



# The Aesthetics of the Spectral and the Permanent Crisis in Tsai Ming-liang's Art

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**Abstract.** This paper focuses on the motif of permanent crisis and the “ghost” in Tsai Ming-liang’s art through a close analysis of films such as *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* (*Hei yan quan*, 2006), *What Time Is It There?* (*Ni na bian ji dian*, 2001), *Vive l’amour* (*Ai qing wan sui*, 1994), *The Skywalk is Gone* (*Tian qiao bu jian le*, 2002), *The Hole* (*Dong*, 1998), and the relevant discourse of Jacques Derrida and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, pointing out new, previously undiscussed connections between *What Time Is It There?* and François Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, 1959). The aesthetics of the spectral is presented as a possible way of approaching films that not only reckon with the increasing immaterialization of the medium in the digital age, but also extend this to understand and represent new qualities of human relationships and existence in the world, using the motif of the ghost as an allegory of the medium and a “haunting” of traditional cinematic plot organization and narrative.

**Keywords:** Tsai Ming-liang, Taiwan New Cinema, aesthetics of the spectral, slow cinema, Derrida.

## Introduction

At the time of a global pandemic, it was an upsetting and weird experience to watch a film in the first frames of which, still in darkness, the siren of an ambulance is heard and in which the characters cover their mouths with masks. It seemed particularly haunting, when we realized that the film was made in 1998 as one of the emblematic works of the so-called Taiwan New Cinema. Taiwan may be a symbol of looming danger, a distinguished place of permanent crisis, but the mask is mind-boggling: can it be that for the people of the East the imminence of a pandemic was palpable at such an early date, is this tangible reality, a Kafkaesque parable, or a presentiment? The film I am referring to is *The Hole* (*Dong*, 1998),

directed by Tsai Ming-liang, in which an awful epidemic spread by a respiratory pathogen isolates the individuals who live among piles of toilet paper in dark, damp dens, and who still find one another, if not otherwise, by breaking through the floor. In what follows, I will analyse some of the works of Tsai Ming-liang, in which the concept of the sublime has been replaced by the concept of the ghostly in an epistemological sense, and by the aesthetics of the spectral. In Tsai Ming-liang's films some characters, venues, motifs recur, reappear like ghosts.<sup>1</sup> The leading actor returns from film to film, and there are some haunting motifs: they form a strange spiritual web in-between the films not linked together in the traditional narrative way. Tsai's films constitute a huge rhizomatic network the nodes of which are not fixed or stable: within a film and between films the motifs peregrinate, occurring here, then there, or their absence is conspicuous in elliptical structures. Such perceived absences in places where there was somebody real earlier create passageways between the "real" and the "fictitious."

### ***I Don't Want to Sleep Alone (Hei yan quan, 2006)***

A destitute homeless stranger is battered black and blue in the slums of Kuala Lumpur. That wouldn't be an attractive story – let alone a love story – in any part of the world. Though the thrashing cannot be seen (there is an elliptic structure, an omission), but we see the man collapse at the roadside. A noisy group of young guest workers are dragging along a large mattress. They found it in the garbage, a mattress is a precious treasure. Though we hear that at first, they do not want to help, or even to stop, the now unconscious man is still carried off somehow (a new ellipsis). The busy caravan of people puts him down on the floor in a house. They are afraid of their Chinese landlady, yet they manage to find a place for the wounded man in a corner. He regains consciousness for a moment, and has to urinate. In another corner a young Bangladeshi construction worker, Rawang, the only character with a name, is cleaning the mattress on the floor. He realizes that the staggering man will get into trouble, so he backs him up. He backs him for the rest of the film, but now he gives physical support, embracing him, pulling down his trousers, propping the helpless man up for pissing. When he's done, he

1 The relationship of Tsai Ming-liang's films to the ghost motif was highlighted by Corrado Neri (2017, 201–210). The Hungarian journal *Enigma* has also dedicated a double issue edited by Balázs Sipos and Csilla Markója in 2021 (no. 104–105.) to the theme of the ghost in contemporary cinema, analysing the films of Olivier Assayas, Albert Serra, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, Chantal Akerman, Eduardo Williams, Claire Denis, Lucrecia Martel, João Pedro Rodrigues, Ben Rivers, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Tsai Ming-liang, Lav Diaz, Béla Tarr, Pedro Costa and others.

can't let him go. He can hardly hold him, the urine pours to the foot of the wall, Rawang squirts some water after it from a pot with one hand, but they lose balance and the stranger's body, which he had to support from the back, collapses on him unwanted, into his lap. Like in a painting of the Deposition, in which Christ is just taken off the cross, Mary bending over him, in the eternal pathetic form of the Pietà. That is what it is, and it isn't. Balázs Sipos writes in the foreword of the two-volume special issue of the Hungarian journal, *Enigma* entitled, *Ghosts, Movies, Images*: "The striking pictoriality of [...] Tsai Ming-liang's films is not a matter of mere decorativeness, but a way to expand the phenomenological capacities of the moving image. In this way, it inventively manipulates the temporality of his films, expanding their figurative possibilities and deepening their political dimension, and also creating the possibility to re-frame certain stylistic periods in art history, and even the museum exhibition space itself" (2021, 6, translation by the author). In this case, the traditional forms of pathos – in Aby Warburg's sense – take on a new social dimension, they appear in a new emancipatory role.

The anonymous sufferer, Lee Kang-sheng, is often considered Tsai Ming-liang's fetish actor, somewhat separating him from the kind of relationship that we saw between directors and their actors like Hanna Schygulla and Rainer Werner Fassbinder, Liv Ullmann and Ingmar Bergman, Anna Karina and Jean-Luc Godard, Jean-Pierre Léaud and François Truffaut. This is how Tsai Ming-liang recalled their first meeting: "before I started directing feature films, for a few years I worked in television. At that time, TV shows were all escapist martial arts fantasies, melodramas, or historical dramas about World War II and the Japanese invasion. A university professor (named Wang Xiao Li) came back from the US, and brought me into writing scripts that comprised more social realism. In 1991 I filmed a miniseries on youth convicts. That's when I found Lee Kang-sheng in the streets. His family, with its very classic Taiwanese structure – a father from the Mainland, married to a local Taiwanese mother – and their quintessentially Taiwanese house were all very attractive to me. Plus, his delinquency, his air of mystery, ennui, brooding silence, and slowness... the manner in which he smoked, all made me think of my strict father, who hardly spoke any words to me during my entire upbringing. After I finished filming *Rebels of the Neon God* [*Qing shao nian nuo zha*, 1992], my father passed away. How I wished he could have seen a film I directed. How I wished I could understand him, be close to him, and even hug him. It's as if I projected this yearning onto the worlds of my films, and in particular, Lee Kang-sheng's character of Hsiao-kang with increasing intensity. In turn, gradually our real lives together seemed to reflect

and materialize the worlds of the films. Hsiao-kang suffered a strange illness after filming *Rebels*. His neck became crooked” (Pikerton 2015). Then he added a startling description (to be understood later): “He is 46, and we live very closely together, so I have come to know his various states of mind and shifting moods quite well. I remember when we were filming *The River* (He liu, 1997), a scene required him to cry, he was only twentysomething then, and he couldn’t cry. I smacked him twice on the face, but still no tears. Filming *What Time Is It There?* (*Ni na bian ji diani*, 2001), it was much easier for him to cry, because his father had just passed away” (Pikerton 2015). Tsai first met Lee in 1991, and since then he has been in all his films. In the past thirty years we have not only seen Lee grow up, this boy with the frightened look in his wide-open eyes which radiated some hard-to-define sadness or suffering, but we have got to know every inch of his body, his third nipple, his bodily functions, the intimate processes from eating to excretion, from masturbation to being together, from illness to recovery. In one of his YouTube interviews, they were sitting side by side, perhaps in Tsai’s home, a bit aged, the interest in each other radiating from their eyes not having dimmed a bit. Tsai in black, with hair cut like a monk’s, modest and extroverted, dedicated and narcissistic, with sudden outbursts of laughing, explaining vigorously, Lee sitting more quietly, with reserve, as the mysterious, submissive object of love. One could see domination in submission, devotion in domination. “I’d like to photograph Lee’s face as long as I live” – he said.<sup>2</sup> The libidinous economy of the two has resulted in a creative connection, a co-authorship. Tsai explained: “all protagonists in different times and places appear to be one and the same person with different identities. I’d like my audience to enjoy both dimensions of my films: the film itself, and Lee Kang-sheng as film, or, the changes of allegedly one and the same person with time, with aging. In real life very few things happen, there is hardly a plot, there are everyday things: the viewer should realize that Lee is similar to all of us.”<sup>3</sup>

When the Chaplinesque choreography of urination is over in *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone*, the long nursing begins (as a recurrent, haunting motif). At first Lee is a helpless, closed-eyed corpus whom Rawang drags to his lair. He gets the important mattress and the even more important mosquito net over him. Without tools – only the director abounds in devices – a highly humorous awkward fumbling begins with a universal object, the plastic bag. Rawang washes and

2 Tsai Ming-liang and actor Lee Kang-sheng talk about his film *Your Face* (2018). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UUD1vX7M6-o&t=153s>. Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

3 Tony Rayns’s interview with Tsai Ming-liang in 2007. [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYAQQiR\\_bk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYAQQiR_bk). Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

feeds him ritually but doesn't manage to reduce his fever. For lack of a bottle, glass, or the like, they drink from a plastic bag (a recurrent, haunting motif, elsewhere they piss in it). Lee gets a plastic bag of shaved ice, which Rawang tried to fasten to his head with another plastic bag, clumsily, in a long process. By the time Lee comes to, the neon green slush (another haunting motif) is melted, it can be drunk, and soon he gets silently yearning companions, bugs (yet another haunting motif), actually bedbugs, and Rawang is from now a night lodger.

Lee, however, finds a girl to court as soon as he is on his feet again. The waitress (recurrent actress, Chen Shiang-chyi) nurses someone else, the son of the café's boss, who is unconscious in coma (another haunting motif). His nursing is a bit more professional, he has a wheel bed, catheter bag, but he is being nursed in another dirty hole, too. But in his case, there is no hope of recovery. It is hard to notice, and bizarre as it may seem, this role is played by Lee Kang-sheng, too, who knows why (so we have another ellipsis, haunting motif). The mother tries to keep her son alive by continuously anointing, massaging, trying to stimulate the body of the living corpse, Other Lee, in all possible ways (typically enough, its reception took the form of reflex-like disapproval in some cases, interpreting this extent of care as rape). The characters do not say a word to each other – we hardly notice it – but from the background noise, e.g. TV, radio, we are informed that the city is buried under a huge cloud of smoke, from the forest fires of a neighbouring country (the environmental disaster takes the form of a lethal pandemic elsewhere, e.g. in *The Hole* (Dòng, 1998)<sup>4</sup> – another haunting motif). The people put on mouth coverings to protect themselves against the stifling smoke, the unmoving body of Other Lee is wrapped – with absurd humour – in a large plastic bag and clean (!) air is blown into it with a fan, to keep him safe. While Other Lee is choking with the infernal smoke under the plastic, First Lee with a mouth mask hurries with the waitress to the monstrous half-ready concrete edifice on which the construction worker Rawang is employed but work had stopped because subsoil water burst to the surface (haunting motif), inundating the inner court, the bay of the iron-concrete skeleton of a building resembling the surrealistic stairs of M. C. Escher (again, a haunting motif); at night Lee and his Platonic lover Rawang usually angled here until a huge death butterfly settled on Lee's shoulder. Now they are trying to kiss and make love amidst gasps for breath on the much-witnessed mattress in the mosquito-net cage, but the smoke foils it, then we see Rawang wearing a plastic bag instead of a mask (we know from the radio that masks are sold out in Kuala Lumpur), trying to cut First Lee's

4 For its analysis see: Marno and Marno (2021, 35–48).

throat with a rusty can top while tears are flowing from his eyes. Lee reaches out and caresses his face. Suddenly we see the helpless body of Other Lee, dreaming awake, staring into the sky. He has a mouth mask. He appears to be crying. At the very end of the film an iconic image: on the raft of the mattress floating on the dark surface of the ground water the members of the love triangle are huddled together, resting peacefully. At last, they can sleep together (the title of the film is: “I don’t want to sleep alone”). Is someone dreaming of a union, or conversely, is someone dead?

This must be a dream, certainly. But who is dreaming what? I grasped my mattress in astonishment, seeing this unusual happy ending in a Tsai film. I was overcome by restlessness, by the analyst’s unease, although it ought to be sufficient explanation that “in a world dominated by the forces of helplessness, overcoming a conflict is equal to a miracle. The momentary conquest over loneliness is like redemption. The most shameless, blatant kitsch is allowed if it celebrates such a pregnant transcendental happiness” (Kemény 2020, 223, translation by the author). Lili Kemény has triggered off a highly inspiring train of thoughts by saying that in Tsai’s films the “ghost” (as a trope) “should not be conceived as a supernatural entity but as a form of repetition (revenant in Derrida’s term). [...] It is implicitly based on the *Unheimlichkeit* concept of Freudian psychoanalysis, which explains the weird unfamiliarity with the return of what was suppressed” (2020, 220). At the same time, the eternal return, we are aware, is never the eternal return of the same thing. What Kemény points out here is of crucial importance: “The immaterial structural ghost can only be acted out on the surface of a fiction with a shift, as a metaphor, just as the Freudian repetition is mostly realized through transmission: what returns never returns the same as it used to be before” (2020, 220).

Elaborating this statement further: the ghost comes about in the gap caused by the shift; the ghost is asynchrony itself. That Lee Kang-sheng needs nursing in the same film in two forms is upsetting, weird. We see him in two helpless bodies, one recovers, the other doesn’t. Perhaps the beautiful dream at the end about being able to sleep side by side is not a simple dream, but the “parallel story,” subconscious desire phantasy of Lee in coma, which has not existed, could not end happily as it was never fulfilled. A dream of the living corpse Lee, who – while breathing in the smoke of wildfires in the plastic sarcophagus – dreams of making love with his nurse suffocating with smoke. What a shift! And the connection is a plan gone up in smoke: the grand plan of love and civilization about liveable life, about life side by side. We are confused: who is a phantom,

the one who dreams or the one who is dreamt about? Did Lee Kang-sheng dream the butterfly, or was it the butterfly that was dreaming Lee Kang-sheng?<sup>5</sup> The characters have hardly any means to express emotions; actually, sudden channels of transmission, mediation, donation, caring open up. If need be, they even cut a hole in the dividing floor, they wriggle through to one another, as in *The Hole*. True, the logic of the spectral also means that desire always goes astray. The characters in Tsai's film, Lila Kemény writes, often appear catatonic, or like automata, which corresponds to the ghostly urge of repetition. She defines the notion of catatonic from the angle of the material aspect of the film, the dreamlike structures and anti-psychologizing leading of the cast, and not from the angle of the perceiving and interpreting recipient who ascribes emotions to the figures. In Lili Kemény's (2020, 226) view, the figurativity of Tsai's films means that instead of the characters, the actual situations in which they find themselves have contours, and the structuralism of the film means that the emphasis is shifted to the visual and kinetic-dramaturgical organization of the situations.

Approaching the question from the angle of the perceiving-interpreting recipient, we may characterize the emotional state of Tsai figures by saying: "they suffer like a dog, they suffer like an animal." Why is it that by human standards an animal suffers more than a human being? Why is it that the suffering of an animal (and a child) touches us most deeply? Why do we respond keenly to the fact that "animals suffer mutely"? Isn't it the lack of perceptible self-reflection that makes us feel they are more helpless, more exposed to external forces? From the reception side, the Tsai characters are extremely sensitive, emotionally surcharged. The lack or damage of speech, of communication leads them back into an animistic state in which animal and anima, instinct and emotion are still coincidental without reflection. Where there is suppression, there must be emotion, too, and where the head is replaced by a cabbage, like in *Stray Dogs (Jiaoyou)*, 2013, in which such tropes take shape (topped with a ritual of devouring by love), the personality must also be involved, even if by being blocked, reserved, abstracted, similarly to how catatonia paralyses the motoric part of the personality.

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5 Reference to Lőrinc Szabó's poem *The Dream of Tsuang Tsi*, translated from Hungarian by Ádám Makkai. "Two thousand years ago the Master Tsuang Tsi,/ pointed at a butterfly and remarked rather musingly:/ "In my dream" he said, "I was this butterfly,/and now I wonder if it is he, or, actually, I." "A butterfly, yes, a butterfly was I!" He would often tell,/ "and it danced and frolicked in the sun merrily/and didn't even suspect that he was Tsuang Tsi.../And I woke up... And now I cannot tell, now I have no idea!" He continued wistfully,/ "What is the truth? Which one could I really be?/ Did Tsuang Tsi dream the butterfly,/or was it the butterfly that was dreaming me?"



## ***What Time Is It There? (Ni na bian ji dian, 2001)***

Take Tsai's film of mourning: when young Lee tries to stop his mother from performing her absurd, compulsive act of mourning, the two figures suddenly break out in a storm of motion, throwing about their arms and legs vehemently, and in this chaotic excess of movements Lee suddenly finds himself face to face with his mother's lap; almost petrified (in a catatonic stupor) his eyes are fixed on his mom's genitals from where he came from: on the origin of life, like a Gorgon head the sight of which turns one into stone. It is not simply a pre-personality state, but rather an interpretive regression, a retreat to the origin. Incorporated in the impersonal behaviour of the characters of Tsai's film there is a sort of group identity, probably that is why death is such a distinguished theme in them, because the tradition of belonging to an entity larger than man becomes explicit at that point. Tsai's figures are not pre-personality beings but they regress into catatonia at times to evade the pains of individuation which tears them out of their original communities and which is accompanied by the local economic/social implications of alienation.<sup>6</sup> They would like to meet, to collide, as Lili Kemény writes, to be part of the whole, but since they are torn from one another, they keep mourning for the loss of the possibility of getting into synchrony – to borrow a term from the conversation of János and Dávid Marno (2021, 35–48).

In a spiral a distinguished point of the arc returns shifted a tier higher. "The time is out of joint," Hamlet exclaims, "o cursed spite! That ever I was born to set it right." Time "out of joint," shifted time is the place of the spectral in *What Time Is It There?* The uncanny which appears as immoderate in the aesthetics of the sublime features as shifted or displaced, not in the appropriate place (e.g. the phantom always appears at another place than expected). *What time Is It There?* is the film of the missing father. In Michelle Bloom's interpretation, the missing father is the metaphor of the art cinema of the French New Wave, besides being a concrete reference to Truffaut being a sort of spiritual father to Tsai.<sup>7</sup> In the Truffaut film, *The 400 Blows (Les quatre cents coups, 1959)*, replete with autobiographic references, the unruly kid was played by Jean-Pierre

6 The speechlessness of the Tsai figures also says much of the educational system and deprivation from cultural institutions – about the social crisis, the lack of learning communicative patterns, etc.

7 Truffaut, in turn, looked upon André Bazin as father instead of his own father. Truffaut, like the protagonist boy in *The 400 Blows* was brought up by his stepfather before he was put in a boarding school. Tsai dedicated the film to the memory of his father and of Lee's father who had just died: he confessed that Lee's grief had revived in him the death of his own father. See: Bloom (2014, 37–56), also Neri (2017).



Léaud. Between the two films, the parallels of Lee and Léaud open up lots of passageways. Léaud drinking milk is the inverse of Lee pissing. The more so as they use the very same bottle. The shift between the two scenes is pregnant with meaning. The greed to drink the milk alludes to the “defect” of the input, the retention of urination indicates that of the output. In Truffaut’s film defect appears on the input side: the boy does not get enough paternal love, he is not nurtured by the world, while Lee cannot display, *give* out his emotions. He can’t give free vent to his desires, feelings. The shift, the sequence of shifts, is indicated by the hands of the watch, haunted by the ghosts: this is the 6-hour shift between Taipei and Paris. In Lili Kemény’s opinion, Lee sets the hands from the time of mourning to the time of love, which appears as a process of grief elaboration. In this sense, the hand of the clock is a visual metaphor of the penis, of libido. To make sure we shouldn’t miss the metaphORIZATION, in the public toilet Tsai shows the perversion of Lee’s stolen watch through the exhibitionist guy who holds the watch gone crazy to his genitals, and suddenly we witness an obstruction of the grief elaboration, like a needle stuck in a groove of a record. Within the shift of time, being stuck is represented as perversion, the catatonia or compulsive motion of the libido. Perversion is none other than the obstruction of libido transmission. If we recognize the symbol of eternal return in the face of the clock, we will notice that the Ferris wheel is also a large clock face on which units rotate and we realize that Tsai picked from *The 400 Blows* the scene of the gravitron in the fun fair because in it young Léaud – who in a beautiful frame is face to face with Lee just past his tousled haired adolescence watching the film on TV – gets in the centrifuge in a sequence (a shift, a passageway) in which he can stand on his head, that is, he may enter the haunted jetlag of time “out of joint,” into the symbolic six hours which separates the time of love from the time of mourning; Truffaut’s time from Tsai’s time; the daybreak of the cinema from the twilight of the cinema; the time of milk drinking from the time of pissing out the milk; the entrance from the exit. It is a subtle example of shifting when Lee, longing for the girl, goes to the railways station, where mad with anger he throws his shockproof, waterproof watch into a small basin on which a waterwheel is turning, then regretting his deed, he fishes it out. In another time, the girl sits in the Garden of the Tuileries next to a larger pool, with the silhouette of a Ferris wheel in the background. The girl weeps, then, being exhausted, she crouches, while strangers try to steal her suitcase. They empty it, or they don’t, it cannot be seen (ellipsis). When the ghost of Lee’s father – who as a phantom in the first frames of the film did not find his place in his kitchen – crops up in the last

sequence in Paris to fish out the suitcase floating off on the water of dreaming (a haunting motif), while the girl is fallen asleep from fatigue and sobbing, the membrane separating the characters in time and place is broken through. The suitcase is reminiscent of the watch seller Lee's showcase: it is important that it is not identical. The girl's suitcase is large, rounded, that of the boy is narrow, with reinforced corners – their difference refers to the above analysed shift, the return in a different way. The girl looks for Lee's phone number but finds Léaud's, and instead of Lee, his father's ghost appears while she is asleep.

Membrane could also be a key word of the film: membranes are stretched between the worlds, impassable yet allowing some osmosis:<sup>8</sup> such is the divided glass wall of the phone booth through which someone can shout his grievance, such is the kissing of the two women from which both withdraw into their snail-shells, such is the car window on which the girl knocks to Lee and the next day she steals all the reset watches of Lee in her disappointment, such are the elevator doors, the glass of the aquarium: this world closes off and opens up, it is porous, permeable, full of membranes. Through the centrifuge – as Truffaut did – we may step over from the realm of catatonia to the topsy-turvy world of the motion pictures. The image of the fun fair centrifuge leads us back to a lower tier of the spiral not exposed so far, to the birth of film as art, which came about from a play of silhouettes: a paper cylinder with stills on the inside was rotated to animate the still pictures inside, to achieve motion. This time travel is an *ars poetica*, an homage to the art of the film: it shows the spinning, the animation, the motion, the jolt out of immobility, the shift, and its reverse, freezing, petrification, stoppage at the same time.

In analyses about Truffaut's intertextuality the cited examples are exclusively the milk drinking, the gravitron and Léaud's eery return in the cemetery. In *The 400 Blows*, however, there is a short scene of which, I think, Tsai's film is the metonymy as Lee is the metonymy of Léaud. I venture so far as to propose that Tsai expanded this scene into the film; when in his twenties working in the national film archives of Taipei Tsai first saw a Truffaut in a retrospective series, he recognized the missing father, the spirit of the father (as he would mention almost in every interview later). In *The 400 Blows* Léaud, as Truffaut's alter ego

8 The concept of permeability has also been discussed by David Teh in relation to Apichatpong Weerasethakul in a catalogue essay for the 2011 exhibition, Yang Fudong, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, CACSA, Adelaide. See: [https://www.academia.edu/48964430/Only\\_light\\_and\\_memory\\_the\\_permeable\\_cinema\\_of\\_Apichatpong\\_Weerasethakul](https://www.academia.edu/48964430/Only_light_and_memory_the_permeable_cinema_of_Apichatpong_Weerasethakul). Last accessed 08.08. 2022. The relationship between Apichatpong Weerasethakul's and Tsai Ming-liang's art is analysed in more detail in Markója (2021, 91–110).

suffers a series of disappointments and with his responses to them he practically spins himself out of society like with the gravitron, to the horizon of nothingness (the limitless sea) from where there is nowhere to escape. He has a single positive emotional impact, the joy of a returned relationship, with his friend, another little boy who offers the most hidden room in their enormous apartment as refuge to Léaud, who escaped from home, where he could live as if he was a ghost, almost unnoticed by the negligent wealthy father. This motif appears in one of Tsai's early films, *Vive l'amour!* of 1994 in which Lee in his twenties lives as a squatter together with a girl and a boy practically shunning each other (as a shift, a haunting motif). In *The 400 Blows* there is a scene of a breakfast, when the son steals some food from his father's table for Léaud hiding in the neighbouring room and gives it to him, but previously he set the clock to an earlier time so that the father would think he is late, and when he runs off agitated, he sets the clock back to the right time. They can meet in the jetlag of time ("out of joint"), which is the time of the two boys' friendship. Similarly to Lee, who sets all the watches in Taipei to Paris time, when his love whom he saw only once has left for Paris. And there is another, unnoticed ghostly motif that finds a corridor from Truffaut's film into Tsai's: the two boys stealing a round-faced alarm clock from a public toilet. The stolen clock oozed from Léaud's hand into Lee's hand who, having stolen it from the wall, holds it tight in the darkness of the cinema while he watches a French film, then the clock gets back somewhat perverted (with a shift, that is) to the satyr, to the public toilet. Lee and Léaud exchange watches (chronometers of love): the two clocks are, however, not the same, there is some difference between them.

## Ghostwriting, or the Silence of the Subaltern

The history of the Taiwan New Cinema started in the 1980s and lasting into our days, ran parallel with the French deconstruction. Although he disputes his membership,<sup>9</sup> Tsai Ming-liang also joined this cinema as a member of the second generation. Derrida's book of ghosts, *Specters of Marx* appeared in 1994 and immediately elicited the acute disapproval of the Indian philosopher and founder of the post-colonial feminist critique, the translator of *De la grammatologie* into English, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. In her study entitled *Ghostwriting* (1995),

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9 See the documentary, *Flowers of Taipei. Taiwan New Cinema* (Chinlin Hsieh, 2014), featuring interviews with Hirokazu Kore-eda, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Wang Bing, Kiyoshi Kurosawa, and Jia Zhangke.

she summarily called Derrida's book a book of "how to mourn for your father," narrowing it down at the same time to a passageway between deconstruction and psychoanalysis. Besides Derrida, Spivak also criticizes Michel Foucault and Gilles Deleuze in another fundamental text of hers, *Can the Subaltern Speak?* because "they side with the bourgeois sociologists who replace ideology with a continuous subconscious or parasubjective culture. The parasubjective matrix, interlaced with diversity" she continues, "introduces a nameless Subject, at least for the intellectuals who are influenced by the modern hegemony of desire." (Spivak 1996, 454.) Spivak refers to the de-subjectified philosophical formation "desire as machine," the desiring machine which Deleuze and Guattari describe in *Anti-Oedipus*. While these philosophers speak of the intellectuals as a mass, *groupuscule* and a variety, through the concept of *desire* they re-introduce a total, undivided universal – quasi-subjective – instance which they inevitably define in the European way on the basis of the (varied) European history of sexuality. She also puts forth a critical comment on the margin of a Deleuze–Foucault interview claiming that the French sages commingle the subject with the individual and are overhasty in urging for the elimination of representation and the figure of the committed intellectual, presuming that the minorities – with some encouragement from activists (Deleuze and Foucault were campaigning for the French prison reform at that time) – were already capable of fighting and speaking up for themselves. Spivak offers concrete examples of who and who could not speak up for themselves. She calls these groups – following Antonio Gramsci – subalterns (for Gramsci the term designated the "invisible" groups of people whose political rights were curbed by the hegemonic majority for bio-political "reasons," who were deprived of political representation and whose access to culture was barred, who were put to work under extremely unfavourable conditions, etc.). Spivak is the cartographer of history, the discoverer of blank spots, who calls attention to the concrete and individual, and with the zeal of the inquisition discards all sorts of general subjects, suspicious generalizations, displaying little understanding and affection for the singular ideas arising from an incessant interweaving of the particular and the general. Spivak does not appreciate Derrida's wit, but those for whom she raises her voice are ghosts indeed. Studying the "sati" rite of Indian women (i.e. the widow sacrifice: when women choose being burnt after their husbands' death) she asks the question who speaks up for these women, whether they are represented in historiography, whether they have a "voice." Can the subaltern speak, can it raise its voice in its behalf, or is it silent, mute, invisible? And don't those who ask for the abolition of representation return to the power

discourse thereby? (Cf. Müllner 2015, 8.) Don't they silence up the nameless, subaltern Other exactly by this demand of theirs? Perhaps this accusation by Spivak deprives the French philosophers' ideas from the historicity of the contexts, yet this critical reasoning has re-created and elevated Gramsci's forgotten concept, the subaltern, into the forefront of international critical thinking, and it is one of the key words for the understanding of the art of Tsai and Weerasethakul.

### ***Long Live Love! (Ai qing wan sui / Vive l'amour! 1994)***

Watching Tsai's films, one might tend to interpret the often nameless and voiceless characters as machines, automata of desire. Actually, what we witness is not only the urge of the instincts, but often morally justified emotion fuelled by commitment, empathy. The Thai masseur in *Days* (*Rizi*, 2016) helps alleviate Lee's infernal pains caused by his neck hernia with real compassion and sympathy, apart from the business considerations. In return, he gets a small music box which he opens when locked in loneliness in the bus stop and listens to it as a confession of love without words. The pictures of devoted care, nursing multiply with time as the creative duo, Tsai and Lee grow older, but already at the very beginning, in *Vive l'amour!* (which is perhaps the most brutally straightforward about alienation with the irresolvable loneliness of Lee in his twenties, we may see gestures which occasionally (sometimes literally, like in *The Hole*) break or try to break through the wall. Hardly more than a child, Lee crouches on the street mat next to his ghost fellow lodger and touches the women's dresses to be sold tenderly, almost with the care of a wife, they wait for each other, travel together, pay attention. In a phone booth even a few concise sentences are uttered for a sort of reflexion when the older boy, a black marketer calls to a date the homeless real estate agent girl living with them as the third ghost (what an astonishing metaphor of the common homelessness of the three in a philosophical sense): "Why am I irritating? I just want to talk to you. People are utterly confused. We must find ways to talk to each other." No more words are uttered, and although they meet, instead of a conversation the date is over with a quickie. A black marketeer of twenty-some years, a homeless young real estate agent girl and a kid selling urn sites are embodiments of *par excellence* homelessness, of the *par excellence* subaltern; they hang around in the illegally occupied flat (their world), but rarely happen to meet, without finding the real possibility of a relationship. Lee irresolutely cuts his veins, then bandages himself, the next day he buys a melon (a haunting motif) with which – a substitute for buxom female shapes

– he begins fiddling absent-mindedly till finally he digs eyes in it, like in *Stray Dogs*, in which, older in age, he envisions the face of his vanished wife in a cabbage, then he lies down in the black marketeer’s bed (haunting motif), tries on the dresses of the girl who is away, lingers in the flat, washes in someone else’s bathroom – this is where we first see his third nipple (a haunting motif, in *Days* old Lee immerses in a bath similarly and we see this special mark of his body which is “really” there), we accompany him to the urn cemetery which – to make it more depressing – is no more than a room with wall-to-wall carpeting, a flat full of urn cabinets, indicating with surrealistic emphasis what a tight place people will have in their final homelessness. “Taiwanese watermelons are wonderful. I must thank the watermelon for making it possible for me to get close to the body,”<sup>10</sup> Tsai said about an event: he had to film a female body close up, he was so frightened that he asked the actress to hold a watermelon between her legs “in the first round.” A watermelon that becomes the symbol of a pregnant belly. In Tsai’s films such substitutions are also subtle shifts. By taming metaphorization into metonymies with the shifts, the didactic constructions organizing his films also become animated, filled with life. In addition to permeability, porousness, the other key words with Tsai are contact and relationship. Since this relationship is never a perfect compatibility, correspondence, union, but a ghost image of it, it turns his films extremely plastic, naturalistic and at the same time, immaterial, inexplicable. The pedagogical, didactic structures are turned into amiable, gentle relativity. We find ourselves between reality and fiction, in the iridescent zone of the rainbow. Though we see people suffering like stray dogs, we do not suffer watching the film. Quite the contrary. We are actually moved from the first moment, reinforced by the momentary (metonymic) connections, and our being moved does not end with the film. The external world is like our inner self, full of problems, and in the film the landscape sobs instead of the people, clouds shed tears instead of the sufferers, canals and sinks flood over, partition walls and valves break through, everything is inundated with the memory of the uncontrollable burst of the water pipe Tsai had lived through as a youth in the dormitory, the suppression materializes, bursts forth, is released through cheerful and dramatic transmissions. I, the viewer, also weep and sob happily together with the landscape, the sewage canals, the clouds. Just as the girl does in *Vive l’amour!*, weeping for over ten minutes into the camera in the deepening amphitheatre of a public park, but she weeps as if her acting did not wholly

10 Tony Rayns’ interview with Tsai Ming-liang, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYYAQKiR\\_bk](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYYAQKiR_bk). Last accessed 08. 08. 2022.

convince her. Unconvincing sobbing – what a marvellous ending for a film. I leave the cinema anguished and moved at the same time, realizing that the real reason for suffering is the inability of expression. Why don't we speak? Why don't we believe each other? Already Lyotard raised the question in *The Postmodern Condition* how communication, expression could be verified, who would tell who was the repository of knowledge, of truth, who would decide what knowledge was at all (1993, 23). The process of ghostification was already registered at that time, and is still going on in the digital world. We have become ghosts for each other.

### ***The Skywalk is Gone (Tianqiao bu jian le, 2002)***

Almost immediately after *What Time Is It There?*, Tsai shot a short film to open the row of shorts that partly proved to be a long peripatetic walk towards the intimate, personal spaces of the museum,<sup>11</sup> and partly is a kind of epilogue, postscript to the ghost film (i.e. mourning film, father film). The trauma motivating the shooting was the shock to find the skywalk on which Lee used to sell the watches gone. It became a ghost, opening a new channel between reality and fiction. In the first part of the short film the girl returns from Paris and desperately looks for the place of her lover, of love, which (as a ghostly shift) is gone. The suitcase, the rounded one with wheels also appears, which was not identical with Lee's showcase full of measly watches glowing in iridescent colours, but still it held the promise of symbolically incorporating the other one. Typically enough, the suitcase is not in the hand of the girl who had escaped to Paris, but in the hand of a woman also jaywalking on the motorway (ghostly shift) with whom she is caught by the traffic policeman (we hear a background dialogue attributing the illegal crossing to the earlier existence of the skywalk at this place), then the policeman takes the girl's ID card and then seemingly forgets to return it, and when the girl comes back for it, he even denies getting it. This turns the girl into a subaltern in the sense Gramsci and Spivak understood it; she becomes a ghost who haunts the place of love in vain, she doesn't find anyone and she has no identity, either (as she was deprived of it). "It seems that many places that I shot for my films have vanished. This is kind of worrying!" Tsai joked on the new ghostly passageway between film and reality in an interview (Yu Sen-lun, 2003). Though the skywalk rising in front of Taipei station vanished with the place of the watch seller, Lee weirdly appears in a subway at the same location (ghostly

11 The simile is used by Vincze (2020, 192–219).



joke) and on a staircase he accidentally meets the girl who doesn't recognize him. She goes down, Lee goes up, and at the top of the stairs – as if having seen a ghost – he turns, but has no time to linger because – having lost his job with the watches, he is hurrying to a casting for a porno film. The short film ends here only to open motivically for the next one, *Wayward Cloud* (*Tian bian yi duo yun*, 2005). The lovers cannot find either their common time, or their common place. They pass by each other as if they weren't there. It cannot be accidental that in this short film, which has a perfectly round story, one loses her identity, the other puts love up for sale. In addition to the universalization of the subaltern existence in Spivak's sense, the interpretation of Marx/Derrida about desire/libido as a commodity and about the stray nomadic subject torn from it, about this postmodern phantom which is constantly trying to find the voice of the subaltern hidden in all of us becomes possible.

The ghost does not kill the libido but resurrects/revives it in time. Suddenly we catch sight of the phallic clock hand that is revived by desire and the dead corpse that is galvanized to life. *What Time Is It There?* and the rest of the films suggest that art shifts, animates, love resets the clock, grief revives, resuscitates, breaks through membranes, opens passages; spirits and ghosts are already among us, we are ghosts ourselves.

Translated from Hungarian by Judit Pokoly.

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