

Student Paper

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New Urban Spaces:
Films of Tsai Ming-liang

In the eighties and early nineties Taiwan witnessed an unprecedented cinematic portrayal of the contemporary urban sensibility. It got a new accent in the second wave films around the early nineties, in which an intensification of the nitty-gritty of the urban spaces was in evidence. The pace and the magnitude of modernization in Taipei or any other East-Asian cities are comparable to the first world cities. It is said that these cities encountered a 'trans-modernity', a global phenomenon devoid of any symbolic affiliation with an organic national environment.

Against such a backdrop the modernist dichotomous relationships between the national and the global, the archaic and the modern, and more specifically, as Fredric Jameson pointed out, the distinction between the Western and the traditional, often tend to wither away. What gains significance is the urban space which transcends the national, or to be more precise, the ethnic identity. As observed by Fredric Jameson in his seminal work 'Remapping Taipei', such dichotomies are now ineligible and rather new questions are raised that are different from those addressed in modernity. He writes:

In the great debates in colonial countries over nativism and Westernization, modernization versus traditional ideals and values, fighting the imperialist with his own weapons and his own science or reviving an authentic national (and cultural-national) spirit, the West connotes the modern as such in a way that it can no longer do when the modernization process is tendentially far more complete and no longer particularly marked as Western.¹

Therefore, it is urbanization in the late capitalist era that charts out its own dynamic course, which cannot be considered as 'Westernization'. This 'hyperspace' entails a remodulation of the previous cognitive regimes, as a whole new set of perceptions and experiences are inaugurated which is visibly similar across countries. Taipei in its urban spatiality, multiplicity and heterogeneity becomes a viable ingredient of the films. It surpasses the symbiotic relationship with any specific nation, particular culture or ethnic identity. As the ethnicity of the yesteryears is now replaced by 'neo-ethnicity'. According to Fredric Jameson 'neo-ethnicity' "is no longer a question of belief, in any religious sense, but very much a question of practice. Ethnicity is something you are condemned to; "neo-ethnicity" is something you decide to reaffirm about yourself."²

Such blurring of the erstwhile binaries motivated the endorsement of a new visual syntax, and a strongly critical view of the excruciating lives of the urbanites in a disintegrating post-modern world. In Taiwan cinema, the shifting images of Taipei are manifested not in the plot alone but also in the forms employed in the films. Broadly, two conventional modes of representing urbanity can be observed: in one, the films retain the markers of identities or signifiers of a

geopolitical urban zone and contemporary culture. This is urbanity with a social, political and cultural identity. On the other hand, there can be a complete obliteration of such markers, giving rise to a generalized and neutralized perspective on urbanity. But the inscription of Taipei adheres to none of the above. Here often the films navigate through the urban labyrinth whereby the markers of space and time are retained, enabling an elementary identification. That is to say, Taipei can be identified as Taipei in the films I have in mind, but the markers employed are not the ethnic-national signifiers. In other words, Taipei is a site where one encounters a 'neo-ethnicity'. The markers linger but are not symbolically linked to nationalism.

The Terrorizer (1986) needs to be examined in this context. This film by Edward Yang acts as a discursive reference point for comprehending the treatments found in the films of the second generation directors, amongst whom I would concentrate on the films of Tsai Ming-liang. In *The Terrorizer*, Taipei has been exhibited neither as a western city nor does it portray the sentimental native identification. Rather it imbibes a visual language which Fredric Jameson finds "(as) cold as one would characterize a glassy surface that repels identification."³ Instead of exploring the themes of cultural roots, the local histories and revisiting the past, Yang in *The Terrorizer* focuses mostly on the metropolis. Among the directors of the time it was Edward Yang who brought a critical edge to the articulation of urbanity. As he said in an interview:

My purpose is very straightforward – using film to make a portrait of Taipei. I am going to explore the changes occurring in Taipei in recent years, and how those changes affect every citizen of Taipei⁴

It is interesting to note the changing inscription of Taipei over the years. Following the division made by Yingjin Zhang - first Taipei was predominantly posited during the 1960s and 70s as the 'icon of urban modernity' which espoused the nationalist agenda of clubbing Taiwan with the Chinese nation. Then during the 1980s Taipei was presented as a major site of diverse identities and hybridity where Chinese culture was accommodated as a part of several indigenous cultures. Finally, with the advent of the New Urban films in 1990s,

Taipei has been transfigured as a series of heterotopias where a wide range of postmodern spaces are re-imagined and renegotiated. The change from China to Taiwan to Taipei in cinematic configurations of Taipei seems to dovetail the general movement from modernization and nationalism to globalization and hybridization in the age of transnational capitalism.⁵

This urbanity which is ambiguous and has political connotations becomes quintessential to the ethos of late capitalism. At this point it is worth recounting how Taipei was established in the film *The Terrorizer*. Instead of presenting a magnificent architectural piece as conventionally found in other films, the film consciously expunges all such national signifiers. Rather a centrally located huge gas tank surrounded by the series of high rises was shown occasionally to set the premise for the devastating urban existence. It almost stood as the symbol of the concealed angst of every individual caught in the web of corruption. Edward Yang intricately laced the multiple plot strands within the fabric of the urban space. The film unfolds with the visuals of ambulances and police sirens cut to the visuals of a photographer waking up. On

hearing the siren he walks up to the balcony to get a better view. Gunshots are heard from near the locality. We see a body lying on the road. With his camera the photographer sets out to document the proceedings. This is juxtaposed with a scene introducing the devastated woman writer. Thus the opening sequence itself acts as a prelude to the engulfing air of menace.

The city becomes the site of perfidy, theft, treachery, masquerade and animosity, where the subjects are vulnerable to the destructive impulses of contemporary hyper-modern life. It is a society devoid of any community. Therefore, the moments of eruption of crisis and violence enable the use of symptomatic reading where the former can be seen as symptoms that foreground the vandalism of individual subjects that the system itself instigates. Moral judgments become ineffectual and are precluded given the milieu of late capitalism. The occasional 'casual betrayals', characters playing tricks on each other's lives, the perennial dissatisfaction, the resultant infinite plaguing of human emotions, bespeaks the 'ontological helplessness' of the characters infected by the soared economic and social alterations in Taipei. The three couples, caught up in the torrents of violence, are somewhat connected by a simultaneous sense of deceit, directionless-ness and incommunicability which is indeed a manifestation of postmodern condition. There are certain scenes in the film where events appear to be backed up by voice-overs, but we then realize that those are expressions of a character undergoing experiences matching the visuals of another; for instance, the sequence where the photographer's girlfriend attempts to commit suicide is supported by the voice of the Eurasian girl talking over the phone.

Each one of the characters ends up being a terrorizer. Fredric Jameson argues that these characters are neither likable nor dramatically evil, as the word evil is no more an appropriate one, but are rather amiably and covertly repulsive. They neither generate sympathy nor antipathy, but almost every character grows repulsive. To cite an example, although it was revealed to the audiences that they were made by the Eurasian girl confined in a room, the anonymous phone calls about her husband's extra-marital relationship free the writer wife from her writer's block and eventually from her dilemmas. Thus the acts of blackmailing and fraudulence found at various moments in *The Terrorizer* are actually motivated by the very conditions of their living in the global city. Perhaps it is the socio-political conditions which are the actual terrorizers, altering the fortunes of the urbanites. Here the climax of the film needs to be pondered upon. The husband, unable to rebuild his home and denied of the promotion, visits his police inspector friend. He lies about his promotion and they celebrate. He wakes up in the morning and in a close-up we see him weeping. Taking his friend's service revolver he walks up to the bathtub. He contemplates while looking at himself in the mirror. After this we find him committing a series of crimes. He kills the director of the hospital, attempts to kill his wife's friend but spares his wife by firing at the mirror. This culminates in the final gunshot with blood splash on the wall. We as spectators are left in utter surprise tinged with a state of shock. The inspector wakes up on the sound of the gunshot and walks up to the bathtub only to find Li's body lying on the ground. Thus the question arises as to who actually is the terrorizer in the film. Is it Li or his wife or the other characters? In fact each one of them has crafted his/her individual

ways of terrorizing others. Such a transformation of an ambitious man to a terrorizer is perhaps made possible by what is seen as the postmodern networks of urban existence.

However, *The Terrorizer* is often given the credit of paving the ground for a new generation of directors to make their films. Among others, the films of Tsai Ming-liang are distinctive in capturing the frustrations and baffling numbness of the urbanites. Tsai's films are radically incongruous with the homogenized aesthetics usually found in films where the 'exotic images of natives and national local histories and signs are employed as selling points in the world cinema'.⁶ On the contrary, the complex structures of his films can never be deciphered by mere consumption logic. In his films the portrayal of Taipei or any city at large is never of an export quality. Taipei is dingy and grubby in his films.

Some other interesting trends also developed in the cinema of Taiwan. The contiguous fringe areas, which were hitherto not easily encountered, are now tracked within the urban nexus with the visual help of the trains and the metro. The trains that signified the act of migration and journey now show the journey not from the rural areas but from suburbs to the city. Hou Hsiao-hsien's urban films are often punctuated with such references to trains; the characters are found frequently visiting the cities from the suburbs which mushroomed as appendices of the globalized city. What grips our attention is that the mesmerizing vast stretch of landscapes from outside the city, earlier used to establish the shift from the rural to the urban space, has lost its primacy to scenes inside trains representing the suburban culture.

The influx of the underworld networking, illegal operations, rampant piracy, pornography production, black-marketeering in the contemporary East Asian films is also to be noted. Earlier, these were presented either as situation-specific misfortunes or contingencies in which the protagonists are plunged. The manner in which these elements are grafted on the contemporary narratives presents them as contingent, chance-driven. No rational motivation is offered. Generic determination or character predestination are largely absent. Thus the questions of belief and morality are jettisoned. The swell of such illegal modes of existence are translated onto the screen by recurrent visuals of the murky and grimy underground tunnels shown in Tsai's films, *The Rebels of the Neon God*(1992), *Vive L' Amour* (1994) , *The River* (1997) or *The Hole* (1998)). These labyrinths expose the flip-side of the globalized economy. For instance, the two friends in the film *The Rebels of the Neon God* are shown to be occupied with petty tasks, earning their livelihood by the acts of theft, burglary, etc. Globalization as a process has given rise to these low income groups of people. They constitute the demography of the fringes of the globalization. In an attempt to sell the stolen parts to the dealer, they are spotted by the video parlor owner. To rescue themselves they jostled into the busy arcade. As they run, the mise-en-scene grapples our attention: The series of scooters bordering the streets, the brightly lit narrow lanes jam-packed with frenzied purchasers, food stalls and hawkers. The street lamps, billboard lights displaying brands clearly confirm the advent of a revitalized economy accompanied by a completely new visual aesthetics.

Dystopian versions of the contemporary metropolitan experience caught between an irretrievable past and factitious commodity-oriented future continue to appear in the narratives of

Tsai Ming-liang. Coming in the wake of democratization of the Taiwanese society which experienced a long authoritarian rule, Tsai's films delve into the distraught psyche and demystify taboo subjects. To him the urban space as space itself is more articulate than the exclusivist identity politics. It doesn't matter to him whether it is Taipei or Paris or any other city his character inhabits. There seems to be an immense irreverence for the 'sense of belonging'. Tsai has said in an interview that he "feel (s) that it is very often that humans lack a sense of belonging. It is rhetorical when we say that falling leaves return to their roots."⁷ Perhaps this explains the inclusion of Paris in *What Time is it There?* (2001). Paris came for no special reason; it was just a feeling of straying or meandering from one hotel room to another, and not exactly from one country to another. There has been a wrong impression that his films are Taipei-oriented. It is just that Taipei offers him the space to articulate the ambivalences and soreness associated with the urban existence. As he states "(It is all the same wherever I go...I wanted to include this sense of drifting in my films and naturally I picked Paris."⁸

His films are often motivated by the quotidian urban living, which is deprived of dignity. But Paris has not been inscribed in *What Time is it There?* ethnically as a Western city. He avoids showing typical landmarks, for example the Eiffel Tower, to establish the city. The mundane urban experience of Paris is presented before us. It is obvious that there is very little investment made to excavate the character's ethnic-national origins. Those origins pass under silence. As I mentioned earlier, ethnicity has now been substituted by neo-ethnicity. The traditional belief systems are now transformed into some mere diurnal practices.

At this point the sequence capturing the actions of the male protagonist in Taipei and female protagonist in Paris simultaneously in *What Time is it There?* deserves mention. It unfolds by showing the female protagonist leaving the hotel room in Paris with camera remaining static at one end of the staircase. She returns to her room to take her watch. Next, she is spotted in a corner of a busy restaurant sipping coffee. She finishes and then leaves. This is followed by showing Hsiao Kang driving down a flyover in Taipei. At the background the high-rises bring into notice the accelerated pace of socio-economic and political restructuring with the globalization. Then we see the girl moving down the subway in Paris. Hsiao Kang on the other hand sits with the displayed watches awaiting customers. The busy road at the background draws the attention where with occasional interruption the traffic moves upto the horizon. On either side of the road lie the multistoried commercial complexes. Back in Paris we see the girl in a busy restaurant finding it difficult to read the menu card. There Hsiao Kang sits idly outside the railway station near a fountain. He throws a watch into it but picks it up again. In Paris the girl is being stopped at a railway station and asked to show her ticket. While she struggles to find it the passers-by seem completely oblivious of her. Then we find her waiting for a train in an almost deserted platform. Finally, the sequence ends with Hsiao Kang having food at a roadside food-stall.

What strikes us in the sequence is the process of urbanization which has occurred everywhere across the world. Both Taipei and Paris in the film are devoid of any socio-political distinctions. Such obliteration of the geopolitical specificities is also addressed in the film *The Skywalk is*

Gone (a short film made in 2002). All identity politics dissolves in such inscription of cityscapes. Thus Tsai's films are never geo-ethnically premised. The actions of the female protagonist who wanders in the streets of Paris are noteworthy. Amidst the rabble in the restaurant, she is shown to be secluded not for any ethnic origins or for being a foreigner, but just because she is facing problems to acclimatize herself to the dynamics of the city. She tries to negotiate the city, but her isolation also springs from the incompatibility which is typical of any urban setting. Consequently, any ethnographic expectation will not be fulfilled here. Scanning the apartments of these characters one would find props that are seldom marked by specific ethnic origins. Rather an emptiness prevails. So the question- 'who comes from where?' is irrelevant. But what is conspicuous is the subjectivity which is much wider than what the identity rhetoric could offer. Identity is something which is institutionally attributed to the individuals, but subjectivity is a ceaseless process of construction, a continuous composition through everyday encounters. It is formed on the basis of practices which one undertakes in everyday life. It is the experience of a person who lives in Taipei but not as a Taiwanese citizen or as a Chinese that gains significance in Tsai's films.

Modernity tended to dissolve the organic and tangible affiliation of men and women with their immediate surroundings. The erstwhile relation of the body with nationality, ethnicity or humanism was often a symbolic one. Tsai's films reinstate mere organic relations which are detached from any symbiotic national discourses. There is to be found a constant attempt to restore that missing link in the East Asian films. The characters are frequently found to be engaged in certain instinctual activities, be it a sexual encounter or the prolonged scenes showing them eating, pissing, occupied in their perennial struggle to combat the scarcity of water or constant seepage in their rooms (as found in films like *The Rebels of the Neon God*, *The Hole*, *The River*, *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003), etc.) Such impulses in Tsai's films help re-establish the vanishing organic relationship with the environment but it differs from the representation of body and organicity in modernity. Here the representation is wholly stripped of any organic relation with nationalism, ethnicity or humanity.

Globalization has brought in the commodity spectacle, a consumer culture where every individual subject is held suspended in the urban fabric which is more social than moral. The nation-state-citizen triad, accompanied by its nationalist economy, has now, in the era of late capitalism, mutated into a consumer-commodity relationship. Within such social matrix human bonding ought to be reassessed. The distinctive boundaries of identity are buried under a new flux of circulation. Taipei in its plurality, as argued by Yingjin Zhang, becomes the 'site of global mélange'. Like other East Asian cities, it emerged in the eighties as a site of cultural hybridization. Through the reiterative visuals of McDonald's, video parlors, shopping arcades, movie palaces, telephone booths, and metro railways the city space is nonetheless posited by cinema as devoid of any landmarks. The mysticism that usually attends nationalist representation completely displaced in such portrayals. Hybridization augments heterogeneity but nullifies mysticism. The only identity manifested is that of the post-modern urbanite, a character that essentially belongs to the fringes of the city. On such fringes Tsai Ming-liang locates his stories.

Focusing on the details of daily habits and actions of Tsai's characters, we see that they constitute a consumer group but are not wholly integrated into any such formation. These 'backstreet dwellers' inhabit the lower depths of the habitations of Taipei. These urbanites, belonging to the periphery – a product of the globalization – are entangled with consumer capitalism. They are often engaged in trivial jobs lacking proper security, as middlemen or salesmen, peddlers, taxi driver, street hawkers, roller skate attendant, real estate agent, petty thieves – occupations that are related to a protean market. For instance, in *The Rebels of the Neon God*, the rows of scooters sighted at the pedestrian crossing accompanied by the visuals of the bikers drifting about the city flyovers, refer to the community where these motorbikes act as a signifier of the era of globalization which has changed the urban habitation.

At this point one may recall Jameson's proposition about postmodernism. He argued that "postmodernism replicates or reproduces-reinforces- the logic of consumer capitalism;"⁹ this has two crucial aspects- the waning of the sense of history and the embalming of the 'perpetual present'. It is this perpetual present which the characters of Tsai apparently inhabit. But the 'series of perpetual presents' grows inordinately exhaustive in Tsai's films. Such delineation does not stem from any negation of postmodernism; on the contrary, the narratives are premised on such transformed social context. But an array of discontentment and resistance amplifies the angst. The allusive references to the past do not contribute to the formation of a chain of historical development. But the interminable present is made uninhabitable where both time and space are unbearable entities. This comes across through Tsai's immersion in real duration, perceived in various scenes where the camera religiously registers the minute details of the mundane activities without any intrusion. The reiterative use of desolate, long and narrow corridors with occasionally characters placed at the edges, shots of deserted lanes, inlets, constricting subways, empty theatre halls, saunas, captured in deep focus and long takes, is part of the same strategy. Here the vastness of the diegetic space, which does not conceal the sense of time, augments the emptiness in the lives of the people. Films like *The Hole* and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* are flooded with such scenes.

Furthermore, both *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* and *What Time is it There?* evoke a sense of past which is disengaged from the unfolding present. In fact both the films finely project two planes of time– one the (author's) nostalgia, another the perpetual present into which the characters reside. For instance in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, the 1966 sword fighting epic film screened at the movie palace is actually a personal favorite of Tsai Ming-liang's. Thus it generates a wistful mood the affiliation of which is entirely with the director himself rather than with any other character inside the theatre. On the contrary, a ceaseless distraction is sited among the spectators. For example the Japanese tourist who enters the hall to take shelter from the heavy rain outside, constantly tries to distract others. He keeps changing seats in an attempt to disturb the rest. While another woman is spotted to use the front seat for her leg rest and then we find her crawling on the ground to shift her place which almost haunts the tourist. Thus bizarreness is exhibited in the spectator's behaviors. The director cautiously shuns the imposition of any nostalgia (or any reference to the past) onto the characters. The author successfully detaches himself from the text

and its characters. The film tries to adopt a non committed stance as far as the spectator-screen relationship is concerned. The identification with the screen is problematized. On the other hand towards the end of *What time is it There?* the appearance of Jean-Pierre Leaud in the cemetery generates a mood of reminiscence. Jean-Pierre Leaud's association with Antoine in Truffaut's famous Antoine Doinel cycle of films (and that character's association with the city of Paris) is an endearing memory to the director and to his audience. But the female protagonist is perhaps unaware of this. To her he is just a stranger who is willing to help.

Hou Hsiao-hsien is known for his complex sense of the past. But there are instances like the last story (set in 2005) in *Three Times*, which unfold in the present. We find here the female protagonist talk about the loss of any past or future, and about inhabiting only a 'greedy present'.

Themes of alienation become explicit in the relationship between the individual spaces and that of the city at large. The home (-lessness) of these characters belonging to the fringes could be correctly referred to as boxed dwelling spaces. Such habitations are best found in the film *The Hole*. The film unfolds by showing a quasi- science-fictional Taipei hit by a mysterious virus named the Taiwan Fever. One of the major concerns of the late capitalist world is housing. This has led to the rise of a number of such boxed spaces which are akin to prison cells. 'Home' now becomes stifling and claustrophobic. In reference to the building shown in *The Hole* Tsai Ming-liang once said in an interview

That building has 400 or more households or families. It is public housing for low-income people. It's unusual because it is located in downtown Taipei. There is a big waiting list for people to get into this housing, which means there are a lot of people who share this economic status.¹⁰

They succumb to a living based purely on 'survival instinct' denied of any dignity. Eventually, they acquire the characteristics of cockroach, an insect's life living in the scraps of the cityscapes. Thus a perennial discomfort engulfs the contemporary urban life, which brings us back to the same question raised by Jameson: as to "Whether there is also a way in which postmodernism resists the logic of consumer capitalism? Whether it will assume a subversive tone at all?"¹¹

That's a question we must leave 'open'.¹² And Tsai Ming-liang's films leave it open too.

References:

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⁴ Chiao-Hao Chang, “An Interview with Yang De-chang”, *World Cinema Weekly* 254 (March 1985):p.60

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¹⁰ Tsai Ming-liang interviewed by David Walsh, ‘An Interview with Tsai Ming-liang, Director of *The Hole*’, World Socialist Website, <www.wsws.org>, 7th October, 1998.

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, p.206

¹² Ibid.