

Spaces, Tactics, and Time:
City Wandering in Taiwanese Cinema from 1992 to 2006

Sylvain Verstricht

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By: Sylvain Verstricht

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Signed by the final examining committee:

Yuriko Furuhata _____ External Examiner

Peter Rist _____ Examiner

Catherine Russell _____ Supervisor

Approved by

Haidee Wasson _____
Graduate Program Director

March 28, 2011

Catherine Wild _____
Dean of Faculty

ABSTRACT

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This thesis concerns the theme and form of “wandering” in Taiwanese cinema. It focuses on selected films by three major directors: Tsai Ming-liang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, and Edward Yang. These three directors are not only the most critically acclaimed from Taiwan, their films also share more than a few characteristics. Their narratives often involve wandering, whether it be in content or form. I argue that this wandering is presented as a way of experiencing the world that can lead to greater agency within it. In “Edward Yang’s *Yi yi: Everyday Adventure in the Idyllic City*”, I use Bakhtin’s chronotope to observe how wandering in the city can transform the everyday into an adventure that leads to greater knowledge and happiness. In “Tsai Ming-liang: Wandering through Dystopia”, I draw on de Certeau’s “pedestrian speech act” to contend that characters in the director’s films approach their dystopian environment from a wandering perspective, which allows them to create new possibilities within the constraining order. In “The Perpetual Present: Mythic Time in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Millennium Mambo*”, I use Barthes’s concept of mythic time to claim that Hou offers a text that is already reread, thereby allowing the viewer to experience a time without *before* or *after*. In these films, urban wandering is a process of self-discovery that is necessary to determine one’s place within the surrounding community (familial or affinitive) and in the world at large.

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Introduction

A few decades ago, Taiwanese cinema was confined to film festivals and art house theatres. Today, video distribution contributes greatly to its growing popularity, at the very least in academic circles. I first got introduced to the films of Tsai Ming-liang and Hou Hsiao-hsien, the two most popular directors from Taiwan aside from Ang Lee, when the Cinémathèque Québécoise held a retrospective of their work in 2005 and 2006. However, it is on DVD that I was able to see most of the films... Unfortunately, their fellow director Edward Yang's films do not benefit from as good a video distribution. *Yi yi* (2000) remains his only film available on DVD in Canada. In his case, for better or for worse, it is the internet that has permitted access to his other work. This often comes at the detriment of the quality of the image, but arguably it is better than nothing.

This newfound access to Taiwanese films combined with their high level of quality has contributed to the proliferation of English writings on these directors in the past decade. Between 2005 and 2007, at least three English books have been published about Taiwanese cinema, demonstrating the new popularity of the subject in academic circles. Emilie Yueh-Yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis's *Taiwan Film Directors: A Treasure Island* is primarily set up as an auteur study that attempts to find a common thread throughout all the films of each of the four major Taiwanese directors of the last three decades: Edward Yang, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Ang Lee, and Tsai Ming-liang. Though *Taiwan Film Directors* is the most consistent in quality of the three books, its auteurist approach means that it disregards many aspects of the directors' films in order to be able to offer a cohesive reading of their oeuvres. Despite essays provided by a dozen different writers,

Island on the Edge: Taiwan New Cinema and After, edited by Chris Berry and Feii Lu, suffers from a lack of variety of approaches. In most instances, the films discussed are dealt with as cultural texts and used to discuss national identity and politics. Despite its promising title, *Cinema Taiwan: Politics, popularity and state of the arts*, edited by Darrell William Davis and Ru-shou Robert Chen, suffers from much the same fate. The section on politics ends up being the strongest, while the section on popularity often fails to overcome its trivial premise and the section on the state of the arts (the shortest one) does not manage to account for the artistic importance of Taiwanese cinema.

If the Taiwanese New Wave is significant because it has managed to put this national cinema on the world map, why is that so little has been written about it beyond its national significance? My purpose with this text is to attempt to fill this lack by foregrounding the urban aspects of Taiwanese films of the New Wave that primarily take place in the modern city of Taipei. In “Edward Yang’s *Yi yi: Everyday Adventure in the Idyllic City*”, I use M.M. Bakhtin’s concept of the chronotope to observe how wandering through the city is treated as an adventure where people become aware of their surroundings, something that is replicated by Yang’s cinematic style, leading to a spiritual awakening about the value of the everyday. In “Tsai Ming-liang: Wander through Dystopia”, I refer to Michel de Certeau’s “pedestrian speech act” to tackle how Tsai’s characters’ wanderings become a way of coping with their dystopian environment. Finally, in “Mythic Time in Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Millennium Mambo*”, I use Roland Barthes’s concept of mythic time to examine how the director manages to create a narrative where notions of *before* and *after* are erased. With the contemporary city of

Taipei as a backdrop, these essays respectively approach wandering as movement in space, as a tactic, and as movement in time.

A Brief History of Cinema in Taiwan

That Taiwanese directors would be particularly interested in everyday life should not come as a surprise given that the roots of Taiwanese cinema took place in documentary film. The feature film industry in Taiwan emerged out of the Second World War, when documentary filmmakers who worked with China's Kuomintang (KMT), otherwise known as the Chinese Nationalist Party, accompanied the KMT to Taiwan. In the following decade, the three studios present in Taiwan (The Agricultural Education Motion Picture Corporation, China Film Studio, and Taiwan Film Studio) all focused their efforts on the production of non-fiction films and were all owned by the government, which not surprisingly used them to turn out thinly veiled propaganda. In 1954, the revenue of Taiwanese cinema represented 24 per cent of the whole.

The following year, the studios used money given to them by the American government to finance co-productions with Hong Kong. These features abandoned Taiwan's early bouts with documentary and instead went along with Hong Kong's predilection for family melodramas focused on female characters and traditional values. In the late 50s, a slew of genre films using Amoy (Taiwanese dialect) found some success with local mainstream audiences, who then abandoned them in favour of more technically polished Mandarin-language films (Chiao 155).

In 1963, inspired by Socialist Realism, the Central Motion Picture Corporation began a series of Mandarin films that had to espouse a style pegged as "wholesome

realism” or “healthy realism.” The three main elements of healthy realism could be found in their style, theme, and ideology (Yeh & Davis 26). These films focused on the everyday life of the working class, but despite their claim to realism, their tone had to be optimistic and positive – wherein the so-called “healthy” and “wholesome” qualifiers come in (Chiao 156). Despite being inspired by the neo-realism of politically-minded Italian filmmakers, these Taiwanese films completely avoided any critical look at their own society and culture (Yeh & Davis 30). These films also maintained a focus on female characters, which eventually led to a predominance of escapist romance stories in the seventies. In the process, women became the target audience for Taiwanese films.

In the 1980s, a New Wave emerged with young directors and critics (most of whom were in their thirties) who had for the most part been educated in Western schools (Chiao 156). The primary intention of the filmmakers involved in this movement was to try to lure Taiwanese audiences away from Hollywood and Hong Kong films, which took up the overwhelming majority of the market (Yeh & Davis 89). In order to do so, they also decided to abandon the previous mainstream genres typically tackled by Taiwanese directors, most especially the escapist melodrama (Lu 9). This also had the effect of dissolving the star system (Chiao 158).

Since autobiography can often be found at the core of New Wave movements (such as those in France, Germany, and Japan), it is not surprising that Taiwanese filmmakers also turned in this direction to provide storytelling material for their new aspirations. For inspiration, filmmakers often turned to childhood memories or to times when citizens were particularly affected by government politics. One only has to think of François Truffaut’s *The Four Hundred Blows* (*Les quatre cents coups*, 1959), Wim

Wenders' *Kings of the Road* (*Im Lauf der Zeit*, 1976), Oshima Nagisa's *Cruel Story of Youth* (*Seishun zankoku monogatari*, 1960), and Tian Zhuangzhuang's *The Blue Kite* (*Lan feng zheng*, 1993). In each of these New Waves, one can also notice a rejection of mainstream genres (Yeh & Davis 146-7). In this way, Chinese literature would have a great effect on the Taiwanese New Wave, and one that is far from indirect. In fact, novelist Chu T'ien-wen might very well be considered the greatest muse of the most famous director from the Taiwanese New Wave, Hou Hsiao-hsien. She is responsible for introducing the idea of working with autobiography to the director (Yeh & Davis 136). She offered him her own autobiography for *A Summer at Grandpa's* (*Dong dong de jia qi*, 1984), while another one of Hou's collaborators, Wu Nien-Jen, offered his for *Dust in the Wind* (*Lian lian feng chen*, 1986). In between, Chinese writer Shen Congwen encouraged Hou to exploit his own autobiography for *A Time to Live and a Time to Die* (*Tong nien wang shi*, 1985) (Yeh & Davis 13). Hou even got Taiwan's most beloved puppeteer, Li Tianlu, to portray himself in the story of his life, *The Puppetmaster* (*Xi meng ren sheng*, 1993).

The second most famous filmmaker from the Taiwanese New Wave, Edward Yang, also looks to Chinese autobiography for inspiration (Yeh & Davis 11). Though it may not be as explicit as in Hou's work, Yang still claims that the characters in all of his later films are based on stories of his friends (Yeh & Davis 147).

And, even though he is better known for his fiction feature films, Tsai Ming-liang has a background in documentary film and television (Yeh & Davis 246). While Yeh and Davis claim that the filmmaker's inspiration comes primarily from an ethnographic source, they still recognize that he integrates autobiography in his fictional films (Yeh &

Davis 11). It would be difficult for viewers not to perceive Hsiao-kang, the recurring main character in almost all of the director's feature films, as Tsai's alter ego.

Along with Ang Lee, Taiwan's most commercial filmmaker, these three directors have managed to put Taiwan on the world cultural map, if not to make it commercially viable within the borders of their island.

A National Cinema Is a Transnational Cinema

Today, Taiwanese cinemagoers almost exclusively consume Hollywood films. Since 1997, foreign motion pictures, most of these from Hollywood, have taken in at least ninety-five percent of the profits at the box office (Yeh & Davis 102). By some, it is taken as yet another sign that, though the United States of America does not have any institutions proper in Taiwan, their political and financial support of the island as a nation independent from the People's Republic of China has come at the cost of a colonial-like takeover of Taiwan's culture. Chen Kuo-fu, director of the commercial hit *Double Vision* (*Shuang tong*, 2002), claims that Taiwanese people do not care about their national cinema (Yeh & Davis 217). The only Taiwanese director whose movies they are likely to go see are those of Ang Lee, the most Hollywoodian of all Taiwanese filmmakers (Yeh & Davis 88). The result is that Taiwanese movie theatres are overrun by entertainment from Hollywood and Hong Kong, while Taiwanese films are sent abroad, where they garner an international reputation for the nation's cinematic output (Yeh & Davis 102). In Taiwan, cinema is almost exclusively a business of importation and exportation.

While it is clear that the New Wave has failed to commercially reenergize the local film industry and stop Hollywood's quasi-monopoly of movie screens, it is also

clear that it has managed to put Taiwan's cinema on the world map by providing three of the finest filmmakers of the last decades of the twentieth century (Yeh & Davis 55). Still, the New Wave is held responsible for the failure of commercial cinema in Taiwan because its filmmakers produce the kind of work fit for art house theatres (Yeh & Davis 56). However, this has allowed Taiwanese filmmakers to strike a chord with audiences abroad, most particularly with the film festival crowd (Yeh & Davis 102). This constant tug-of-war between film as a commercial venture and film as an art form runs through Yeh and Davis's book on Taiwanese cinema, and it is a question that unfortunately plagues cinema even outside of Taiwan's borders. The high cost of film production makes it one of the very few art forms for which profitability is allowed to regularly overshadow artistic merit.

Still, Yeh and Davis ask a question that has its own obvious answer written into it: "Why do Taiwan-made art films travel around the world but fall flat at home" (Yeh & Davis 9)? It is because they are *art* films. No nation can claim to be able to single-handedly financially support their own art cinema. To expect Taiwan to be able to turn art cinema into a locally viable enterprise is to place expectations upon the nation that could not be met by any other. Luckily, one of the advantages of the global village is that Taiwan does not have to be the sole backer of its cinema. Hou Hsiao-hsien is one of the most coveted directors at film festivals around the world; and Tsai Ming-liang has proven quite popular with the French, who have financed some of his films, including *What Time Is It There?* (*Ni na bian ji dian*, 2001) (Yeh & Davis 88). The thing to remember is that a national cinema can only become so once it crosses its own borders, when it becomes a transnational cinema; a national cinema can only be so in the face of other national

cinemas. That is to say that national identity can only be defined in contrast with other national identities.

While many films become international hits through an exoticizing reception from audiences abroad, I would argue that the main reason why films by the three directors discussed here have managed to so easily cross borders is not because they appear exotic, but the opposite. My own fascination with them does not rely on an exoticization of the Taiwanese, but rather on a deep feeling of identification with the characters and the processes of filmmaking that bring them into being. The main reason for this is that all of the films that I am concerned with take place within an urban setting, the city of Taipei. As Yeh and Davis explain, the interchangeability of cities is especially obvious in the films of Yang, who presents Taipei as a global village where “hungry British, French, American, and Japanese expatriates” cross paths with “Chinese yuppies, petty gangsters, students, and businessmen” (92). In fact, there is a link to be made between the transnational wandering visible in Yang’s films and the transnational wandering of the films themselves. Both have the city as the site of their manifestation. Indeed, the city is the foremost site of transnational wandering. To be cosmopolitan is to be at home in the city rather than in a nationality. If the global village does indeed exist as a geographical space, the city is where it is to be found. Similarly, the city is where art house cinema is to be found. It is a specifically urban phenomenon. The motion pictures that can be seen in one film festival are often the same ones that can be seen in yet another film festival in yet another city in a country halfway across the globe that same year. Film reels cross borders, making art house flicks transnational travellers.

I would argue that one of the reasons why the cinema of the Taiwanese New Wave has become a transnational cinema is because its narratives are articulated in ways specific to film as distinct from novels or plays. In “Remapping Taipei,” an essay focused on Edward Yang’s *Terrorizer* (*Kong bu fen zi*, 1986), Fredric Jameson claims that “in Taiwan, as elsewhere, the aesthetically ambitious now want to become great film-makers rather than great novelists” (121). Indeed, Taiwanese filmmakers of the New Wave and their heirs are profoundly concerned with expressing their narratives cinematically. In the 1920s, Virginia Woolf already argues that, in order to capitalize on its own strengths as a medium, cinema must abandon symbolism, which is an intrinsic part of literature – words are symbols in and of themselves – and therefore the latter’s strength. “All this, which is accessible to words, and to words alone, the cinema must avoid,” she says (594). What is most appealing about Woolf’s essay is that it is not an attack on cinema, but a desire to see it achieve its full potential as an art form distinct from literature. Again, Jameson concurs with Woolf:

It will have thereby become clear that however film expects to achieve analogous effects, it cannot do so simply by finding and matching simple filmic equivalents to these textual ones of reading and its inner analogues. The reason has already been indicated in passing, and it is not a consequence of the deficiencies of film as a medium but rather of its superiority to narrative language in any number of representational ways. (133)

By figuring out ways of tackling narrative filmmaking without simply transcribing literary devices into film, New Wave directors have managed to create an aesthetic that makes cinema more comparable to music than to literature, in that it has the ability to affect audiences who do not even speak the same language or share the same cultural background without having to be translated. The result is a cinema that appeals to

audiences abroad without resorting to an exoticized image of its people and locales. Instead, they do so by tapping into the transnational potential of the moving image.

Towards an Aesthetic of Wandering

Instead of constructing their films as one would a novel or a play, Taiwanese filmmakers have capitalized on film's ability to record, prioritizing the unfolding of events over their construction. So, even when they are dealing with past events, the present is allowed to emerge through the becoming of each scene. In the first feature film to mark his new style as director of the New Wave, *The Boys from Fengkuei*, Hou is often quoted as saying that he would "constantly tell the cinematographer to 'keep a distance, and be cooler.' It allowed certain *real* situations to *naturally unfold* themselves" (Yeh & Davis 157-8, my emphasis). The idea is that, the further away the camera is from the action to be recorded (as in a long shot), the more elements fall within the frame that are not part of the action itself, lending the shot a more naturalistic feel. To look at it in a different way, it gives the performers a larger playing area, allowing them to not be limited by the restricted space of a tighter shot, lending their movement, as well as other elements of their performance, more freedom. Even when the shot is tighter, performers are not asked to restrict themselves and remain within the parameters provided by the frame. Instead, they are allowed to walk in and out of the frame, and the film does not cut to another shot to reposition the performers within its grab. Yeh and Davis recognize that in the films of Yang, Hou, and Tsai, the "structuring principles seem at odds with the needs of efficient storytelling. [...] Visual composition within the frame and the shot is similarly painstaking, yet indifferent to conventional plays of curiosity and suspense in

commercial genres” (100). As a result, there is a feeling that the events unfold even when they do not fall within the film. They take on a life of their own. The camera does not construct the narrative; it simply records it when it happens to fall within its grasp.

These stylistic decisions contribute to the realism in these films, and prove that realism is not simply dependent on the kinds of narratives filmmakers choose to tackle. Once again, Yeh and Davis rightfully claim that “The holistic, non-anthropocentric narration [in these directors’ films] models social experience as it is lived on a daily basis” (100). One of the reasons is that such shots, where the action is unfolding far from the camera (the perceptual stand-in for the audience) or even falls outside of the camera’s gaze, is that it breaks with the usually omniscient narrator (also visually brought into being by the camera) present in most films. Instead, the audience is experiencing the film as one often witnesses events as a bystander in real life: since the narrative is never over, the information is always incomplete, offering the audience only a partial view of the whole picture. This partial picture is not a result of the filmmakers leaving information out of the narrative, but of the impossibility of offering a full picture in the first place. While in many films a lack of information would be used to create suspense, to let the audience use their imagination to fill in the holes, here the holes cannot even be filled due to the lack of causality in the narrative. The narrative even resists the notion that the picture could be made whole. The only way for the audience to gain some satisfaction is through the acceptance of life as a narrative that can never fully take on the shape of a story.

Yeh and Davis’s argument is obviously a reiteration of André Bazin’s belief that “long takes, long shots, and real locations [sustain] relations between screen and spectator

that are perceptually closer to the phenomenological real” (Yeh & Davis 99-100). These three elements are all present in films of the Taiwanese New Wave. And yet Kim Ji-seok claims that “familiar surroundings become unfamiliar through long takes” (qtd. in Yeh & Davis 237). How can the long take offer a perspective that is more realistic and yet more unfamiliar? Must one claim be wrong in order for the other to be right? Not necessarily so. First, let us tackle the more obvious argument, that the long take is closer to the phenomenological real since the human eye cannot cut back and forth from different perspectives on a single action, one moment far away from the action and one thirtieth of a second later closer to it. Indeed, actions unfold in real time before one’s eyes rather than being constructed by them. So, if we are to agree that long takes also make the environment more unfamiliar, how can it simultaneously be so?

I would argue that what makes one’s surroundings usually familiar is the very lack of awareness of the surroundings. To be familiar with something is not to have a deep knowledge of something; the information remains on the surface, something to be recognized by simply being glimpsed. However, with the long take, the visual information is no longer simply glimpsed over. It remains even after one has taken in the scenery, so to speak. This persistence of the image is what brings it into unfamiliar territory. No longer does the audience only see; it is also aware of seeing. For directors of the Taiwanese New Wave, film is not only a medium with which to bring stories into being, but a medium that, at its best, leads audiences to a heightened awareness of the act of seeing, even once they have left the movie theatre. This love for the very act of seeing can be seen in modern Chinese writer Shen Congwen’s words when he said that “‘Seeing’ is the only thing that I will never get tired of” (qtd. in Yeh & Davis 159). Shen

is seen as one of Hou's influences by Yeh and Davis. They recognize that "Shen's love of seeing is invested by a tremendous inquisitiveness" (159). The long shot and take is a great way to tap into this visual desire, since as the shot seems to extend beyond the time and space necessary for the eye to take in the information relevant to the story, it implies that there is something more here to see. On the other hand, Yeh and Davis claim that in Tsai's films, his interest in duration breaks the diegetic flow and drives the audience to distraction (243). That is one possibility. Whether the length of the shots leads individual spectators to distraction or a deeper involvement with the image – or, even more likely, a constant shift between the two – the effect is essentially the same: one of contemplation. The difference lies in whether this contemplation is focused on the film image or on one's inner mental processes. For a film that is forever in sync with its diegetic flow is one that entertains without leaving its audience any space for contemplation. Finally, beyond the long shot and long take, the use of real locations suggests that what there is to see is not simply a cinematic creation, but is just as accessible outside the movie theatre. Yeh and Davis link this film device to the use of *liubai* in traditional Chinese ink painting:

Liubai, leaving space blank, is a common compositional device in traditional Chinese ink painting to prompt emotional contemplation. In cinema, *liubai* entails inviting audiences into a cinematic space, not to understand, connecting cause and effect, but to experience: in other words, an aesthetic deliberation. Thus, spatiality is emphasized to privilege aura, ambition of a significant portion of plot, are likened to the traditional compositional principle in which a small section is believed to be more revealing than a totality. (134)

They too believe that the use of *liubai* in cinema emphasizes the experiential value of the medium over the intellectual grappling of storylines.

It might seem odd to claim that narrative films that are scripted are unfolding rather than being constructed, but even the writing process deviates from the norm when it comes to the New Wave. Even Wu Nien-Jen, who is credited as a screenwriter for more than twenty-two films, including key works by Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-hsien, sees his role in an unusual light. “He prefers collaborative, improvisational composition, calling himself more of a ‘facilitator’ than a scriptwriter, finding the actual writing stage to be mechanical and anticlimactic” (Yeh & Davis 68). His attitude reflects that of the New Wave as a whole. “Anticlimactic” because to shoot a screenplay is to act out a moment that is already past; it is to walk towards a dead thing. With the New Wave, shooting becomes the moment when one is writing, with the camera rather than a pen. This is one of the main ways in which these films privilege the cinematic over the literary.

Another reason why the events within these films appear to be unfolding rather than constructed is that they often fall within the grasp of the everyday. As Ben Highmore points out, the everyday is unconscious in as much as “it is not open to direct observation, or ever fully controllable” (13). He compares it to inner-speech, “that never-quite-heard rambling, conjuring up memories, and an uncensored response to life around us” (13). However, with the Taiwanese New Wave, these actions, which can never fully be controlled, are subjected to the direct observation of the camera. One can easily see how this would lead to realism, especially given that the everyday also blurs the line between on and off-camera action; how does Lee Kang-sheng eating off-camera differ from him eating on camera? Performers of the everyday are involved in actions that are cyclical. The nature of the everyday, as can be seen in the word itself, is that it can never

cease to be. That the everyday is unrelenting – that it is something the performer would be involved with whether on or off camera – is what contributes to the erasure of the camera at the same time as its presence becomes highlighted through the audience's awareness that they are witnessing that which is usually not available to direct observation.

While these characteristics are common to all three of the directors discussed here, what follows in the individual chapters are the specificities of how an aesthetic of wandering is used by Yang, Tsai, and Hou. Though these analyses are sometimes inspired by the film characters' movement, in most instances wandering is meant in a more metaphorical way to tackle a wider variety of issues. In Yang's *Yi yi*, I look at wandering as the mobility afforded by urban subjects that allows them to move about without a fixed course, leading them to greater knowledge about the world that surrounds them and their self in relation to it. In Tsai's oeuvre, I approach wandering as a deviation from what is deemed the proper use of bodies, spaces and objects, a moving away from the usual course set for them. As for Hou's *Millennium Mambo*, I am concerned with wandering as the winding course that the non-chronological narrative espouses. The reader might gather that in all these instances I reject the pejorative notion of wandering as aimless, except in the most geographical sense. As can be seen in the chapter on Tsai, wandering can even be a most conscious act, a tactic. One can consciously deviate from the usual course without necessarily knowing the alternative path one is taking or where it will lead them. Rather than being aimless, wandering becomes laden with possibilities, a journey that can lead to new discoveries.

Chapter 1

Edward Yang's *Yi yi*: Everyday Adventure in the Idyllic City

Three generations of a family in modern Taipei. A few days in their life, days that straddle the line between the everyday and the exceptional. All of them caught in a moment of crisis, but nothing so extreme that they might fall completely out of the everyday's grasp. The mother is struggling with the mundanity of her existence. The father is tempted to abandon his family by a former lover. The teenage daughter is developing feelings for her friend's ex-boyfriend. The son, still a boy, is struggling with the limited nature of knowledge. The grandmother is lying in a coma, unaware of her own crisis. By the end of the film, all is resolved, with varying degrees of drama.

Even though *Yi yi* earned Edward Yang the best director award at the Cannes Film Festival in 2000 and the film has since become a staple on lists of the best motion pictures of the decade, very little academic writing has been dedicated to it. David Leiwei Li did write one of the most impressive essays on a Taiwanese film with "*Yi Yi: Reflections on Reflexive Modernity in Taiwan*," which appears in *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, an anthology edited by Chris Berry. In his essay, Li looks at the family in crisis in *Yi yi* from the point of view of reflexive modernity (as opposed to post-modernity), arguing that the new experience of time and space in late capitalism brings about a reassessment of ethical needs (198).

My own argument is that by presenting the modern city as a site where the private inevitably becomes public, Yang sets it up as an environment where people can experience everyday adventures simply through the act of wandering. Throughout this

chapter, I use Bakhtin's writings on the chronotope¹ to support my argument. First I demonstrate how Yang capitalizes on the viewer's visual desire by turning private events into public spectacles. Then I explain how the viewer becomes the ultimate protagonist of *Yi yi* as — much like the characters — s/he experiences an everyday adventure in the idyllic city. This adventure translates as a journey where characters are able to resolve their crisis by wandering through the city, leading to a personal metamorphosis.

All that Is Private Is Public: The Personal Experience in the Modern City

It can be said that *Yi yi* primarily focuses on everyday events. And yet, despite its three-hour run, it makes for a captivating cinematic experience. Much of what makes it a compelling watch is how Yang presents private content in a public form. By form, I do not only mean the medium of film itself; though it definitely plays a significant part in infusing the everyday with a quality that could almost be described as magical, Yang goes even further by adopting a cinematic style that capitalizes on the viewer's visual desire. While the characters in the film often go through personal moments in social settings, even when they are behind closed doors Yang shoots in such a way as to turn the viewer into an unsuspecting bystander, a privileged observer: all-seeing but always out of sight. As such, the viewer gets to observe characters with the feeling that this is how people must be when they are out of his or her sight. Yang ensures that every moment, no matter how private in essence, veers into the public by being readily observable.

Often he films in long shots or even extreme long shots, as if getting any closer would reveal the presence of the viewer to the characters and break the illusion of reality,

¹ The intrinsic connectedness of time and space that is the foundation of all narratives.

not so much for the performers as much as for the viewer. Still, Yang wants the characters' speech to remain audible. For this reason, there emerges a disjunction between the volume of the characters' voices and the distance between the performers and the viewer that allows the latter a privileged experience. Even when the performers are filmed in extreme long shots, their voices remain as loud and clear as if the viewer were standing right next to them. This is also the case when the action is shot through windows, the glass never becoming a barrier behind which the characters' words are locked.

Beyond this disjunction between distance and volume, Yang also uses another technique to give viewers the feeling that they are witnessing events unfold without the characters being aware of their presence; he often shoots through doorways, effectively creating a proscenium around the frame. While the fourth wall has been used in both theatre and film to enhance the realism of the performed over that of the performance, here the fourth wall is not an illusion that must be maintained through the actors' performance, but a concrete reality unto itself. As such, the actors do not have to pretend that the camera is not in the room since in fact it is not. From the viewers' perspective, it is a literal door that opens up onto the characters' private life, a window through which they can see without being seen.

The private nature of everyday life is also an essential quality of the adventure novel of everyday life as described by Bakhtin. As he explains, in such stories,

The everyday life that [the protagonist] observes and studies is an *exclusively personal and private life*. By its very nature there can be nothing *public* about it. All its events are the personal affairs of isolated people: they could not occur 'in the eyes of the world,' publicly, in the presence of a *chorus*. These events are not liable to public reckoning on the open square. (122)

Similarly, in a few key scenes, the characters in *Yi yi* do get to observe this personal and private life. Early in the film, Yang Yang's father reprimands him for staring at a neighbour. His son explains that he only wanted to know why she is unhappy. When his father asks how he knows she is unhappy, Yang Yang replies that she had a big fight the previous night, which he could hear from his room. The child is the accidental witness to other people's personal and private moments. Such events are only inadvertently public. Through an open door in their apartment building, Yang Yang's sister also witnesses a dispute, this one involving a girl who caught her mother sleeping with her teacher. It turns out that he has also been sleeping with the daughter. Yang Yang's sister finds herself on the other end of the gaze in the previous scene, in which she reprimands her friend's ex-boyfriend when a woman passes by, exclaiming "Tough lady." The point is clear: personal and private events do occur in public, no matter how involuntarily.

But these scenes are few, especially compared to the number of similarly private ones that viewers get to witness on their own. In fact, the whole of *Yi yi* gives its viewers the feeling that they are constantly privileged in watching the characters' personal moments unfolding in front of their eyes. Not only do they get to share the gaze of the characters in these few scenes previously discussed, but that of the viewers is sustained even as the characters in the film fall on the other side of it. And a realization occurs: more than the characters in *Yi yi*, maybe it is the viewer that has the most in common with the protagonist of the adventure novel of everyday life. Witnessing the characters onscreen witnessing private and personal moments only heightens the viewers' awareness that they are involved in the same activity. If anything, in those moments, the characters may only serve to point to the viewers, to serve as stand-ins for them: the characters are

like the viewers, who in turn are like the characters. The characters may appear as the protagonists of the film, but (as there always is) there is an extra-textual story here, that of the audience watching the film; and, in that story, according to the roles described by Bakhtin, the viewers become the true protagonists, since most of the private and personal moments are only witnessed by them and by no other character within the story. This realization is what makes viewing *Yi yi* such a captivating experience despite its focus on the everyday, the audience becoming aware and appreciating that they are the privileged witnesses of personal and private moments. Taking the viewers as the true protagonists of *Yi yi* might explain why they are usually watching these moments from afar while the characters' voice remains perfectly audible, as if they are spying on the characters. On the other hand, the characters in the film only get to witness other people's private moments for brief periods of time. For all these reasons, the viewer may indeed be the true protagonist of *Yi yi* when seen in the light of Bakhtin's conception of the adventure novel of everyday life.

Though it might be accentuated by it, that the personal nature of the events unfolding before the camera would make viewers feel as though they were spying on the characters is obviously not particular to cinema. Bakhtin had already noted with the adventure novel of everyday life that the “quintessentially private life that entered the novel at this time was, by its very nature and as opposed to public life, *closed*. In essence one could only *spy* and *eavesdrop* on it. The literature of private life is essentially a literature of snooping about, of overhearing ‘how others live’” (123). This perfectly describes the feeling viewers experience when watching *Yi yi*, that they get to overhear what would be beyond their reach under normal circumstances. By its very nature, film

constantly straddles the line between private and public; it shows what would usually be invisible to the viewer. As Yang Yang tells his dead grandmother in the last scene, “I want to tell people things they don’t know, show them stuff they haven’t seen.” And Yang the filmmaker does show viewers "stuff they haven't seen" for everyday life by its very nature can usually only be experienced firsthand rather than witnessed. So when Bakhtin claims that “Public life and public man are by their very essence *open, visible* and *audible*” (123), it should not come as a surprise that these words also describe the viewer's experience of *Yi yi*, for Yang succeeds in making the private public, showing not only that which viewers have not seen, but that which they could never see under normal circumstances.

A key scene that reasserts the feeling of spying is the one where Yang Yang runs through the schoolyard to run away from a teacher on whom he has dropped a balloon filled with water. During part of his escape, the viewer sees him through a series of security camera images, with no interruption, the omnipresent security cameras covering every inch that Yang Yang covers. This scene is of little significance for the story, (it could easily be removed without causing much damage,) but has great implications as a motif. First, while viewers see the security monitors, they do not see a security guard or anyone else observing the images they show. Instead, Yang effectively inserts the viewers in the narrative by casting them in the role of an all-seeing security guard. More importantly, just as some of the characters appear as stand-ins for the viewer in certain key scenes, this particular shot could be said to point to all others that surround it. Indeed, it brings attention to many of the other shots that compose the film, drawing comparisons that are infused with meaning. Earlier it was said that viewers may feel like they are

spying on the characters from an all-seeing point-of-view, and what better way to enhance this feeling than to present images through security cameras? Once again, viewers are made aware that it is not just with this particular shot, but that with all others that surround it as well that they are in a privileged position as all-seeing.

The inclusion of the viewer into the narrative can also be seen in the scene where the father and the uncle converse in the front seat of a car. The viewer would usually most likely witness such a scene from the front of the car, looking at the characters' faces. But this is not the case in *Yi yi*. Instead, the camera is positioned in the back of the car, looking at the back of the characters' heads, as viewers would if they were a third passenger. The perspective that would usually be presented is a non-human one, in that it would be impossible for a human being to occupy a position where they could witness the characters' conversation from the front of the car while it is in motion. By finding themselves in the backseat, viewers are both in the scene and outside of it, eavesdropping on the conversation as if they were in the car, but standing out of the characters' field of vision. They are invisible passengers.

Yang's greatest skill in *Yi yi*, however, is in establishing visual connections between the personal and the social. One of the most effective ways he achieves this is by filming through windows, so that viewers always see more than the bare necessities required by the story, for they do not only see *through* the windows but also *in* them. The city outside, with its cars constantly passing by, becomes a never-ending series of reflections while the people inside live their private dramas. By seeing both inside and outside simultaneously, viewers get the feeling that they are observing a single cell within

a larger organism. Though characters may feel isolated, they remain visually connected to the whole of society.

Near the end of the film, there is a scene that takes this motif even further. The viewer gets to observe a domestic scene through a bedroom window, but this time there is also a window at the back of the room, so that the viewer can actually see through the room. The city gets reflected in the front window as the other side of it is visible through the back window, the couple inside the room appearing as if on an island in a vast urban sea. This image reiterates the idea of a single cell delimited by architecture within a larger organism, the city.

An even more unusual choice is Yang's juxtaposition of an entire scene's worth of dialogue between the father and his former girlfriend with a single shot of railroad tracks. The scene works best on a cognitive level, the viewer left to wonder about this odd juxtaposition. The train tracks appear as lines that converge and extend beyond the frame, like life paths. People meet for a conversation, travel side by side for a moment, and eventually go in different directions, to wander alone for a while or move towards a new encounter. In this respect, the train tracks foreshadow what will happen with the father and his first love. More importantly, they bind the personal (a private conversation) with the social (public transport).

With *Yi yi*, Yang's ambitious endeavour is to give viewers back that which they need to watch films in the first place: the gift of sight. He does not want viewers to hear; he wants them to listen. He does not want them to look; he wants them to see. And for this they need to be aware of the act of looking. Seeing may be nothing more than this awareness. One of the ways to achieve this is, in the most literal sense, by taking a new

point of view on the world. To use an example from *Yi yi*, one thinks of the scene where Yang Yang runs into an auditorium to hide from his teacher. Inside there is the screening of a documentary about the beginning of life on earth. In the dark room, Yang Yang sits on the floor right by the door. From this unusual perspective, he is able to see the underwear of a little girl walking into the room. This is not only an awakening in a sexual sense; it is a spiritual awakening for a character whose main concern throughout the film is to see more, to know more, to experience more. He would not have caught a glimpse of the girl's underwear had he found himself in any usual position. This sighting is unintentional, the result of a series of accidental events, but it only incites viewers to strive for a different perspective on the world in order to find themselves truly seeing again.

As I have just touched upon, the act of seeing is crucial because it leads to a greater knowledge and experience of the world. Virginia Woolf realized early on that, during a film, “As we gaze we seem to be removed from the pettiness of actual existence” (592). In *Yi yi*, Yang demonstrates that this is the case even when pettiness is exactly that which is shown. One thinks of the scene where the mother is in tears, saddened by the realization that her life is monotonous after speaking to her unconscious mother every day. “I tell her the same things every day,” she says. “I can’t bear it. I have so little. How can it be so little? I live a blank! Every day... Every day... I’m like a fool. What am I doing every day?” And while she is living this moment of despair, the viewer experiences something other than she is, something on the other end of the spectrum entirely: beauty. The struggle for meaning that the mother is going through is one that can easily be identified with and, when she vocalizes it, viewers come to share part of their

burden with her and consequently find themselves uplifted. As such, they see more not only in a visual sense, but also in a spiritual sense.

Everyday Adventures

By making private events public, Yang creates a world where everyday wanderings become an adventure. This adventure is in turn infused with the everyday in that it answers to idyllic notions of life as cyclical. Though it may at first appear odd to refer to a film as slow and quiet as *Yi yi* as an adventure, one must think of adventure in the sense of a journey where, as Bakhtin points out, one of the prerequisites is for the protagonist to undergo a metamorphosis (111). Of course, there is not a single protagonist in *Yi yi*, but a family of protagonists. Thinking of these characters within an adventure context only helps one realize the similarity of their journey throughout the film. Each of them goes through a crisis that is not dissociated from his or her everyday life, but that is intrinsically part of it. The plot “is in no sense an extratemporal hiatus between two adjacent moments of real-life sequence. On the contrary, it is precisely the course of the hero’s [...] life in its critical moments that makes up the plot” (Bakhtin 111). The father is tempted to leave his family for his first love; the mother is struggling with the monotony of her life; the daughter is falling for her friend’s ex-boyfriend; the son, though the youngest character, is struggling with the most complex problem, that is the limited nature of individual human experience and therefore of knowledge; and all of them are dealing with mortality through the grandmother’s coma and ultimate death.

One of the most telling ways that *Yi yi* is an adventure is that the situation of the characters does not change between the beginning and the end of the story. In narratives

where the adventure can be found in everyday life, one cannot speak of the characters' journey as an "evolution in the strict sense of the word; what we get, rather, is crisis and rebirth" (Bakhtin 115). In other words, the characters go through a journey that leads to a perceptual metamorphosis. It is not their life that changes, but their perception of it. This is nowhere more explicitly stated than with the parents. After being tempted to leave his family by and for his first love, the father decides against running off with her and goes back to his wife. He later relates his experience to the latter in these words: "While you were away, I had the chance to relive my youth. I thought I could change things, but they turned out the same. I realized that even if I had a second chance, I wouldn't need it. I really wouldn't." The words he chooses to articulate his epiphany clearly demonstrate that there has been no real change in his life. He realizes that change is not necessary or even desired, that there is a reason why events unfolded the way they did in the first place. If a change does occur, it is rather in the perception of his own life, and that is how he finds himself reborn, once again able to fully appreciate that which was already his.

In the same conversation, the mother also puts into words her moment of rebirth. The mother's despair dissolves when she finds herself in a similar situation to the grandmother's and discovers the gentle continuum of life across generations: "I was like mother and they [the children] were like me... Things aren't so complicated. Why did they ever seem so?" Again, there has been no real change in the mother's life; it has not become any less monotonous. However, becoming the audience for her children's everyday experiences — like the viewer is — allows her to discover meaning that she was previously unable to find in the seemingly mundane everyday. This mere change in perception allows her to experience a rebirth. In *Yi yi*, no dramatic changes are necessary

to bring balance and happiness to the characters' lives. Rather, the “solution to flaws and opportunities of human existence is simple acceptance” (Yeh & Davis 127). Fredric Jameson had already recognized in Yang's earlier film *Terrorizer* (*Kong bu fen zi*, 1986) that the “unification of the multiple destinies and strands [has] the effect of reassuring its subjects of the ultimate unity of the social totality, and of God’s design” (115). The same applies to *Yi yi*, where the mother's rebirth is triggered by the sudden awareness of this unification through multigenerational mirroring. Cyclical order is privileged over chaos, a characteristic that *Yi yi* shares with the idyllic chronotope. It should be noted that Li also recognizes that the parents' rebirth is engendered by their metaphorical wanderings, claiming that “Having wandered lonely as a cloud in the lonely crowd, husband and wife have literally landed on their bed, an image of re-embedding after their disembedding ventures into the exhilarating unknown” (203). The use of the word “re-embedding” reiterates that the situation of the parents has not changed between the beginning and the end of the film.

Even that which could be perceived as the ultimate crisis, death (in this case that of the grandmother), is transformed into rebirth by Yang Yang. After being in a long coma, the grandmother experiences a more literal rebirth when she miraculously regains consciousness for a brief moment before finally dying. Then, at her funeral, Yang Yang calmly walks up to her casket and reads a letter he has written for her, which becomes the closing monologue of the film. From one sentence to the next, Yang Yang seamlessly segues from death to life, merging the two as if they flowed into each other: “Grandma, I miss you. Especially when I see my newborn cousin who still doesn’t have a name.” First, the sting of death; then, the breath of the newborn, so close to birth that he is still

without a name. Again, here one can no longer speak of a linear progression from birth to death since death only appears as a moment of crisis followed by a new birth. Life is presented as an endless cycle where crisis is inevitably followed by rebirth.

Even though *Yi yi* is primarily concerned with the everyday, another indication that it can still be considered an adventure is that it deals with “the *exceptional*, utterly *unusual* moments of a man’s life, moments that are very short compared to the whole of human life” (Bakhtin 116): a meeting with a former lover, a double murder, another death (though this one of natural causes)... Yet even some of these moments get assimilated into the everyday. For example, the most violent event, the double murder, does not actually occur onscreen; instead, the viewer only learns about it after the fact through a televised newscast. The television, perfectly immersed in the home, might very well be the most domestic of all media. As Ben Highmore points out, “TV perhaps more than any other medium brings the world into the domestic sphere as everyday culture (the *daily* bombings, the *daily* suffering, the *daily* conquests and so on)” (101). So by hearing of the murder through the television, (as one usually does) rather than witnessing it, even this traumatic event becomes subdued, assimilated back into the everyday.

On the other hand, the tamest of these unusual events, the meeting with the former lover, is the most removed from its subject's everyday life. This is because the event is both spatially and temporally removed or displaced from the father’s usual life; the meeting occurs in a different country, Japan, which is also in a different time zone, something the characters point out. As such, these moments are extratemporal to the father’s everyday life, yet as with the hero of the adventure novel of everyday life, they still “*shape the definitive image of the man, his essence, as well as the nature of his entire*

subsequent life” (Bakhtin 116). That is to say that, in these exceptional moments, the true character of the father shines through as he decides not to cheat on his wife and he regains an appreciation for his everyday life, something that was already evident before this bracket of adventure time. In other words, he is the same man during this adventure as he is in his everyday life, and the adventure only serves to test and ultimately prove his true nature, to offer him a moment of crisis out of which he will not come out changed, but reborn.

All the protagonists in *Yi yi* are so inscribed with everyday life that they can never fully participate in the adventure life presented to them. They may dip their toes in it and treat it as an alien force, but for the most part they can only observe it. Like the father agreeing to meet his first love — but in another time and place — they occasionally wear an adventure mask, but they never fully engage in this life (the father decides not to rekindle the old romance) specifically because they are determined by their everyday life. The protagonists, by their very nature, cannot be part of adventure life; they pass through such a life as would a man from another world. In everyday life lies their true nature. The adventure life only serves the purpose of a foil event to demonstrate the steadfastness of the protagonists’ character and of human life in general.

In *Yi yi*, everyday life is the place where the sun shines, the starry firmament, whereas the adventure is a threat to the simple beauty of everyday life. It is the test that attempts to sway the characters away from the everyday, but luckily they can only inevitably return to it. This is why such an optimistic feeling emanates from *Yi yi*; the adventure cannot be sustained indefinitely. The crisis that is part of it can only be of a minimal duration since in essence it cannot be a permanent state of being. It must

inevitably be resolved one way or another, leaving the everyday to seep back in and take over, bringing the characters back into its light. This realization is at the source of happiness for the characters (such as the father) who cherish the everyday. When the uncle tells him, “You know, NJ, I’m never happy,” the father replies, “When you don’t love what you do, how could you be?” As this conversation reveals, the father believes that happiness is intimately connected to the appreciation one has for the things that are unavoidable, those that populate everyday life, like what one does for a living. Since the everyday must be defined in oppositional terms, it necessarily cannot encompass all life experiences; however all things must inevitably return to it. As Guy Debord states in “Perspectives for Conscious Alterations in Everyday Life”,

Everyday life is not everything — although its osmosis with specialized activities is such that in a sense we are never outside of everyday life. But to use a facile spatial image, we still have to place everyday life at the center of everything. Every project begins from it and every realization returns to it to acquire its real significance. Everyday life is the measure of all things: of the fulfillment or rather the nonfulfillment of human relations; of the use of lived time; of artistic experimentation; of revolutionary politics. (239)

The father in *Yi yi* is conscious that the everyday is inescapable and that therefore the only way to experience happiness is by surrendering to it and appreciating it.

However, just because the father views everyday life as inescapable does not mean that, like his wife, he finds it monotonous. On the contrary, the father has, as Louis Aragon might say, a “sense of the marvellous suffusing everyday existence” (24). Early on in the film, he asks “Why are we afraid of the first time? Every day in life is a first time. Every morning is new. We never live the same day twice.” With these words, he transforms the everyday into a series of adventures that cannot be replicated. His view is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's concept of love at last sight, which is anchored in the

urban experience. Benjamin argues that “The delight of the city-dweller is not so much love at first sight as love at last sight. The *never* marks the high point of the encounter, when the poet’s passion seems to be frustrated but in reality bursts out of him like a flame” (45). If, as the father in *Yi yi* claims, every day is a first time, it necessarily means that every day is also the last of its kind. Since one never lives the same day twice, every day is marked as a *never again*. This outlook is what allows the father to instill the everyday with the spirit of adventure. He must fully appreciate the present moment because he is conscious that it is ephemeral, perpetually hanging on the verge of its own death. Every sight is a last sight.

This is presented as being the case even for death. At a funeral, Yang Yang reads a letter to his dead grandmother in which, from one sentence to the next, he moves from the topic of death to that of birth. Death is presented as just another last sight, the ultimate *never again* that just like all others gives value to the present moment. Death, like everything else, is ephemeral because life keeps moving through it, despite it. People are born as others die. Death is always the end of a life, but never the end of life.

There is yet another way in which the threshold between everyday life and adventure life is crossed, this time from the perspective of the viewer. Yang Yang articulates it in the simplest terms when he points out to his father, “I can’t see what you see and you can’t see what I see.” The insinuation is that everyday life is in essence private. However, if one were to temporarily see what others see — something that film and the arts in general approximate — everyday life would cease to be private and would transform into adventure life. (This is at the core of voyeurism; the mundane becomes exciting, even titillating.) In other words, one person's everyday (in this case that of the

characters) is another person's adventure (the viewer's). This explains why the daughter's boyfriend claims that "we live three times as long since man invented movies." He then reiterates that "movies give us twice what we get from daily life." As Li points out, the "reflective search for knowledge is also couched in the film as a cinematic dialectic of vision" (201). In other words, to see more is to know more, and in turn to know more is to see more. For Yang, watching movies is not a distraction from everyday life; it is a way to get actively involved with it. It is no surprise that Yang says that the first thing he tells his students is "to know life, that nothing can replace this direct experience" (qtd. in *Ciment 576*, my own translation).

To access this knowledge, one must have a heightened awareness of everyday life, of that which most would overlook. Many of the characters in *Yi yi* are divided between those who have this awareness and the foil characters who do not. For example, when the father takes out a playing card from a shuffled deck and replaces it in a random spot in the deck, his business partner Ota is able to figure out which card the father had picked. When the father asks him what the trick is, Ota replies "This is not a trick. I know where the card is because I teach myself to know where every card is at all times." He has memorized the position of over fifty randomly sequenced cards. This is a sign of his heightened awareness and, like the father, he is one of the happiest characters in the film. One could say that it is Ota who opens the father's eyes to the wonders of everyday life. In fact, Yang describes Ota as the father's muse or even angel (Rayns). Both of these characters stand against the idea that ignorance is bliss. On the contrary, for them as – one can imagine – for Yang, awareness is bliss. The scene ends when a waiter comes over and asks, "You're not gambling, are you? Who won?" With only two lines, this

character is established as a foil. His wrong assessment of the situation reveals his lack of observation and awareness.

The Idyllic City

Even though the action of *Yi yi* takes place in the city, it is still presented as an idyll. Yang clearly establishes that, even when living in the city, human beings remain part of nature and therefore in synch with the rhythms of life. After all, the film does move from marriage and birth to death. Also, by focusing on the members of a single family, Yang ensures that his story is centred on the home. For all these reasons, I argue that Yang is moving towards an idyllic chronotope of the city.

In the chronotope of the idyll, there is an intimate relationship with a familiar place, most especially the home (Bakhtin 225). This is the first characteristic that *Yi yi* shares with this chronotope. In *Yi yi*, the home is represented by the family of protagonists, three generations who all live under the same roof. As Bakhtin explains, “The unity of the life of generations [...] in an idyll is in most instances primarily defined by the *unity of place*, by the age-old rooting of the life of generations to a single place, from which this life, in all its events, is inseparable” (225). Even when the characters wander outside of their apartment building, there is never the sense that they are in an unfamiliar territory. The city might be much larger than any country town, but human habits being what they are, even the biggest city becomes reduced to familiar pathways, to a humanly manageable size. The possibilities the city offers might appear limitless, but the everyday is so deeply ingrained in human beings that they inevitably end up walking the same streets, delimiting a neighbourhood with their every step. The characters in *Yi yi*

look at home in every shot, feeling just as comfortable having an intimate conversation on the street or in a café as when they are between the four walls that constitute their house.

The father is the only one who goes into an unfamiliar territory when he goes to Japan, but even this ends up being recuperated in two ways. First, the mobility afforded by modernity has shrunk the world. When he first meets his former lover, who just flew from Chicago to Tokyo, the father exclaims, “You got here so quickly.” She replies that there are many flights that go from Chicago to Tokyo every day. Later, she also mentions that she married a Chinese-American in Seattle. This further highlights the character’s mobility: born and raised in Taipei, married in Seattle to another Chinese person, now living in Chicago. In the same conversation, international calls, which make different time zones and places collapse into a single time and space, also get mentioned. Later, the woman points out “It’s almost 10... that’s 8 am in Chicago.” The father adds, “9pm in Taipei.” Again, different time zones are made to collapse together.

Second, he is meeting with his former lover, a situation that is rooted in familiarity. As is so often the case in *Yi yi*, this idea also shows up in the dialogue when the father states, “Now I’m holding your hand again. Only it’s a different place... A different time... A different age...” His former lover adds, “But the same sweaty palm.” This sameness puts the characters back into a familiar situation. Still, the father, deeply rooted in the everyday, feels that he cannot live indefinitely in this different space and time; he ultimately decides to go back home to his family because, there, his everyday life, that guiding light, awaits him.

The idyllic chronotope also explains the key final scene where Yang Yang seamlessly moves from death to birth from one sentence to the next at his grandmother's funeral. Bakhtin explains that "The unity of place brings together and even fuses the cradle and the grave [...], and brings together as well childhood and old age" (225). All of these elements are tied together in this scene.

Bakhtin adds that "This blurring of all the temporal boundaries made possible by a unity of place also contributes in an essential way to the creations of the cyclic rhythmicalness of time so characteristic of the idyll" (225). The numerous parallels established between different characters in *Yi yi* are thereby explained. These parallels are nowhere more visible than with the father and his daughter. In fact, Yang readily admits that he could have tackled the same themes and questions by following a single character from birth to death, but that he thought it would be more effective if he used a single family where all stages of life could be represented by a different family member (Rayns). A clear example is when the daughter's boyfriend runs away from the hotel room they have rented just as her father admits (in voice-over) that he has done the same thing in his youth. This juxtaposition emphasizes the cyclical nature of time. The father seems to believe that such a cyclical time does not exist when he claims that "To sleep with someone means nothing now." Little does he know that his daughter's boyfriend ran out of the hotel room that they had just rented because having sex with her did not feel right. This scene demonstrates that time indeed retains a cyclical nature despite what older generations might think. They simply believe things have changed because they are no longer intimately familiar with the lives that young people lead. The father is closer to the truth when he says, "Young people always find their own way. That's the best way."

Just as in the idyll, even though *Yi yi* is focused on the everyday, the film is still limited to a few basic realities of life, such as love, birth, death, and marriage. It is not concerned with the trivialities of everyday life such as chores or errands. Rather, characters connect with one another, have casual but philosophical conversations, experience private dramas and personal crises. As Bakhtin points out, “Anything that has the appearance of common everyday life, when compared with the central unrepeatable events of biography and history, here begins to look precisely like the most important things in life” (226). This is the realization that sends the father back to his family.

Finally, *Yi yi* also fulfils the third feature of the idyll, which is the “conjoining of human life with the life of nature, the unity of their rhythm, the common language used to describe phenomena of nature and the events of human life” (226). This link is explicitly made in a conversation between the daughter and her romantic interest. In the scene in question, the boy says that “There’s no cloud, no tree that isn’t beautiful. So we should be too.” The implication is that human beings do not stand outside of nature, but are part of it. Therefore, observing a human being is an activity that is on par with revelling in the beauty of any other natural entity, such as a cloud or a tree. This is the activity that the viewer is involved in when watching *Yi yi*. To drive the point home, this dialogue overlaps the beginning of the following scene, which consists of the father and his former lover walking among trees. Just as human beings are compared with trees in the previous scene, they now find themselves side by side to visually exemplify Yang’s idyllic view of the world. The point is clear: even city people cannot escape the cyclical nature of life. It is no longer only in the provincial novel that “the events of everyday life take on an importance and acquire thematic significance” (229). There is also meaning to be found

in the minutia of everyday life in the city. No matter where they live, human beings remain part of nature and, as such, their beauty is undeniable.

Since *Yi yi* is composed of so many long shots, the characters often only occupy a small portion of the frame, the rest being overtaken by other visual elements: the cars passing by in the city outside, the lights of the buildings, the trees swaying in the wind... The previously mentioned scene from *Yi yi* in which the dialogue is heard over the train tracks takes this even further and completely empties the shot of the visual presence of the characters and only offers them up as disembodied voices. By visually presenting much more than the bare necessities required by the story, Yang gives the viewer a space large enough that the eye can wander. The dialogue spoken by the actors often encourages the viewer to participate in this activity. For example, when Yang Yang enters an auditorium where there is a movie screening about the beginning of the world, the voice-over narrator in the film within the film speaks of clouds, saying, "Often we overlook their beauty." This seed has now been planted in the viewers' minds and from then on they are compelled to revel in the beauty of clouds in the subsequent shots in which they appear. All of *Yi yi* is infused with such eye-opening dialogue. Again, Yang does not want viewers to look (for they would be likely to *overlook*), but to truly see, for such is the way to gain access to beauty. The wandering eye is a seeing eye just as the wandering body is a living body.

Though Edward Yang uses many of the same filming techniques as Hou and Tsai (long shots and takes), the effect is undeniably different. There is no doubt that *Yi yi* is a more optimistic film than any by the other two directors. Yang shows that human beings

remain part of nature even in an urban setting and that there is still beauty to be found if one is to wander and pay attention to the world around them. With Yang, the everyday is not a hellish limbo, or a moment lacking causality or consequence that can therefore be interchanged with any other; it is bursting with meaning, holding every aspect of human life together. It is the only key to redemption.

Chapter 2

Tsai Ming-liang: Wandering through Dystopia

What to do when one lives in a world in which one is unable to fulfil one's emotional needs? This is one of the recurring themes throughout Tsai Ming-liang's oeuvre. He has managed to tackle this issue over and over again by creating a world that is sustained from film to film, mainly by locating the action in contemporary Taipei and by using the same characters (and actors who portray them). Nowhere is this more evident than with the character of Hsiao-kang (Lee Kang-sheng), who appears in all of Tsai's feature-length films since 1992, almost always as the protagonist.

I will give a brief synopsis of these films by focusing on Hsiao-kang's ambiguous sexuality and change of profession from film to film in a manner as to pre-emptively highlight the theme of wandering. In *Rebels of the Neon God* (*Qing shao nian nuo zha*, 1992), Hsiao-kang has dropped out of school. He then goes on to develop an obsession with a budding heterosexual couple, though it is unclear if the object of his affection is the man or the woman, or if he is simply jealous of their relationship in itself. In *Vive l'amour* (*Ai qing wan sui*, 1994), he is a cremation container salesman who develops a crush on a heterosexual man, Ah Jung (Chen Chao-jung). In *The River* (*He liu*, 1997), Hsiao-kang is hired as an actor to play the role of a dead body floating down a polluted river in a film, after which he develops an intense pain in his neck. His father attempts to find a cure for his son's ailment, bringing them both to another city where they inadvertently end up having sex in a dark bathhouse room. *The Hole* (*Dong*, 1998) takes place a week before the beginning of the year 2000, at which point Taipei is overrun by a

strange epidemic. While inhabitants are asked to evacuate, Hsiao-kang does not do so and neither does the woman who occupies the apartment below his. When a hole appears between the two apartments, their occupants are forced to communicate. When the woman falls victim to the epidemic, Hsiao-kang provides her with a life-giving glass of water before lifting her up to his apartment through the hole, where they dance cheek to cheek. In *What Time Is It There?* (*Ni na bian ji dian*, 2001), Hsiao-kang is a watch salesman. When a woman asks him for his own dual-time-zone watch because she is going to Paris, Hsiao-kang begins to switch every clock he finds to Paris time, as if he had developed romantic feelings for the woman. In *The Skywalk Is Gone* (*Tian qiao bu jian le*, 2002), Hsiao-kang is looking for work and ends up auditioning to be a porn actor. In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (*Bu san*, 2003), Hsiao-kang is a film projectionist in a movie theatre where gay men cruise for sex. In *The Wayward Cloud* (*Tian bian yi duo yun*, 2005), he is a straight porn actor who is seemingly still romantically infatuated with the same woman he was in *What Time Is It There?* Finally, in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (*Hei yan quan*, 2006), Hsiao-kang is in Malaysia where he ends up taking care of a man who is hurt. In the final shot of the film, the two of them and a woman are all lying down on the same mattress.

Though Tsai is fast eclipsing Hou Hsiao-hsien as the most written about Taiwanese director, few academic essays have been devoted to dealing with his films as an oeuvre. In “Postsadness Taiwan New Cinema: Eat, Drink, Man, Woman”, Wu Meiling uses four of Tsai’s films (from *Vive l’amour* to *What Time Is It There?*) to argue that the director moves beyond the ethos of sadness cultivated by filmmakers of the earlier wave and focuses instead on desire displacement. Since the authors of *Taiwan Film Directors:*

A Treasure Island use an auteurist approach, Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh does look at Tsai's oeuvre up to the point the book was published (in 2005, so that she tackles Tsai's films up to and including *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*). Unlike many who discuss Tsai's films in terms of alienation and loneliness in the modern city of Taipei, she decides to take a different route and look at the use of camp in his oeuvre. In "Camping Out with Tsai Ming-liang", she argues that though the director's film are deadpan, they are camp in that Tsai uses black humour in his queering of urban life in Taiwan.

Though in Tsai's films the theme of wandering might be most obvious in the episodic structure of the narrative, I am more interested in how the characters' own wanderings become a way of coping with their dystopian environment. Using Michel de Certeau's "pedestrian speech act" as a model, I argue that, by wandering, Tsai's characters (most specifically Hsiao-kang) create new possibilities that preserve their romantic longings in the pornographic city. The characters make do in a way that also links back to de Certeau's concept of tactics. As such, wandering is not limited to the act of walking; it is a philosophical approach, a way of resisting linearity and subverting what is deemed the proper use of bodies, spaces, and objects. More specifically, I observe how Hsiao-kang's queer sexuality allows him to resist both heterosexual and homosexual linearity; in turn, how queer subjects use spaces in ways they are not intended to be used in order to create an alternative space for themselves; finally, how characters find alternative uses for everyday objects in order to sustain their romantic nature in a pornographic world.

Bodies

The first time I watched *Rebels of the Neon God*, the first Tsai film I happened to see, my own heterosexist assumptions led me to believe that the character of Hsiao-kang was heterosexual and pining for the female lead character. It is only after then seeing *Vive l'amour*, where he is more clearly interested in the male lead, Ah Jung, that I retroactively questioned my assumptions. Not that I now believe that in *Rebels of the Neon God* Hsiao-kang is gay. His sexuality is too complex and fluid to be reduced to the outer point of a binary. It is for this reason that I choose to use the umbrella term “queer” to refer to Hsiao-kang’s sexuality, in an attempt to avoid oversimplification.

Hsiao-kang’s fluid sexuality can be read as a wandering sexuality, in that it does not have a predetermined destination even when it comes to gender. As such, Hsiao-kang’s sexuality allows him to resist both heterosexual and homosexual linearity. It is this wandering sexuality that allows him to use his body in unconventional ways that enable him to navigate and even subvert the dystopian order.

In *Vive l'amour*, Hsiao-kang’s wandering nature is not only established through his sexuality. It can also be observed in the scene where he cannot sleep and so wanders outside. Insomnia can then be seen as another cause for wandering. Night is *the end* of the day, the time when most temporarily call it quits and finally go to bed, tired or even *exhausted*. In other words, it is a daily time-destination, one that obviously also has a space-destination, usually the bed at home. However, not only is there no home for Hsiao-kang in *Vive l'amour* – he is squatting in an apartment to which he stole the keys – while night is still present, sleep is not. Insomnia removes even this temporary time-

destination, leaving its sufferer with no end in sight, in a constant state of displacement and therefore wandering.

So it is no coincidence that one of the moments when Hsiao-kang is able to make subversive use of bodies to realize his seemingly unachievable romantic ambitions is when the heterosexual object of his affection, Ah Jung, is asleep. Ah Jung finds himself at the apartment Hsiao-kang is squatting because he has been brought there by Meimei, the woman in charge of selling the place, so that they can have sex. When they arrive at the apartment, Hsiao-kang is already there, masturbating on the bed. Of course, he puts an end to his masturbation as soon as he hears people coming into the apartment and quickly hides under the bed. Unaware of Hsiao-kang's presence, Meimei and Ah Jung have sex on the bed under which Hsiao-kang is while he continues to masturbate. After their sexual encounter, Ah Jung falls asleep and Meimei leaves the apartment. Hsiao-kang takes this opportunity to quietly walk out of the room, but at the last second changes his mind. Instead, he walks back towards the bed and lies down next to Ah Jung. It is then that the unconscious Ah Jung puts his arm around Hsiao-kang, which the latter uses as an opportunity to steal a kiss. By resisting linearity – which would have had him walk out of the room at the first opportunity – and subverting the proper use of bodies – which would have had him not kiss Ah Jung because he is heterosexual – Hsiao-kang is able to fulfill, no matter how minimally, his desire. Wandering is the recognition of a possibility, the taking advantage of an opportunity.

While this instance in *Vive l'amour* is rather benign, the subversive use of bodies in Tsai's oeuvre however is most controversial in the end to *The River* and *The Wayward Cloud*. At the end of *The River*, Hsiao-kang and his father both end up at the same

bathroom unbeknownst to the other. Like all the other men there, Hsiao-kang is wandering through the narrow halls of the bathhouse, half-naked. He finally walks into a half-darkened room where he proceeds to perform oral sex on the man in the room. The man orgasms and then turns on the light, which allows him to see that it is his son who has just fellated him. He immediately strikes him. Though his reaction is involuntary in that it comes out of shock, the action still comes across with a large dose of irony. As Fran Martin justly notes, “The painfully ironic and unjust situation in which the father punishes the son for the same behaviour in which he himself also engages and which they have just enacted together, surely evacuates the moral authority of the father, who is now revealed as hypocritical and unjust” (175). While both father and son can be said to make a subversive use of their bodies by engaging in incest (no matter how inadvertently), for this to even occur there needs to be a previous subversive use of the body; one would not expect the biological father in a nuclear family to get involved in homosexual relations. This first subversion needs to occur in order for the subsequent one to even be possible.

It might be hard for most (especially those who have not seen the film) to grasp how the enactment of incest, a most taboo subject, could have a positive outcome for the characters involved in it. However, in this particular case, the incest should be judged by the harm it has done, and it has done none. On the contrary, the ending of the film suggests that it has done more good than harm. Rey Chow perceives the ending as being “*un-traumatic*” (138). Fran Martin is even bolder in claiming that “Xiao Kang’s discovery of the dawn balcony and his momentary absence from both the door’s and the film’s frame appear to bespeak not a catastrophic collapse of all systems, but a sense of optimism arising from the implied possibility of escape from oppressive constraints, and

the intimation of a newly discovered position that might now be occupied” (176). Tsai himself admits that “after [father and son have sex], it doesn’t seem so bad after all. When you see father and son embracing, you get the feeling that they have somehow found salvation, because they have probably never in their lives had the chance to embrace one another, nor even to hold hands nor touch one another momentarily” (qtd. in Martin 178). Without disagreeing with Martin or Tsai, I would personally argue that the subversive use of bodies through the accidental incestuous act is positive because it reveals both men for whom they truly are. As such, parallels can be drawn with Edward Yang’s *Yi yi* in which to know more leads to a greater appreciation of life. In fact, the last shot of *The River* ties in with *Yi yi*’s representation of the search for knowledge as intimately linked to a dialectic of vision. Martin points out that “Whereas throughout *The River* the characters have been held up and made the objects of our gaze inside their architectural and cinematic frames, in the final shot Xiao Kang becomes the subject of the look, breaking the frame by actively looking up at an offscreen space invisible to the viewer” (179). Hsiao-kang is now able to see more because he knows more. As such, it is no longer difficult to perceive the incestuous act in *The River* as having a positive outcome.

While even the most conservative could admit that the incestuous act in *The River* has the benefit of being accidental, no such excuses can be made for the scene in *The Wayward Cloud* in which Hsiao-kang (now a porn actor) fucks his unconscious onscreen partner. Though my purpose is not to condone this act (which is nothing less than rape, but remains a fictional one), I aim to argue that even this most subversive action ultimately leads to a positive outcome within the context of the film. While up to that

point Hsiao-kang has managed to maintain his sense of romantic longing despite living in a world predominantly focused on sex, here sex has come to take over even his profession. While he still seemingly has romantic feelings for Shiang-chyi (Shiang-chyi Chen) – whom he first encountered in *What Time Is It There?* – the scene in which he fucks an unconscious porn actress reveals that he has just about lost all sense of humanity. He is now willing to treat another human being as nothing more than an object to use for sexual gratification; if not his own, then at the very least that of the porn viewer. What the viewer is witnessing is the death of Hsiao-kang's romantic self. However, the viewer is not the only one to witness this scene. Shiang-chyi is also watching from behind a decorative grid that separates the room where the porn shoot is taking place from the hallway where she stands. She becomes a stand-in for the viewer, reacting strongly to the scene. However, she does not react as one might expect. Her reaction is to begin moaning as if she were the woman being fucked, actively giving the unconscious porn actress a voice. That she is enacting the behaviour that would usually be performed by the porn actress collapses the two bodies into a single entity. As such, Shiang-chyi's moaning signifies her own pornographication – the eradication of her romantic self in favour of an exclusively sexual persona – upon the witnessing of the now purely sexual nature of the object of her affection. However, Hsiao-kang in turn reacts to Shiang-chyi's reaction, as if witnessing the death of her own romantic self shocks his back to life just as it was about to give its last breath. She becomes the mirror in which he sees himself. Unable to cope with the death of Shiang-chyi's romantic self – and by extension his own – he reacts by shoving his penis in her mouth through the grid that separates them, thereby making her pornographic moaning stop. Though the extreme

nature of the action ensures a most visceral reaction from the viewer, on a cognitive level the viewer realizes that the action has a positive outcome. By stopping her moaning, what Hsiao-kang is stopping is the death of Shiang-chyi's romantic self. His subversive use of bodies ends up saving them both. One might even speak of a resurrection given that in Tsai's following film, *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, Hsiao-kang appears to be a new man, offering the gentlest care to another man.

It should be mentioned that after Hsiao-kang shoves his penis in Shiang-chyi's mouth, a tear runs down her cheek. However, this tear should not be taken as proof that the action imposed on her has a negative outcome. On the contrary, in Tsai's films, crying is a sign that a character's romantic self is still alive and that they are not merely a pornographic body. In an interview with Shujen Wang and Chris Fujiwara, Tsai states that "crying means that you still have feelings" after claiming that "Things would always be okay after my characters finish crying" (240). Fujiwara agrees, claiming that even if you cry with Meimei at the end of *Vive l'amour*, "it shows that somebody is *still alive*" (241, my emphasis). Similarly, Shiang-chyi's tear is the proof that her emotional self is still alive. That Tsai's characters retain a deep feeling of longing in a world that otherwise appears to be empty of emotion elicits the viewer's sympathy in the face of their enduring humanity, and this even as it struggles to find a concrete outlet.

Spaces

When Hsiao-kang is first introduced to the viewer in *Rebels of the Neon God*, he is smashing his hand through a window in an attempt to kill a bug. This image is revealed to be an appropriate introduction to a character who constantly defies the

compartmentalization of space, which is presumptive and which creates an impending crisis. It is as if Hsiao-kang, able to see through the glass, comes to question this porous barrier, realizing that each division of space in the city is arbitrary. There is a movement that could go through the window were it not there. This rejection of barriers is nowhere more apparent than with his sexual identity, which resists any simplistic categorization between straight and gay. Rather, his sexuality is complex and fluid. One could even say that it is a wandering sexuality. Wandering is especially important because it defies the compartmentalization of space. Throughout Tsai's oeuvre, characters subvert what is deemed the proper use of space in order to reassert their agency as human beings.

Of course it is only normal for human beings to feel alienated not just in but also by the city, where they are an afterthought to automobiles. In *Vive l'amour*, Meimei crosses in the middle of the street more than once even though a huge sign in this exact spot clearly states that there is a 360-dollar fine for jaywalking. Does she simply not see the sign? Given its prominence and the repetition of the action, it seems unlikely. It is more believable that she is actually choosing to ignore it, even if possibly only out of apathy and self-interest. It is hard to blame her when, as William H. Whyte states in his book *City: Rediscovering the Center*, jaywalking is a way for pedestrians to reclaim the urban space, which prioritizes cars over pedestrians (61). If anything, the sign in the middle of the road forbidding jaywalking only highlights the possibility of doing so. Performed consciously or not, the act demonstrates that there is a conflict between Meimei and the city, and through her actions Meimei reclaims her power. As such, Meimei is demonstrating the same spirit that Hsiao-kang is when he smashes his hand

through the window. She is resisting a direction that the city is imposing on her body with her own movement.

A similar event unfolds in Tsai's short film *The Skywalk Is Gone*. The film takes its title from the fact that the skywalk where Hsiao-kang sold watches in *What Time Is It There?* has been demolished. After her trip to France, Shiang-chyi is back in Taiwan and goes back to where the skywalk once was, probably out of a desire to see Hsiao-kang again since he had given her his own dual-time-zone watch for her trip. But the skywalk is gone. So Shiang-chyi, as though compelled by mysterious forces to do so, follows a woman who crosses the busy road at street-level where the skywalk used to be. Both women are thereby reclaiming the urban space, which in this instance is a space of nostalgia and therefore a romantic – or at the very least romanticized – space.

To get back to *Vive l'amour* however, the entire film is based on the notion of space. Hsiao-kang and Ah Jung both come to squat in an empty apartment that Meimei is trying to sell after they each individually steal the keys to it. While this space might necessarily appear cold and impersonal, to assume that this means that *Vive l'amour* is ultimately about alienation and loneliness in the city is to miss the mark. My multiple returns to the film have brought me to strip away its cold exterior to find what might even be called a queer romantic fantasy quietly lying underneath. There is no doubt that pessimistic readings of the film are encouraged by the last scene in which Meimei sits alone on a bench in a depilated park and cries for minutes on end (though as I have argued earlier I am inclined to agree with Tsai and Fujiwara that crying in Tsai's films should be viewed in a positive light). However, though it rarely gets mentioned, the last scene involving Hsiao-kang and Ah Jung is equally important. In their last scene, they are

cooking and eating a feast in the luxurious apartment. They have taken an empty space, a blank canvas, and with their resourcefulness turned it into a home for an unlikely couple composed of a queer man and a heterosexual one. The previous scene offers a great contrast with this one as the viewer witnesses Meimei, alone at her actual house, pathetically eating a piece of cake right out of the fridge, standing in its harsh lighting and cold air.

Indeed, maybe *Vive l'amour* is a queer romance after all. It might help to visualize this by telling the story by focusing on Hsiao-kang, who is after all the first character the viewer is introduced to and the one who sets the story in motion by stealing the key to the apartment. He plans to use the apartment to commit suicide in, but at the very moment when he slashes his wrist, Ah Jung walks in with Meimei, saving his life. Ah Jung becomes the hero and Hsiao-kang, the rescued princess, yearning for love. While Ah Jung's romantic efforts with Meimei are frustrated, he does spend time with Hsiao-kang and develops a relationship with him. As they spend time together, Hsiao-kang's desire for Ah Jung deepens as he hears him masturbating in the next room. The resourceful Hsiao-kang develops a humble domestic life with Ah Jung, washing clothes in the bathtub and hanging them to dry on the balcony. Hsiao-kang puts on women's clothes while he hangs out in the apartment, as if he were a housewife. Ah Jung comes to trust him and even leaves him to watch the clothes he is selling on the street. While Ah Jung has sex with Meimei, Hsiao-kang lies under the bed masturbating, closer than ever to the object of his affection. When she leaves, Hsiao-kang takes her place in bed. Ah Jung puts his arm around him and Hsiao-kang kisses him. They then have a feast as a celebration of their relationship in the luxurious apartment they have turned into a home, their home.

During this time, Meimei, who is still completely clueless as to Hsiao-kang's existence, finds her efforts frustrated at every turn: she cannot sell a single property, her car refuses to start, she is without love and doomed to eat alone in her crummy apartment. Hsiao-kang's rival finally capitulates in a park where she cries on a bench, defeated and alone. So by the end of the film, a couple – no matter how unusual – has indeed formed; it is simply not the couple one might have expected. It is a queer couple formed by a heterosexual man and a man with an ambiguous sexuality. In subverting the use of space by squatting in a luxurious apartment, Hsiao-kang has managed to turn his romantic fantasy into a reality.

In *What Time Is It There?*, Hsiao-kang subverts the Taipei landscape by switching every clock he comes across to Paris time. He does so after his encounter with Shiang-chyi because she is now in Paris. Thereby his actions come across as deeply romantic, a desire to inhabit the same space as her even as she is halfway across the globe. At a certain moment, a curious stranger catches him changing the time of the clocks in a store. The man follows him and ends up stealing one of the clocks from Hsiao-kang and running away. Hsiao-kang runs after him, which leads him into a public bathroom. At first the man is nowhere to be seen, but then the door to a bathroom stall opens, revealing the man with his pants around his ankles, holding the clock over his penis. In effect, what the man is doing is using Hsiao-kang's romantic longing to try to lure him into a sexual encounter. However, Hsiao-kang does not have anonymous washroom sex with him. Instead, he ends up changing the time on a huge clock that overlooks the city, powerfully reasserting the force of his romantic longing.

In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, gay men have overtaken a movie theatre on its last leg and turned it into a cruising ground. What is especially significant is that the film playing at the theatre is King Hu's *Dragon Inn* (1967), a seminal work of *wuxia* (a genre that focuses on the adventures of chivalrous martial artists) that could be read as homophobic because of its negative portrayal of eunuchs (castrated men). Thereby the gay men are circumventing the intended use of the space and queering it. While it might be difficult to romanticize the actions of gay men cruising for anonymous sex, it still remains that they have created a social space where they can meet, the necessary first step if there is to be any possibility of romantic concretization.

While characters in Tsai's films are constantly making subversive use of constrictive spaces to fulfil their needs, Tsai ultimately seems to be advocating for spaces that are open and allow for the fluidity and diversity of human desires. As such, holes take on a most positive role in his films. In *The Hole*, the opening that appears between two apartments first comes across as a loss of privacy, something that needs to be fixed; the inhabitants on each side are undersocialized and do not know how to interact with other human beings, the man upstairs peeing in the hole or the woman downstairs shooting spray in his eye when she catches him spying on her through it. However, they need to move through this awkward phase and learn to deal with each other. Ultimately, it is because of the hole that Hsiao-kang sees that his downstairs neighbour is dying and that he is able to give her a life-giving glass of water, and it is through the hole that he pulls her up to his apartment where they slow dance together, reasserting the ultimately beneficial role of the hole. It allows human contact to occur.

In a similar vein, Hsiao-kang is able to shove his penis in Shiang-chyi's mouth in *The Wayward Cloud* because there are holes in the grid that would otherwise separate them. It is because of these holes, which allow a reciprocal gaze, that Hsiao-kang can witness the death of Shiang-chyi's romantic self, which shocks him back to life and enables him to save Shiang-chyi's through his extreme act.

It should be noted that the redemptive act in *The River* also occurs because of an opening. At the bathhouse, every door that Hsiao-kang attempts to go through is closed. The only one that is open is the one that leads him into his father's room, where the two men finally come face to face with their true nature.

Ultimately, what Tsai is arguing for are spaces that allow for the fluidity of human desires, sexual and otherwise. So it is only fitting that the final image in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* should be of two men and a woman peacefully resting together on a mattress that is floating on water, left to wander. The fluidity of the water reflects the mutability of sexual identities that allow the three of them to come together and find solace in each other's arms, human contact and interaction satisfyingly finding its full reward.

Objects

In the last section to this chapter, I will look at wandering from a different perspective, not as a way to change the space, but of changing the use of objects within that space. In this sense, wandering goes beyond being only a way of moving in space and becomes a way of thinking; it is the recognition of a polyvalence that also becomes a way of doing in space. This attitude allows wanderers to change the use of the everyday

object to fit their needs and desires. In “Walking in the City”, de Certeau recognizes this link between walking and the use of the everyday object when he states that

[the walker] also moves [possibilities] about and invents others, since the crossing, drifting away or improvisation of walking privilege, transform or abandon spatial elements. Thus Charlie Chaplin multiplies the possibilities of his cane: he does other things with the same thing and he goes beyond the limits that the determinants of the object set on its utilization. In the same way, the walker transforms each spatial signifier into something else. (98)

In his essay on *The Wayward Cloud*, Neri explores in depth the use that the characters make of watermelons. Within the context of that film, they are a symbol used to such an extent that they even come to create an allegory. Though the watermelon in the one scene where it is present in *Vive l'amour* is used in similar ways, there are also distinctions to be drawn and specificities to be added. Since this film is not the focus of Neri's essay and the use of the watermelon is only superficially dealt with once, a closer look is warranted.

In *Vive l'amour*, it is Hsiao-kang who interacts with a watermelon. He brings it back to the apartment and begins by simply throwing it in the air and catching it as if it were a football. Even though he is taking food and turning it into play, his interaction with the watermelon is at this point not all that uncommon, but things take a strange turn when he makes out with it as if it were another human being's head. He even moans while doing so, as if he were actually experiencing sensual pleasure from it! Since, as Neri points out, filmmakers of the Taiwanese New Wave “do not resort to dialogue or psychology to describe complicated states of mind or emotion” (403), such scenes become a great way to communicate a character's internal life. Here, it is unlikely that Hsiao-kang has a fetish for watermelons and truly experiences sexual pleasure upon

making out with one. Instead, the watermelon becomes a substitute, a stand-in for something else. It points to a lack that, no matter how minimally, gets taken care of with the watermelon. Based on his later interaction in bed with Ah Jung, the viewer can easily gather that Hsiao-kang really longs to kiss a man. Alas, there is no homosexual man for him to kiss, so he is left to use everyday objects so as to fulfil his desires. He is at this point acting out a fantasy, which unbeknownst to him will actually get fulfilled later, though again with its own set of drawbacks, as the act is not being reciprocated.

Hsiao-kang once again changes his use of the watermelon when he proceeds to pull out a pocketknife (probably the same one he used earlier to slit his wrist) and carve holes in the watermelon. The viewer might first be inclined to think that Hsiao-kang is about to take the watermelon as sexual object one step further by turning it into an object to be penetrated, but his plans are actually of a completely different order. He carves three holes in a triangular formation. He then slips his fingers inside the holes and rolls it down the apartment hallway as if it were a bowling ball. Once again there is a notion of play, but when the watermelon smashes against the wall and breaks into pieces, his intentions become clearer. It is quite possible that without the resources (a knife big enough) to cut the watermelon, he has to come up with a creative way to break the watermelon open. The small blade of his pocketknife is not enough, so he devises an ingenious alternative plan to get the job done. The watermelon ceases to be simply an end

– something to be eaten – and also becomes a means to an end – a tool to gain access to what is to be eaten. Much like de Certeau’s walker, the protagonist

creates for himself a space in which he can find *ways of using* the constraining order of the place or of the language. Without leaving the place where he has no choice but to live and which lays down its law before him, he establishes within it a degree of *plurality* and creativity. By an art of being in between, he draws unexpected results from his situation. (30)

Hsiao-kang does something similar (though less impressive) later when he washes clothes in the bathtub and then hangs them up on the balcony to dry.

After eating some of the watermelon, he once again subverts the expected use of it by rubbing its insides against his face as if it were a human hand. Even after fulfilling what would usually be deemed the purpose of the watermelon – to be eaten – Tsai refuses to let this be its ultimate use and reverts back to a use of it that is more akin to the previous one where Hsiao-kang is making out with it. This time however, this pseudo-sensual caress leaves a literal trace on Hsiao-kang, the juices of the watermelon running along his skin like the saliva of a lover. The difference with the previous moment is that here the viewer understands that Hsiao-kang’s desire is not solely of a sexual nature; he longs to be touched. What might be most surprising about Tsai’s films is the discovery that, despite their cold exterior, their characters’ desires are incredibly sentimental. It is the frustration of this sentimentality that gives the films their cold surface.

One only has to think of the scene in *Vive l’amour* when Meimei lies down in bed and turns on her side. She looks over to the empty space next to her on the mattress, which Tsai actually frames as if there were another human head next to hers that the viewer simply cannot see. She then proceeds to gently stroke that space as if it indeed were a human face. This scene is crucial because it is the first time that the viewer gets to

witness Meimei's vulnerability. Until then, she has only been ruthlessly trying to sell the properties she is responsible for and denying the advances of Ah Jung. Once again, without even using dialogue, Tsai manages to demonstrate that Meimei is rejecting Ah Jung not because she is not interested in love, but because she is not interested in love with him specifically. However, she too longs for human touch. As Neri notices, in Tsai's films, "characters do not talk to each other, but to their rooms, ceilings, and walls. They do not make love to each other, but to their objects and fetish symbols" (393). Their desires get expressed not so much in their interaction with each other, but in their relationship with the objects that surround them.

There is another scene in *Vive l'amour* that reveals a telling interaction with objects. In this scene, Hsiao-kang puts on a dress, high heels, and a boa. These articles of clothing were left behind by Ah Jung, who sells women's clothes on sidewalks. Since the viewer does not have access to the inner thoughts of Hsiao-kang, it is difficult to decipher what pushes him to put the clothes on. The most persistent feeling is that he simply does it out of boredom. With little to do in the empty apartment, he finds a suitcase of women's clothes and decides to put them on, again as a sort of play. It is quite possible that for him, putting on women's clothes becomes yet another way to act out his desire. It is impossible for him to live it out because he is attracted to a heterosexual man, so he tries to become a woman to whom that man could be attracted.

Then he does cartwheels before dropping down to the floor to do push ups. In an instant, he has gone from a performance of femininity to one of masculinity, arguably even passing by a non-gendered, child-like performance when doing cartwheels. But of course he is still wearing the dress, so it is as if he comes to inhabit a space that is

simultaneously feminine and masculine, and yet somehow neither. The dress subverts the push ups just as the push ups subvert the dress. His ingenious interactions with objects even allow him to bridge perceived gender gaps and to live the ambiguities and complexities that populate sexual identity. At every turn, Hsiao-kang's subversive use of everyday objects allows him to retain his romantic self in a world that denies him the fulfilment of his desires.

In this chapter, I have argued that characters in Tsai's films subvert what is deemed the proper use of bodies, spaces, and objects in order to retain their romantic self in a pornographic world. At this stage however, it seems that Tsai might move beyond this premise as the situation has reached a critical point in *The Wayward Cloud*, turning into an allegory. The romantic selves of the two main characters in this film, Hsiao-kang and Shiang-chyi, are brought to the brink of death before being saved at the last moment. After the harsh pornographic world of *The Wayward Cloud*, the characters appear to be resurrected in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, in which Hsiao-kang tends to a man in dire need of care. The last shot of *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, breathtaking, is of the two of them and Shiang-chyi lying on a mattress that floats away on water. Finally, there is an outlet for their romantic desires, which they have found in genuinely caring for one another and in the acceptance of a fluid sexuality that allows for new relationship possibilities.

Chapter 3

The Perpetual Present: Mythic Time in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Millennium Mambo*

Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Millennium Mambo* (*Qian xi man po*, 2001) is one of those too rare films primarily concerned with the cinematic itself. With this film, his eleventh feature as a director, Hou abandons archaic concerns with chronology and constructs his film's timeline with a spirit that is more concerned with cinema than with storytelling; he builds it according to rhythms, moods, and atmospheres.

It makes sense that the words used to compose the title of the film refer to a period of time and a type of dance since the film is indeed a dance with time. Just like contemporary dance, *Millennium Mambo* is not overwhelmingly concerned with conventional storytelling and must order its sequences according to principles other than chronology or suspense. Indeed, there is a feeling when watching the film that the scenes could be rearranged in any order without overwhelmingly damaging the film as a whole. In fact, *Millennium Mambo* was conceived as a film from which the different segments were meant to be uploaded to the internet, where viewers could construct the narrative as they wished (Rigoulet 42). The internet would be the perfect medium for such a project given that it intrinsically lacks the chronology that is otherwise unavoidable in the time-based medium of cinema.

The story of *Millennium Mambo* takes place at the start of the new millennium, when Vicky, a beautiful young woman, is stuck in a violent relationship that she seemingly cannot escape. Though a voice-over narrator (who might also be Vicky) claims that Vicky has five hundred thousand New Taiwan dollars in her possession, this

money does not seem to help her break way from her lover, Hao-hao. On the contrary, she has decided that she would leave him only once the money has run out. All the while, Vicky attempts to find some escapism by going out to nightclubs. However, these attempts are unsuccessful as even there drugs and violence always seem to find her. Luckily, there is another, more beneficial male presence in her life: Jack, the owner of the bar where Vicky works. Though he is a small-time Mafioso, he has a constructive role in Vicky's life. He takes care of her and gently tries to point her towards a healthier lifestyle. One night, she meets two other men who have a positive influence in her life: the Takenchi brothers. They are DJs from Japan who, unlike Vicky, are quiet and shy. Vicky visits them in a cold and snowy Japan where she is presented with an alternative way of living.

Almost a decade after the release of *Millennium Mambo*, scholarly writings on the film remain quite rare. However, this probably has more to do with the difficulty of talking about it than with its value. In his book *Sinascape: Contemporary Chinese Cinema*, Gary G. Xu devotes a chapter exclusively to *Millennium Mambo*. Though it is a fascinating read, its premise is rather ludicrous. Xu accuses Hou of denying the significance that historical events (including colonialism) have had in shaping Taiwan's socio-cultural landscape because he does not present the story of *Millennium Mambo* in chronological order (and this even though the film does not deal with these political issues). The implications of Xu's statements are that artistic texts should not mess with chronology less they undermine the importance of colonialism. Needless to say, this would impose great limitations on artists for the sake of an argument that is hardly convincing.

More so than with any other of his films, Hou keeps the story in *Millennium Mambo* to a minimum and allows the form to become the film's claim to artistic aspirations. As a result, it is difficult to discuss this film, which might explain the lack of academic writing about it. Many reviews of *Millennium Mambo*, short in length, already point to this difficulty in their superficial tackling of the film by overwhelmingly focusing on the story. In this regard, it is not surprising to find out that one of the most disparaging assessments of the film also happens to be one of the most inept. *Variety*'s Derek Elley describes Hou as "a stylist in search of content, with another back-of-a-coaster script by regular collab Chu Tien-wen." More astute is *Cahiers du cinéma*'s Thierry Jousse, who qualifies *Millennium Mambo* as "quite possibly the first authentically techno film in the history of cinema" (28, my own translation). He goes on to say that he does not mean this in terms of the film's subject matter, the club scene in Taipei, but because of Hou's mise-en-scène, "in itself an electronic musician's act, [...] a kind of continuum in which the viewer must submerge himself at the risk of being left behind" (28, my own translation). Indeed, it makes more sense to approach *Millennium Mambo* as one would the music pervading it. Criticizing the minimal presence of a story in the film is akin to complaining about the lack of lyrics in electronic music.

Tackling the film as one would a piece of electronic music helps greatly in approaching its minimalist storyline. The same could be said of Hou's *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (*Nan guo zai jian, nan guo*, 1996). As Haden Guest observes, "The almost perpetual 'techno' soundtracks that bind both films' open, meandering narratives give literal form to the films' attempt to understand the larger rhythm or design of these worlds while enhancing their deliberate narrative abstraction" (37). This narrative

abstraction and its role in deemphasizing chronology within Hou's narrative is at the core of my analysis of the film. The unimportance of the order of the events in *Millennium Mambo* – and therefore of the point of entry into the text – evokes Roland Barthes's concept of mythic time. Before his exhaustive analysis of Honoré de Balzac's *Sarrasine* in *S/Z*, Roland Barthes claims that rereading “draws the text out of its internal chronology (‘this happens *before* or *after* that’) and recaptures a mythic time (without *before* or *after*)” (16). My claim here is that Hou not only writes the text of *Millennium Mambo* but re/reads it, making the potentially readerly text writerly (in so much as it disregards conventional narrative structure). The text is drawn out of its internal chronology, thereby creating a mythic time without *before* or *after*. As I will explain, it is especially difficult to establish a “before” or an “after” in *Millennium Mambo* since the image and the voice-over narration simultaneously occupy two different space-times. I will look at how Hou achieves this wandering through time by playing with the chronology of events, by establishing an arbitrary ending that manages to remain out of the viewer's sight and, unlike more conventional narratives, by enticing the viewer to desire nothing.

Dancing with Time

From its very first shot, *Millennium Mambo* puts the viewer in an unusual situation. There is no establishing shot and no desire to let the viewer know where the story takes place. Instead, the viewer is thrown into a transitory space, a corridor lit by neon lights that probably serves as pedestrian bridge over roads built for cars.

A person is already present in the shot. It is a beautiful woman with long, flowing black hair. Every once in while she takes a drag from her cigarette. The cascading movement of her hair is accentuated by the speed of the shot, which is slowed down.

A woman's voice makes its way over the music. Is it the voice of the woman onscreen? The voice speaks of the character onscreen, Vicky, in the third person, yet their voices will later prove to be oddly similar. Who is the narrator? Who is the character? And, when she turns around and looks directly at the camera, who or what is she looking at? The camera? Hou Hsiao-hsien? The viewer? A character within the story? It is a question that remains without an answer, though the last option seems the least likely since the camera stays behind while Vicky goes down a set of stairs at the end of the shot. *Film Comment's* Chris Chang believes that Vicky is making "come-hither eye contact with the lens" (18). For his part, *Cahiers du cinéma's* Patrice Blouin attributes the point of view to the audience: "It's between her [Vicky] and us [the audience] that, from the very beginning, everything is at stake" (17). While Blouin's explanation has meatier and therefore more appealing implications, it remains that Chang's is just as likely. So, already with the first shot, there is a multitude of elements and yet a lack of information that ensures that viewers have no points of reference to situate themselves within the story. All the viewer can do is let go of the desire for a conventional narrative and be submerged in the sensory experience of the film.

And yet the situation gets complicated further. First, the narrator mentions that Vicky is planning to leave her boyfriend when she has spent the five hundred thousand dollars she possesses, setting up an end point to the story that turns out to be not as relevant as it first seems, as I explore later; but the voice also ends its opening monologue

by stating that this happened ten years ago, in 2001. Though the image is set up as being contemporary to *Millennium Mambo*'s shoot, the voice-over narration comes to the viewer from a yet impossible place: the future. Does this explain why the narrator speaks of the character in the third person even though they may be the same person – that time has created a divide, Vicky looking back on her younger self as if it were a different person that she can no longer identify with and therefore must address in the third person?² Either way, the viewer is now aware that there is a significant gap in time between the image and the voice-over narration. Though the viewer has been given two specific time periods, 2001 and 2011, their overlapping accentuates the indeterminacy of time within the film. As Amiel notes, the overlapping of different times in the protagonist's life introduces "in the sequence of events the very relativity of that sequence" (29, my own translation). The present might not even be taking place currently.

The following scene is just as peculiar though on a different level. It also stands out from the rest of the film as it seems to have no relation in terms of content. It consists of a man performing magic tricks to a group of young people that includes Vicky. While nearly every other narrative element in *Millennium Mambo* recurs at least once, it is the only time the viewer is exposed to this magician. If anything, this scene abandons the highly experiential qualities of the previous one and transforms them into symbolism; for what is a magician but someone who seemingly breaks the space-time continuum? One second, the magician holds coins in his right hand; the next, they appear in his left hand even though there has been no visible transfer. The coins seem to have moved from one

² This is the explanation privileged by Chang.

hand to another without having had to travel the space in between, much like Hou switches from one time to another without having to occupy the time in between. From one moment to the next, Vicky is in a different place or time (sometimes even simultaneously, as in the first scene) without having to travel the equivalent on the other plane. Something that was here a moment ago can be there the next, and vice versa.

Of course, as the first scene suggests, there is a real-life equivalent: memory. Preoccupied with one moment in time this instant, and with another the next, it allows people to travel in time without having to travel in space. As it goes for all things, memory can only find emergence in the present. As such, memory also necessarily creates an overlap in time: to corporally be here, right now, and yet to mentally inhabit the past. It too defies chronology. The associations it makes are more likely to be thematic than chronological. The scene with the magician sets the viewer up to expect to be transported from one place to another, from one time to another.

The rest of the film can be roughly divided into three sections: the scenes at the nightclub, the fights between Vicky and her boyfriend Hao-hao in their apartment, and the few moments of peace she gets to cultivate, which usually take place in a snowy Japan or in Jack's presence. When it comes to the scenes presented to the viewer, it is quite possible that they actually appear in chronological order. However, there is no way to know since there is a lack of causality within Hou's narrative. As the scenes usually fall within those three categories, they could be reordered in any other sequence and yet still appear to be in chronological order.

The narrator seems to be fully aware of this as she recounts the events in a way that does not always sync up with the image. For example, at one point the voice tells the

viewer that Hao-hao once stole a watch. A few scenes later, he gets a phone call and says to the person at the other end of the line that he did not take “it.” The viewer makes a link: could he be talking about the watch mentioned by the narrator earlier? The supposition gets confirmed when, in the following scene, cops show up at the apartment looking for proof that the watch was at one point in his possession. The scene is made all the more interesting specifically because the viewer already knows about it. Maybe it can best be explained by once again using Barthes’s words when he claims that “rereading is no longer consumption, but play (that play which is the return of the different)” (*S/Z* 16). Indeed, here the same scene has returned, but with a difference: words have become images. It too replicates an act of the mind as memories come up to the surface again and again. For Chang, rather than weakening *Millennium Mambo*, this “structural redundancy” is also what “gives the film its emotional scope and power” (18). Possibly pushing the matter even further, *Cahiers du cinéma*’s Thierry Jousse finds that the relationship between the image and the voice-over is not only paradoxical, but almost contradictory (28). This only reaffirms how the repetition layers the film rather than making it more monotonous.

More than any other, the scene about the theft of the watch establishes *Millennium Mambo* as a text that is already reread. I do not mean this in the sense that Barthes does when he claims that every text is already read (*S/Z* 16) since the language that makes up a text is composed of citations, repetitions, echoes, and references (“From Work to Text” 169). In this instance, the text is not only already read, but already *reread*. That is to say that the text has already been taken out of its internal chronology and that Hou has thereby created a mythic time (i.e. a time without *before* or *after*) that is present upon the

first viewing. To illustrate this, let me try to determine notions of past, present, and future within this scene. The first time the scene is presented, it is in a voice-over that is positioned over another scene. The voice comes to us from the future, but it is talking about a past event. Of course, the viewer experiences all this in the present moment. When the scene is presented to the viewer a second time, this time visually, it becomes impossible to place it chronologically. The scene has already occurred, so it obviously belongs to the past. Yet the viewer is clearly experiencing it in the present moment. And still it happens *after* the voice from *the future* has told the viewer about it. It becomes clear that notions of past, present, and future are perpetually shifting and that in order to use those terms one needs to first set a fixed point as the present. However, *Millennium Mambo* even resists that since there is not only one point to be fixed, but two: the voice-over narration and the image, which are not synchronous. The exercise therefore becomes impossible. What is the present of the image is the past of the voice-over; what is the present of the voice-over is the future of the image. As Amiel states, it is “As if events themselves could be ‘polychronous’, at once before and after, charged with causes and consequences, with announcements and assessments” (29, my own translation). As such, time stretches before the viewer, who is able to touch the past, the present, and the future all at once.

Once again, the reason behind this ever-shifting perception of time as relative is greatly influenced by the lack of causality within Hou’s narrative. As Amiel notes, in *Millennium Mambo*, “There are fewer consecutions, and relationships between cause and effect, than simultaneities” (29, my own translation). Indeed given that it is impossible to place the events that occur in *Millennium Mambo* in any certain chronological order, the

viewer can (and to a certain extent does) at least on a conceptual level experience the events as simultaneous. In some moments, when the image and the voice-over narration do not sync up, this happens at the most literal and experiential level. However, on a more conceptual level, this is also what happens with the whole of *Millennium Mambo*. Given that it is impossible for the viewer to situate one scene in relation to another in terms of time, the safest default setting is to place the scenes on top of one another rather than one after the other. As such, *Millennium Mambo* builds up not horizontally as most narrative films do, but vertically. It is for this reason that Hou's narrative is so reminiscent of Barthes's concept of mythic time since the viewers are left to experience all scenes as simultaneous rather than as chronological.

Of course, it is possible to deny the existence of the future within a narrative and claim that the furthestmost point in time can only be the present. If that is the case, then the only source of present in *Millennium Mambo* would have to be the voice-over narration and all the images that compose the film would fall within the hands of the past. (Of course, film images always belong to the past since film is a record, but here I am concerned with the story within the film rather than that of the film itself.) Such is the case from the point of view of the voice-over narrator who looks at the images as if they were a series of memories. Again, this perception of the events presented as memories explains why they do not answer to chronology.

There is some irony in this given that Hou has stated that his intention with *Millennium Mambo* was to record the present (Joyard & Tesson 18). Of course, to a certain extent, he did; Amiel speaks "not of the past, but of a deferred present" (29, my own translation). However, the voice-over reinscribes the film within the past, as if it

were the only way that Hou could deal with the film image. Indeed, his long-time collaborator screenwriter Chu T'ien-wen explains that

[*Millennium Mambo*] was a very difficult film to make because [Hou] didn't have enough time to really digest the subject matter. Many of Hou Hsiao-hsien's earlier films depict life from thirty or forty years ago, so the events had time to settle and there was room for a kind of aesthetic distance. Hou Hsiao-hsien has always had an easier time filming subject matter in which there is historical distance. But when it comes to contemporary Taiwan, he is too close and has trouble finding the right perspective to capture his story. (Berry, M. 59)

Given these difficulties, it is not surprising that Hou found the distance he needed by not only writing the text, but reading and rereading it, each time driving the text further into a re/read past that created a mythic time without *before* or *after*.

To Desire Nothing

From the very first shot, Hou sets up an ending to his story. The voice-over narrator claims that Vicky is planning to leave her boyfriend just as soon as she has spent the five hundred thousand dollars she possesses. Therefore, Vicky's money becomes like an hourglass and the money bills like grains of sand sinking to the bottom until there are no more left in the top half, Vicky finally free of her boyfriend.

The viewer is never given any clue as to how much money Vicky actually has. In fact, it is the only time it is mentioned. The only other time that someone refers to her money is when her friend Jack tells her "You earn a lot but you spend even more." It is the first time the viewer becomes aware that Vicky is even working since she is never actually shown doing so. Does this money get added to the five hundred thousand dollars, so that the end continuously gets pushed a bit further out of sight?

More importantly, does this five hundred thousand dollars even exist? It is a question that no reviewer asks, taking the narrator's words at face value. However, the viewer never has any proof of the money's existence or any idea as to how Vicky would have gotten that sum in the first place. Either way, the viewer's ignorance as to the amount of money in Vicky's possession keeps the ending out of sight. The hourglass has been tipped on its side, allowing the viewer to float in this suspended time.

While the ending remains deferred as a result, there is however an imagined ending that gets created out of the viewer's desire. It is the same one that is tied to the supposedly dwindling amount of money that Vicky has: her leaving Hao-hao. In this manner, Hou has achieved an unusual thing in the cinematic landscape; he has constructed a narrative that puts viewers in a position where they feel the desire for a kind of nothingness. One could almost speak of a desire for a lack of story in one that is already minimal. He achieves this partially because the story is limited to the bare essentials in the first place, but also because of the repetitive nature and the lack of variety of its few segments. As the most often recurring narrative element consists of Vicky and Hao-hao fighting in their apartment, in scenes that explore psychological, physical, and sexual abuse, the viewer can only hope for a release from such repetitive drama.

Moreover, the second most often recurring narrative element is equally constraining. It consists of the scenes at the club, which fail to provide an outlet for the violence that cloaks the apartment. Instead, the violence even finds its way there, two fights taking place on the premises. In another scene, drugs make an appearance but also fail to provide their consumers with the desired escapism. As Philippe Gajan notes, the

drugs and alcohol “conceal more than they excite” (63, my own translation). Never does Vicky seem happier upon her return from the club. Once she is even lying in the hallway that leads to Jack’s apartment, before stumbling in to vomit in the toilet.

The escape (for both Vicky and the viewer) must be found elsewhere, in the scenes where there is a lack of drama. One could almost speak of a return to *Millennium Mambo*’s narrative origins given that these scenes are all reminiscent of the very first one where Vicky is simply walking away from the camera in slow motion. In fact, slow motion is used in two more of those scenes (and the same music in one of them) in which Vicky is in the passenger’s seat of a car while Jack is driving. That the image is slowed down for the scenes where there is the least happening speaks of Hou’s desire to evade conventional storytelling. By slowing down the least eventful moments, he is effectively making the duration of the narration of the event exceed that of the event itself. In these moments, the viewer feels that *Millennium Mambo* is not about the entertainment value of the story but about something else. If anything, it is about creating a desire to move away from being entertained at all costs; for the viewers to desire entertainment within the context of *Millennium Mambo* would only force them to assume their own sadism and potential misogyny since it can only be provided at the expense of Vicky’s well-being. If the viewer wishes for Vicky’s life to improve, she must be out of Hao-hao’s apartment, out of the nightclubs, out of Hao-hao’s life altogether.

And yet the scenes where she is free from Hao-hao’s violence do not put a strain on the viewer’s pleasure. On the contrary, they come like a breath of fresh air for they offer the desired release from the rest of the narrative, which takes its toll on the viewer as it does on Vicky. Indeed, Hou seems to believe that happiness is not to be found in the

attempted escapism of the nightclub or in the arms of a lover, but rather in simply being comfortable with one's own life as it moves along quietly. Aside from the first scene and the scene with the magician, the only moments of happiness Vicky seems to experience are in Jack's car and in Japan. In the first scene in Jack's car, she can be seen standing out of the car's sunroof, enjoying the wind blowing through her hair. The second time, her head is resting on Jack's shoulder as she looks up at the sky. By stretching the duration of these shots, Hou is proving generous to his protagonist, extending her moments of happiness as if to allow her to savor every drop. The viewer is likewise rewarded.

With Hou it is never about the crassness of the story. He is a man of details. He likes to say that "Of all the leaves carried by the wind in the sky, there is but one that stands still for all eternity at the precise moment we look at it intently with comprehension and sympathy" (Amiel 29-30, my own translation). In these scenes, Hou is extending Vicky the same comprehension and sympathy. It is not about making time go by faster, using Vicky to entertain audiences; it is a matter of being able to find happiness when life is at its most peaceful.

To look at it from a different angle, these slowed down moments are not about revealing more visual details by stretching out time, but rather to change the visual feel – and therefore the very experience – of the narrative. At regular speed, these moments would probably appear as yet just another part of the story. By slowing them down, Hou effectively changes the focus of the viewer. It becomes not about how these moments connect to the rest of the story as much as how they stand on their own, working primarily on an affective level. They allow the viewer to be taken out of the narrative and

get immersed in the visual and affective experience of cinema instead. The images can then be enjoyed for their own sake rather than because they carry the narrative further.

One could almost make a link to the scenes in the apartment, which Hou films in tight shots even though he places the actors as if he were actually using wide shots (Joyard & Tesson 18). The result is that, in more than one scene, the actors are not even in the frame as they go into adjacent rooms to the one where the camera is located (usually in the kitchen area). So viewers are left to look at an empty room while they overhear what is happening in the adjacent room (a fight between Vicky and Hao-hao, the cops searching for the watch). Once more, it is not about providing the viewer with visual information as much as it is about giving a certain feel. The shot of an empty room juxtaposed with the audible drama unfolding in another room creates much tension. In the scene where Vicky and Hao-hao are fighting, it heightens the viewers' concern for Vicky as they can no longer keep an eye on her, both literally and more metaphorically. It further heightens the viewers' helplessness in the experience of cinema; they are doomed to witness without being able to interject. The viewer is left to impatiently wait, hoping to catch a glimpse of Vicky as a confirmation that she has not fallen completely victim to Hao-hao. To see nothing makes the scene more intense as the viewer desperately watches out for any immersion into the image as if it were a precious commodity. To see nothing is to reveal a desire to see more. Once again, the effect works more at an affective level.

However, the only other scenes where Vicky and the viewer get to experience a sense of release from the drama of the characters' lives are the ones that take place in Japan. Vicky ends up there after meeting the Takenchi brothers in a club in Taiwan where they were DJing. They are described by the voice-over narrator as quiet and shy, qualities

that Vicky desperately needs in her life; indeed that is what they offer her. The scene after the one at the nightclub in Taipei offers a stark visual contrast, going from the darkness of the club to the whiteness of snow. Could Vicky already be in Japan? The brothers did mention that it was cold there. Indeed, that is where she now is. Either a significant amount of time has been skipped or Vicky's financial situation is so great that she can just up and go at her heart's desire. Maybe it is true that she has five hundred thousand dollars in her possession after all.

It is February, during the Yubari Film Festival. In the second scene in Japan, Vicky and the brothers are sitting at a restaurant where the boys' grandmother is cooking for them. The narrator says that this eighty-year-old woman wants to live to be a hundred to see how Yubari changes. In just a few words, the grandmother is established as a foil to the character of Vicky. While Vicky leads a loud existence with little hope for tomorrow, the grandmother leads a quiet life that is filled with so much love for life and the changes that it brings that she wants to live to be a hundred. Some might find irony in the fact that the grandmother's quiet life is a more fertile ground for change, while Vicky's seemingly tumultuous life offers none. Instead, Vicky's life appears as a limbo that is only doomed to offer more of the same unless she finds an exit.

And the exit door is right here, in the Takenchi brothers' grandmother. At the same time as the woman appears as Vicky's foil, she also appears as her potential future self. In her presence, Vicky looks as happy as she ever does in the film. In her, she could find a model for an alternative life. Hou's perception seems to be able to bridge such gaps in time when he claims, "With age, it's a bit as if, at the same as I observe a person in the present, I guess what they will become in life, their future" (Joyard & Tesson 18, my own

translation). Olivier Joyard and Jean-Marc Lalanne also see the Takenchi grandmother as the woman that Vicky could become (14). It is clear that, despite their obvious differences, it becomes possible for viewers to envision Vicky as growing up to be much like the grandmother.

In the following scene, Vicky is outside with the brothers. They are running and laughing like children. It is the only scene where Vicky can be seen and heard laughing. They throw themselves in the snow. They then decide to make imprints of their face by burying them in a snow bank. This simple activity provides *Millennium Mambo* with one of its most enchanting moments. There is of course the playful aspect of the activity, but there is also something more. It is a gesture that almost reaches paradoxical proportions. There is first the very human desire to leave a trace – one almost feels as though it is the first time that Vicky truly sees herself, her image not being sent back to her by the hard and necessarily superficial surface of a mirror, but by a natural element that will undergo a similar process to her own life, bound to eventually fade away. As Patrice Blouin states, “If *Millennium Mambo* presents a specifically contemporary distress, its hope, on the other hand, is very ancient. It lies entirely on the possibility of durably leaving a human imprint in a bit of snow or on celluloid” (17, my own translation). While there is definitely a link to be made between the imprint in the snow and the film image, there is also an omission in Blouin’s statement; for, while Vicky is making an imprint of her face in the snow, it is still snowing. Snow being such a fragile material to begin with, it is already hard to visibly see the imprint of Vicky’s face. Moreover, as it keeps snowing, the imprint can only appear for a few seconds before it is gone. However, this is not a cause for concern; it does not work against the effect caused by the imprint. On the

contrary, it somehow adds to it. This is because, while the imprint reveals a desire to leave a trace in the present, to live it consciously and therefore fully, its inevitable disintegration also reveals a peaceful acceptance of the ephemeral nature of life. The trace is only there for a few moments; death absorbs everything.

Just as the cut that brings the viewer to Japan is jarring in the stark visual contrast it offers, so is the return to Taiwan. Vicky is back in the same apartment, with the same music playing, providing the same feeling to the viewers. It is as though they have come back to a previous time, as if they have been sucked back into the past. Again, given the lack of causality in *Millennium Mambo*, it is impossible to tell whether this scene chronologically falls before or after Vicky's trip to Japan. Though it feels like the past, it is quite possible that it has occurred after the trip to Japan. It is also just as possible that the viewer's feeling is correct and that Vicky has fallen back within Hao-hao's grip. The narrator does tell the viewer that Vicky would again and again go back to Hao-hao "as if hypnotized." Given the immediately apparent visual similarities with previous scenes, it is not surprising to see that this one also finds its way back to earlier narrative elements, ending in a fight between Hao-hao and Vicky before she storms out of the apartment.

Luckily, by the end of the film, Vicky is back in Japan, upon Jack's incentive and the pretense that he is there. It seems that Jack himself feels that Vicky needs a release from her usual lifestyle as he leaves her a voice mail telling her "If you want to take a break you can come join me here." Once again, the implication is that Vicky is upwardly mobile, able to pick up and leave at a moment's notice, which she seemingly does. The film does end in Japan, but again the lack of explicit causality in the film makes it hard to determine whether Vicky goes back to Japan or if the viewer is once again witnessing

scenes from her previous trip. Whether the story ends on a positive note or not, the narrative most certainly does.

Once again, the return to Japan is visually jarring as it is made particularly explicit. Hou reverts to the same imagery he has previously established, cutting from a static shot of a hotel room situated behind train tracks to a moving one of snow as seen from a moving car. The viewer knows at once that Vicky is back in Japan. The narrator says that Vicky “wandered around with the cell phone that Jack left her.” Though *Millennium Mambo*’s narrative does wander through time, it is hard to say the same of Vicky. Through most of the film, she is stuck in a vicious circle that can even be described as obsessive in its narrative recurrence: drugs at the club, fight at the apartment, fight at the club, drugs at the apartment... Though Vicky’s life does lack direction, these repetitions can hardly be described as wandering since they fail to move away from the usual course of her life. Instead, it is when she is outside of her element, in Yubari, away from the clubs and Hao-hao, that Vicky is left to wander. In these moments, she is at her happiest.

In the next to last shot of the film, the Takenchi brothers are teaching her Japanese, but also a new way of being, as they walk in the snow that fills Yubari’s road of cinema, where giant movie billboards hang overhead. The narrator lets the viewer know that Hao-hao vanished like a snowman from Vicky’s life. Finally, the narrator reminds the viewer that “This happened ten years ago, back in the year 2001. That year, there was snow in Yubari.” The film ends with a shot of an empty street as the snow keeps falling.

Though Vicky can be said to most literally wander when in the streets of Yubari, these sequences occupy only a short portion of *Millennium Mambo*. It is not from this angle that I am approaching wandering in Hou's film, for I believe to do so would be to once again foreground the content, while more than in any other of his films, it is the form that takes centre stage here. It is for this reason that I decided to look at wandering in *Millennium Mambo* from the point of view of the narrative wandering through time, like a series of memories that, unlike lived life, are not tied down to chronology. The fact that there is a ten-year distance imposed on the film through the voice-over narration from the future easily allows the film to be taken as an already reread text, thereby creating what Barthes refers to as mythic time, that is a time without *before* or *after*. Therefore, the narrative can freely wander both ways, towards the past or the future, while only reinforcing the organic nature of such wandering in the process.

As the years pass by, *Millennium Mambo* is looking more and more like a singular film in Hou's career. Up to then, most of his films unfolded in chronological time, and so it has been the case ever since. Minor exceptions are *Good Men, Good Women* (1995), which travels back and forth between noticeably different time periods, and *Three Times* (2005), which moves from one time period to another without ever reverting back to a former one. In the case of *Three Times*, one could even say that the order of the sequences is essential to its meaning. Neither film demonstrates the same kind of organic wandering that occurs in *Millennium Mambo*. By achieving mythic time through the rereading of his own text, Hou shows that film is not dependant on narrative causality to gain affective power.

Conclusion

The arrival of Tsai Ming-liang as a major director on the world cinema stage is often used to mark the beginning of the Second Wave of Taiwanese cinema, other times referred to as the Post-New Wave. His contribution to Taiwanese cinema should not be underestimated. The filmmaker can definitely be thanked for bringing queer characters into the Taiwanese cinema landscape given that the worlds represented in Hou Hsiao-hsien's and Edward Yang's films are exclusively heterosexual. Even though *Notes of a Desolate Man* is the most acclaimed book by Hou's long-time screenwriting collaborator Chu T'ien-wen, he has never adapted it to film. Hou claims that his film style would not be appropriate for this particular story (Berry, Michael 258-9), but his explanation seems facile when one knows that the main character in the novel is a gay man and that characters in Hou's numerous films have never been anything but straight. Though Yang's films present less insular worlds than Hou's, he also has never had a gay character in any of his films.

While Hou and Yang did not include queer characters in their films, the style and content of their cinematic output has still undergone noticeable changes since Tsai's first feature film. For one, Hou's films have become more and more contemporary in subject matter, but there has also been a shift in his style. As James Udden has scientifically demonstrated, since *Good Men, Good Women*, Hou's shots have been less static and their average shot length longer (200-1). As for Yang, his films have gone from dealing with Taiwanese society in an insular fashion to opening themselves up to the world at large by dealing with issues relating to modernism.

Though Tsai might not have intentionally sought out to espouse the style of his predecessors from the Taiwanese New Wave, there are definite similarities in their aesthetics. Just like Yang, the average length of Tsai's shots tends to be quite long, and – as has already been mentioned – Hou's already long average shot length has only been getting longer since the mid-nineties. The long take feeds into the realism that permeates the films of all three directors (if one is willing to overlook Tsai's fantastical musical sequences). As I have argued, the long take privileges the unfolding of events over their construction. Also common to the three directors and no doubt intimately linked to the use of the long take is the predominant use of long shots. In order to allow the action to unfold without interruption, the shot must cover the space required for said action (even though, as has been seen, actors may still exit the shot only to later return to it).

As Hou takes up more contemporary subject matter starting in the mid-nineties, thematically the work of the three directors becomes more intimately linked. All three deal with modernity in capitalist Taipei. Jen-yi Hsu also acknowledges that it is only in the nineties that the city becomes the most common theme in Taiwanese cinema (136). While many of the main films discussed here could be said to deal with alienation and loneliness as effects of capitalism, modernism, and urbanism, one must not overlook certain details. While many of the family members in these films could be said to be isolated from each other, the father and the son in *Yi yi*, for example, are quite close and communicate extensively with one another.

It must also be noted that the topics tackled by Tsai could not have been dealt with at any prior time in Taiwanese cinema. As Gina Marchetti notes in her essay on *The River*, Taipei has become a more open place for its gay community since the lifting of

martial law in 1987 (115). It is unlikely that any director could have made such extensive use of queer characters prior to this date as Tsai has been able to since. Tsai might not be exposing new problems as much as he is finally able to voice ones that had been silenced for too long. Once again, as Marchetti points out, *The River* deals with “the invisibility and suppression of gay history” (114) rather than its absence. The problem that father and son encounter in the film is not their homosexuality, but that taboos surround their sexual orientation to such a degree that it becomes invisible. As I have argued, the sexual encounter between father and son turns out to have positive repercussions since for the first time they are able to see each other’s true self. Only then can they enter into a truthful relationship, crying in bed together, aware of each other’s vulnerability as well as their own. While the social alienation presented in Tsai’s films might not be desirable, the recognition of its existence becomes a necessary step on the way to the formation of new communities that are not based on heterosexist notions. Such is the relationship created by Hsiao-kang and Ah Jung in *Vive l’amour*, or Hsiao-kang and the man and woman he is sharing a mattress with at the end of *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone*.

While some have attempted to pin the alienation that Tsai’s characters experience to the director’s status as an immigrant from Malaysia (Wang & Fujiwara 224), one should be careful when it comes to simplistically suggesting that emotions such as loneliness are an immigrant’s prerogative. It would fail to explain why film audiences around the world relate to Tsai’s characters, and this even though they might not live under the same post-colonial conditions; not to mention that there is something xenophobic about insinuating that immigration leads to alienation and loneliness. While Tsai concurs that his characters’ loneliness is drawn from his own life, he recognizes that

his immigrant status might have little to do with it. Tsai identifies as a “global person”, capturing the essence of the cosmopolitan individual when he claims, “I would be okay wherever I go. But then again I never have a sense of belonging wherever I go” (Wang & Fujiwara 225).

It is in this light that one must approach these films: as engaged in the urban experience. Tsai recognizes who the audience for his films is when he says, “Everyone who live in large cities, in France, Taiwan or elsewhere, can very easily understand my films. There is a common feeling to living in a big city, no matter which one it is” (Burdeau & Joyard 53, my own translation). One must look at the wandering of the characters in the films discussed in the previous chapters as a sign of their lack of a sense of belonging (because they would be okay wherever they go) mixed with their mobility as urban subjects in the modern city. As can be most clearly seen in *Yi yi*, their wanderings should be viewed as a way of discovering the self by moving through the world. When it comes to *Millennium Mambo*, one only has to think about how Vicky seems to be most comfortable in her skin when she is the farthest away from home, abroad in Japan. One must first find their self before being able to find their home.

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