). In *Kaili Blues*, the camera's extended movement through Dangmai repeatedly shifts between characters, objects, and locations, loosening the relation between spatial movement, narrative purpose, and subjective perspective. In *Long Day's Journey into Night,* the 2-minute, 34-second sequence of Wildcat eating an entire apple shows how Bi Gan communicates emotion through duration, gesture, and silence rather than dialogue. This culminates in the 59-minute 3D sequence, where the director believes that long takes 'would be best suited for portraying more 'realistic reality' of a dream' (Gan 2019). In the dream sequence, memory is transformed into an immersive spatial experience. The long take, therefore, does not simply depict a character's altered relation to time; it makes that relation perceptible to the spectator. By loosening the distinction between the past and the present and allowing recollection, dream, and waking perception to coexist, Bi Gan's films transform memory from a recoverable chronology into an ongoing experience of the past within the present.

The Afterlife of Images: Cinema, Archive and Historical Memory in *Resurrection*

We want to control our illusions, our brains. What I want to say is that it's okay not to control everything—it's okay not to control our dreams. - Bi Gan (Gan 2025)

Across his films, Bi Gan transforms dreams into a space wherein past, present, and future intersect, unsettling the linear progression of time and bringing separate temporalities into relation. While Bi Gan's first two films present cinema as a site of dreaming, *Resurrection* reconfigures cinema as a dreaming body that imagines its own transfiguration into distinct human characters. In *Resurrection,* Bi Gan extends his spatiotemporal imagination beyond the local and the autobiographical, conceiving a world in which humanity has surrendered dreaming

in exchange for immortality. In this film, his attention turns to the collective memory embedded in cinema, understood as both an art form and a significant sociocultural and historical space. This shift, however, does not abandon Bi Gan's enduring concerns with memory, dreams, and temporality; rather, it expands them, linking individual vulnerability, longing, and loss to collective transformation and historical violence.

Resurrection is structured as an anthology, in which each chapter begins with the central character asleep, then waking into a new reality. Set over several periods of twentieth-century China, each episode concludes with the character's death, signifying the loss and unfulfilled desires of the vast majority. These recurring deaths fracture any linear narrative of national progress, revealing how personal histories diverge from the collective imagination of historical progress by repeatedly interrupting each period with individual loss, failure, and unfulfilled desire. Each chapter is also organised around a sense: sound, sight, smell, touch, taste, so that historical periods are registered through bodily and affective experience rather than relying primarily on historical exposition. In Bi Gan's hands, historical memory thus emerges not as a stable national narrative, but as something experienced and sensed through violence, desire, hunger, and exhaustion rather than something simply known. Moreover, the film's sequencing mirrors the conventional periodisation of film history. It progresses through successive cohorts of filmmakers and styles, ranging from silent cinema to futuristic frames. Each cohort, in turn, is constituted by China's specific historical moment in which it emerges.

In *Resurrection*, Bi Gan presents cinema not as a passive repository but as an active archive: it stores historical traces while simultaneously rearranging and transforming them. The film's six chapters, each organised around a sense, a distinct cinematic style, and a historical period, function as layers of cultural memory that are continually reactivated rather than fixed. Between each chapter, prior to the Deliriant's reincarnation across time, time-lapse shots depict burning candles collapsing into pools of wax. Reading alongside the Buddhist idea of continuity without identical substance, the recurring candle-and-wax imagery suggests a model of transmission based not on preservation of an unchanged form but on transformation and recurrence. *Resurrection* treats cinema as a medium of historical reassembly. In this framework, memory remains alive, continuously reshaped by the dreams, genres, and perceptual experiences that cinema makes possible.

Toward the end of *Resurrection*, the narrative folds back onto its opening: the 'Big Other' washes the Deliriant's corpse and fits it with prosthetics that restore the original monstrous form first glimpsed in the opium-den prologue. This recursive gesture collapses temporal distance, rendering the ending not as resolution but as a spectral return to the film's point of origin. The 'Big Other' then places him in a coffin-like chamber that simultaneously resembles a funerary container and a technological storage unit, collapsing preservation and burial into a single image. The film's last image withdraws from this scene to reveal a miniature wax

movie theatre. As ghostly silhouettes occupy the seats and a silent film begins to play, the entire structure and audience slowly melt into shadow. This concluding gesture does not simply mourn the end of cinema; it reimagines it. As Oli Welsh observes, *"Resurrection* is a rebirth; Bi kills the movies so he can bring them back to life through the power of his own cinematic will."

Conclusion

Bi Gan's cinema presents memory not as the recovery of a completed past but as an unstable encounter with what remains unresolved. Through spatially structured charged environments, dislocated temporal frameworks, and dream-like formal transitions, his films make the persistence of the past perceptible within the present. A close reading of his three feature films reveals that Bi Gan constructs a novel temporality in which memory and dream dissolve the boundaries between past, present, and future, rendering time not as a linear progression but as a layered, recursive field. Began in *Kaili Blues,* where he constructs a liminal mnemonic space, embodied in the village of Dangmai, where personal memory unfolds through a dreamlike terrain. This spatialization of recollection expands in *Long Day's Journey into Night*, where Luo's dreams serve as a conduit for navigating not only individual loss but also the fractured temporalities of Chinese modernity. In *Resurrection*, this trajectory culminates in a voyage through historically differentiated worlds, in which the boundaries between past, present, and future dissolve into a recursive field of cinematic time. Across these films, Bi Gan combines individual experience with the wider rhythms of historical transformation, rendering memory, dream, and history not as separate domains but as entangled within a single, stratified time.

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