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Metaphors of Illness: An Analysis on *The River* and *The Hole*

While the existing scholarship concerns the negativity of metaphoric disease, this paper negotiates the productiveness embedded in the metaphor of illness, through analyzing Tsai Ming-liang's films, *The River* (1997) and *The Hole* (1998). In *The River*, the male protagonist gets afflicted with neck pain after playing a corpse in a murky river; in *The Hole*, the two protagonists refuse to leave a building where there is an epidemic outbreak and consequently become stranded and isolated. Illness thus indicates specific spaces within which the protagonists experience loneliness and frustration and turn to external spaces for survival: in *The River*, the space is the exploration of sexual preference while in *The Hole* it is the musical fantasy. However, those outer spaces unavoidably drive the protagonists back to reality and revise their intersections with the world, through which they reconstruct personal interactions and regain vitality. In these films, Tsai proposes an alternative way to demonstrate Susan Sontag's theory about the metaphor of illness (1968; 1989): illness is the act of growth, despite its metaphoricity for immorality, pollution, and punishment. Through a two-fold scrutiny, this paper also argues that illness in the films is both metaphor and resistance of metaphor. The idea that illness can be interpreted as both isolation and connection, as well as pollution and regeneration, illustrates the ambiguity in Tsai's films, which leads to the questioning of the interpretation itself. Faced with the "new normal" in a post-pandemic era, this paper wants to negotiate the discursivity of the metaphor of illness.