

Csilla Markója

## FROM CINEMA TO MUSEUM

A LONG WALK WITH TSAI MING-LIANG, 1.<sup>1</sup>

## VIVE L'AMOUR (1994)

In *The 400 Blows* Léaud, as Truffaut's alter ego 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. 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. In *Vive l'amour* 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, but rarely happen to meet, without finding a real possibility of a relationship. Lee irresolutely cuts his veins, then bandages himself, the next day he buys a melon 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, 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 (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”, Tsai said about

<sup>1</sup> This text is based on online reviews of Tsai Ming-liang's films by Csilla Markója (ELKH BTK MI). Csilla Markója's previous academic paper on Tsai Ming-liang and the aesthetics of the spectral: <https://sciendo.com/article/10.2478/ausfm-2022-0012>

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. The pictures of devoted care, nursing multiply, as Tsai and Lee, the creative duo 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. 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. „The external world is like our inner self, full of problems,” Tsai says, 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 convince her. Unconvincing sobbing – what a marvelous 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 in the conversation? The process of ghostification still going on in the digital world. We have become ghosts, haunting each other in an empty flat.

### THE HOLE (1998)

In times of a worldwide pandemic, it was a disturbing and strange experience to see a film in whose first frames, still in darkness, the siren of an ambulance can be heard and in which the characters cover their mouths with masks. It had a particularly haunting effect when I realized that the film was made in 1998 as one of the TNC’s emblematic works. Taiwan may be a symbol of impending danger, an excellent site of permanent crisis, but the mask is confusing: tangible reality, a Kafkaesque parable, or foreboding? In *The Hole*, a terrible epidemic caused by a respiratory pathogen isolates people living among piles of toilet paper in dark, dank caves, and the infected become bugs reminiscent of Kafka’s nightmares. In Tsai Ming-liang’s films, some characters, settings and motifs reappear again and again, like ghosts. The main character, Lee Kang-sheng, returns from film to film, and there are some haunting motifs: they form a strange, rhizomatic spiritual web between the films, which are not

connected in the traditional narrative way. One such motif is the water that pours down on the isolated, lonely souls in this film, both in the form of burst pipes and in the form of rain, slowly but surely breaking through the walls between them and freeing them from their desperate isolation. My firm idea is that all this water and rain are the projected tears and sobs of the characters. In Tsai's films, the walls weep, the urban and natural landscapes weep, the whole created world weeps and cries for the people. But in this film, which is a euphoric dystopia of broken walls and ruptured membranes, there is also a strange source of serenity and joy. For there is much singing in this film. The songs are sung by Grace Chang, an actress and singer who grew up in Shanghai but fled to Hong Kong as a young woman fleeing communism and recording in the 1950s and '60s. In her own way, Chang broke down a wall: As one of the first pioneers of the modern woman, she has incorporated Western hits into her songs, which both counterpoint and interpret the terrible isolation and abandonment of the characters in *The Hole* with a strange humor. The film is a symbol of breakthrough in every way: when the boy reaches for the sick girl's hand through the broken ceiling, not a dry eye is left in the house.

#### WHAT TIME IS IT THERE (2001)

When you are in love, you involuntarily adjust your internal clock to that of the other person. Suddenly you start thinking with her head, worrying about her, reading her favorite books, watching her movies, sharing your space, your time. You become generous, you step out of your compulsive schedule, you suspend your own time. In a good case, she does the same, and you meet in an in-between time zone that is just yours. In Tsai's film, young Lee Kang-sheng is selling watches on a skywalk when he meets the love of his life. He sets his watch to hers, and she travels to Paris, Truffaut's city. The two can no longer meet in real time, they remain prisoners of their maddening loneliness, and yet, though they are separated by interpersonal jetlag, their time is touched by each other. In Tsai's wonderfully layered, intricately metaphorical film, signs, slips and coincidences multiply. Objects and motifs wander through time, separating and connecting these two people who are barely aware of their love: mourning loved ones lost and undiscovered in a blur of unrecognized things. In Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*, there is scene of which, I think, Tsai's film is the metonymy as Lee Kang-sheng is the metonymy of Pierre Léaud. I venture as 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 suffers 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 friendship with 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 were a ghost, almost unnoticed by the negligent wealthy father. This motif appears in one of Tsai's early films, *Vive l'amour!* In *The 400 Blow* 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, but previously he set the clock to an earlier time so that the father runs off agitated, he sets the clock back to the right time. They can meet in the jetlag of the of time, 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 has seen but 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 to the satyr, to the public toilet. Lee and Léaud, Tsai and Truffaut exchange watches, chronometers of love: The two clocks that appear in two different films, are however, not the same, there is some difference between them. And this discrepancy is somehow life itself, compared to the exceptional time of love. A recurring, haunting motif in Tsai's films is that people live as ghosts in each other's presence, while their emotions are very real. That is why this film is a wonderful romantic love story, even though nothing happens in it. The clocks could not align, yet in the gap of time and space divergence, sacred moments, and gestures blossom into beautiful flowers.

### THE SKYWALK IS GONE (2002)

„It seems that many of the places I shot for my films have disappeared. It's kind of disturbing!” Tsai Ming-liang joked in an interview about the new ghostly passageway between film and reality. Almost immediately after *What Time is It There?*, Tsai made a short film to open the series of shorts, which turned out to be partly a long peripatetic walk towards the intimate, personal spaces of the museum, and partly a kind of epilogue, a postscript to the feature film. The trauma that motivated him was the shock of not finding the skywalk where Lee sold the watches. Although the short film is meaningful in itself, its discursive layers can only really be deciphered if you know the feature film. It is a clever, but also a very tender film about the shifts and slips that make it impossible for people to meet or for things to happen – but these shifts and slips are reflected in the structure of the film. Shwizz, the skywalk was gone, it became a ghost, opening a new lacrymal canal between reality and fiction. In the first part of the short film, the girl returns from Paris, desperately searching for her lover's place, her love, which has disappeared. The suitcase also makes an appearance, the round one with the wheels, which is not identical to Lee's display case full of puny watches glowing in dazzling colors, but is nevertheless symbolically related to it. Typically, the suitcase is not in the hand of the girl who has fled to Paris, but in the hand of a woman who is also jaywalking on the motorway, 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 location), then the policeman takes the girl's ID card and more or less forgets to return it, and when the girl comes back for it, he even denies having got hold of it. This turns the girl into a ‚subaltern existence‘ in the sense that Gramsci and Spivak understood it; she becomes a ghost who haunts the place of love in vain, she doesn't find anyone, and she doesn't have an identity either (because it was taken from her). The skywalk in front of Taipei station has disappeared along with the watch seller's shop, but Lee strangely appears in the same place on the subway and accidentally meets the girl on a staircase who doesn't recognise him. She goes downstairs, Lee goes upstairs, and at the top of the stairs – as if he had seen a ghost – he turns around, but has no time to linger, because – having lost his job selling watches – he has to hurry to a casting for a (porn) film. The short film ends here only to set the scene for the next one, *Wayward Cloud*. The lovers can't find a common time or place. They pass each other as if they weren't there. It can't be a coincidence that in this short film, which has a perfectly round story, one loses her identity, and the other puts love up for sale. In addition to the universalisation of 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 that is constantly trying to find the voice of the subaltern hidden in all of us, becomes possible. The ghosts are already among us, we are ghosts ourselves, Tsai says, we just need to learn to see in the „haunting hour“ that is our new digital age, and then perhaps the separate things and beings can break through.

### GOODBYE DRAGON INN (2003)

Lately, the back row of cinemas has become double seats for lovers. If there was one thing, I dreaded about going to the cinema, apart from films that were too loud, too violent, or too silly, it was what happened that day. There he was, holding one of those two-seat tickets. In an instant, we both blushed red. I clearly perceived this gesture as a violation of the mystery that sexuality had always been for me, and he realized what a mistake he had made. And I felt that how deeply I have hurt him, when I had implicitly qualified his gesture as an obscenity. Because spontaneity, the uniqueness of things is sacred. There we were, ticket in hand, in a lobby lined with burgundy plush, plunged into the well-known hell of mutual sulking and desperate desire for each other. The funny and philosophical question of why people like to kiss in the dark of the cinema didn't even come up. *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, among others, explores this question in depth. In the increasingly deserted auditorium of Tsai's doomed Taipei cinema, the last cinema in the apocalyptic sense, people look for each other but do not find. This is not Tsai's best film, and not only because Tsai's fetish actor, Lee, is only a ghost who rarely appears to collect the heavenly flood of tears in buckets in the mundane, dirty, but sometimes too spacious, sometimes too cramped space of the allegory. Tsai repeats himself quite a lot in the impressively edited images, despite their otherwise relentless randomness, and, excep-

tionally, I felt a little clumsily stylized the ballet of desire in the backstage, with the protagonist sniffing like a dog. Meanwhile, this direct depiction of the animality of desire, like Tsai's other powerful gestures, imbues this scene with a melancholy irony – Tsai's genius is always apparent. The first sentence, apart from the wuxia with a system of allusions shown in the cinema (as others have already written so richly and beautifully about it), is uttered by a Japanese tourist in the 45th minute: „Did you know that this theatre is haunted? Ghosts.” And with that, all the ghosts in between were named, from the ghosts of history to the ghosts of cinema, from the inherently haunting frames to the increasingly virtual desires of people. This film is a profound and painful yet sensitive response to the digitalization of our world. Men's bodies rub against each other in a labyrinth of stacks of boxes, bottomless mouths devour and crunch, while the ghosts of times past remind them of their transience. With the tears and mourning of the last spectator, the materiality of the cinema as a meeting place, where people's intense longings for each other, filtered through the pearly screen, are captured in the darkness of the film, fades away. Cinema is an aphrodisiac of the interpersonal, a reminder of the times of unique and unrepeatable things, in the vapour of the steam dumpling, cut in two, secretly shared with the other, and in the flickering, fleeting dream of the projected image and identity.

### STRAY DOGS (2013)

„Tsai Ming-liang: *Stray Dogs*. A film about home. It is full of invisible ghosts. I cried.” – Apichatpong wrote on Twitter after the debut of Tsai's slow cinema in 2013. Some parts of the film have since become intermedia art, museum objects in various installations. „Without a cinema, there are no fixed lengths, no popcorn, no sofa, no room temperature control, no story lines, no film categories, no performance... Any single shot, no matter in 3 minutes, 10 minutes or even half hour, can be seen as a film in itself. Therefore, *Stray Dogs at the Museum* space is both a collection of short films and a coherent single film at the same time. It is there to present that films can be shown with great flexibilities.”<sup>2</sup> These video installations draw attention to what has always been associated with the visual arts in Tsai's work, the intermediality that is a legitimate development for such a wild and extreme image-maker. But the films have a social sensibility and humanity that is partly lost the moment they enter the museum. Although the location of *Stray Dogs*, a ruined house in Taipei, is a found object, its unrestored upper floor, burnt black and unpainted, has inspired Tsai to almost artistic gestures: The interior, down to the tiles, has already been painted to resemble the house, the staircase recalls Escher paintings, the permeable walls recall Lynch's films, the sliding partitions, the pictorial structures recall the bold diagonals of Hokusai prints, making the autonomous world of the film, which

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<sup>2</sup> *Stray Dogs at the Museum* Project with pictures: <https://montue.ntue.edu.tw/en/straydogs/>  
My papers on Tsai Ming-liang: <https://mta.academia.edu/CsillaMarkoja> Tsai. cit.: [https://www.randianonline.com/np\\_event/tsai-ming-liang-stray-dogs-at-the-museum/](https://www.randianonline.com/np_event/tsai-ming-liang-stray-dogs-at-the-museum/)

focuses more on visual language than narrative, increasingly pictorial and at the same time more structured: Every cut and frame of *Stray Dogs* has the compression and editing of a work of fine art, and Tsai admits that it was intended as such. Indeed, there is another specific Hokusai parallel to be found in the spatial structure, the wildly cut compositions, the foreground-background relationship, and the use of the distinctive blue colour. Apichatpong also has his own meaningful colours, in the form of turquoise curtains, fluorescent tubes, and sky-blue blankets: the colour symbolism also sometimes evokes Buddhism, the colours of monks' robes, which vary from region to region, wild reds, saffron, yellows. In the *Stray Dogs at the Museum* exhibitions, some of the moving images from the film were projected onto museum spaces, for example onto plastered walls that mimicked reliefs on which Lee's face appeared as a concrete landscape, a geological formation: a dynamically shifting system of landslides and high points, extending the concept of landscape film into an interactive installation, as anyone can enter the projected image and transform the tectonics of Lee's face, his whole psychic geology. „I don't think you can draw a line between reality and fiction. I don't think there is such a thing as „non-fiction, because from the moment you put the camera down at a certain point, filmmaking is entirely subjective. I don't believe in documentary either, because represented reality in that sense is always an illusion”, as Apichatpong once said in similar terms.<sup>3</sup> The *Stray Dog's* homeless and fragmented family with the alcoholic father wanders in the crevices of time and space. The power of the film lies not only in the beautiful landscape slow cinema details, but also in the urban extensions, deeply saturated with compassion and moving pathos forms of pain. The destruction of the cabbage head, a substitute for the missing woman, is an act of mourning that erupts out of repression, accompanied by the sobs of nature. Whether it is possible to go on is rather a question raised by the final frames. Everything depends, as usual, on a single human touch.

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<sup>3</sup> Apichatpong cit.: Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Walker Dialogue with Chuck Stevens. 2004. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tPwSjBYTpXQ>