

The Time is Wrong There

Michael Berry: What type of films did you like most when you were a child?

Tsai Ming-Liang: *I don't remember the content of a lot of those films—my memory keeps getting worse and worse (laughs)—But I remember those faces. And even today I still remember the names of all those actors, even those people in those minor supporting roles, actors like Yu So-Chao (Yu Suqui) (1930–), stars of martial arts films like Ko Lo-chuen (Gao Luquan) (1909–), Connie Chan Po-chu (Chen Baozhu) (1946–), and Josephine Siao (Xiao Fangfang) (1947–)...*

The film industry is a swirling spool of cinematic devices that have glimmered in the sunlight for so long, that they are perceived as natural, innate facts of the art form. Their strings float down to catch our eyes. Like fish lures, I am afraid to grab on and be tugged away towards the West.

I am not an actor. Yet, on the streets in Taipei, Tsai stops me.

Tsai Ming-Liang: *I never like those tall and handsome leading men—I don't believe for a second that one of them could be a college student or a construction worker, or anything else! (Laughs) But with an actor like Lee Kang-sheng, I can really believe his performance.*

I was a waiter, an insurance salesman, a police look-out in front of an illegal gambling parlor. All were odd jobs I did after failing the entrance exam to study film at university. When a hand reached out, offering me a small role in *All the Corners of the World* (1989), my little street corner began to shake beneath my feet. And on the inside, what seemed to be rejection previously hardened in my veins, became viscous, and was flowing slowly through my body and out through my fingertips.

“The identity of ‘one’s own society’ is an open question” –Akhil Gupta and James Ferguson, *“Beyond ‘Culture’: Space, Identity, and the Politics of Difference”* (1992).

Tsai had asked me to blink, to move my shoulders, relax my arms, and so on. He seemed frustrated that I was going so slow with my movements. He told me I looked like a robot. It’s interesting how when filming, the desired effect is to make the movie believable, to have a natural flow between the person on camera, through the screen, to the person watching. But for it to be believable, you need not be yourself, rather someone completely unbelievable to you. A projection. I responded to Tsai’s remarks as such: “This is just how I am.” We finished the scene,

but I kept seeing a twinge in his eyes after what I said. A kind of ember that even the wind can't snuff out.

Tsai Ming-Liang: *His actions may be slow, but why do I always have to get him to hurry up? Why can't I slow down to wait for him?*

Michael Berry: So he really prodded you to reevaluate your entire approach to directing actors.

Tsai Ming-Liang: *Right, I had to readjust how I looked at a performance. Later I realized that it is not at all a matter of fast or slow, as long as the performance is real and convincing.*

Tsai came to visit me on the set of Ann Hui's *Ordinary Heroes* (1999). We had one scene left, and it was a charged, crying one. I could see the stress in Tsai's eyes, and the frustration at the fact that it wasn't his movie to direct. Ann Hui had to use eye drops since I couldn't bring myself to leak tears from my eyes on command. As the manufactured liquid dotted my skin, I thought of words spoken by the director Wong Kar-Wai: *in Hong Kong, we always pre-sell to get our film financed, and for most Southeast Asian markets, they just want to have action.*

If you have only seen and grabbed lures your entire life, you don't know what real sustenance looks and feels like.

I realized that Ann Hui doesn't suit me. Her rhythms pound at my heart so fast I don't have time to breathe. I don't want to adapt to the expectations of the public...of Hong Kong cinema...of Hollywood. Short takes and invisible editing remind me of that day on the street before an outstretched hand guided me away. I prefer Taipei, and New Wave, and Tsai who exemplifies both. Of long takes, and the recognizable boundary between me, the camera, and the screen.

Director's Notes, 21 September 2001, What Time Is It There?: My first appointment with Jean-Pierre Léaud in Paris was in a café that he frequents. However, he got the time wrong and thought that I was late. He left without waiting, and I only found his empty cup.

I returned to the solace of Tsai's camera for *What Time is it There?* as the main character. My father had just died and I became obsessed with Paris time after meeting a woman about to travel there on vacation who bought one of my watches. I ended up changing every clock I encountered to Paris' time, which caused my mother to believe my father's spirit was in a different time than Taipei. I peed into a plastic bag and water bottle from the fear of my father's ghost blocking the way in the dark halls. Jean-Pierre Léaud starred as a seedy man on a bench asking for the number of the woman who bought my watch.

“Words cannot state simply how fine is Jean-Pierre Léaud in the role of the boy—how implacably deadpanned yet expressive, how apparently relaxed yet tense, how beautifully positive in his movement, like a pint-sized Jean Gabin. Out of this brand new youngster, M. Truffaut has elicited a performance that will live as a delightful, provoking and heartbreaking monument to a boy.” –*The 400 Blows* NY Times Review by Bosley Crowther.

“I argue, then, that Tsai’s film [*What Time Is It There?*] indexes a characteristically postcolonial relation to time that I call *temporal dysphoria*: a disorientation in relation to time rather than space. Designating something analogous to motion-sickness (time-sickness?) that is a subjective effect of the regime of cultural time-lag as experienced by postcolonial subjects, this temporal dysphoria underlines the enduring effects of the former, strongly hierarchized relations between centre and periphery; west and non-west; and, arguably, between European film and its ‘others.’” –*The European Undead: Tsai Ming-liang’s Temporal Dysphoria*, Fran Martin (2010).

The final scene in the movie is my father’s spirit in Paris walking toward a Ferris wheel. When I see the scene on screen, I gaze at the circle, of circular time, and think how the film may become a worthy example of New Wave experimentation. Then I think of Jean-Pierre Léaud and how well placed he is, sitting on a bench, shadowed almost with a figmented rope tying him to us. Perhaps he’s unaware of the strain on his ankle. Our longing to be in the west, either being dragged forward or held back I do not know. It reminds me of me. There is comfort in knowing an unseen force keeps reflecting off of itself, convinced that the expanding distance will shorten. I am tempted to take my teeth and bite through the rope, whether it be a tether or a jackline to release myself and fall back into the infinite emptiness, to be free of it. Tsai is beside me with a metaphorical knife, carving his notes into the fibers of the screenplay, writing a distinguished actor into a shabby form, and dissolving him into its pages to let me, undistinguished and relentless, take over in slow motion.

Tsai Ming-liang: When I found Lee Kang-sheng on the street, I invited him to be in my films. Since then, his perfect embodiment of an anti-actor has had a profound impact on my work. One day, to my shock, I realized I never wanted to move my camera away from his face, and it was then that I found the true reason for making films.

Tsai asked me back again for a movie he was going to call *the Skywalk is Gone* (2002). I agreed.

My time with Tsai mirrors Taiwan. We continuously wander around each other like a Ferris wheel off its base in the borderlands of cinema, making films, not for money or fame, but to share the same frame of collective contradiction that our cinema possesses. A silk thread is wrapped around our wrists. It tries to guide us towards the national stage with our eyes closed. But I will displace it. When I open my eyes to gaze through the lens of the camera, the thread will snap. Then, I’ll differentiate the world and reconnect it again.

Sources:

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