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## Spaces of Reality: Tsai Ming Liang and Re-Thinking Identity

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Spaces of Reality: Tsai Ming Liang and Re-Thinking Identity

Senior Project Submitted to  
The Division of Language and Literature  
of Bard College

by  
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Annandale-on-Hudson, New York  
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## Introduction

The purpose of this thesis is two-fold. On the outset, I went into this project to unpack Tsai Ming Liang's films. I wanted to analyze his films in order to understand what about his film style creates the unique feelings and thoughts I experienced while watching them. Before I researched or read much from academic articles on Tsai Ming Liang, I wrote about his film *What Time is it There?* for a survey class on Chinese cinema. In this film the theme that stood out to me was rebellion, which at the time I linked to a critique on capitalism. Reading Gilles Deleuze helped me understand how Tsai's film technique, which Deleuze would describe as encompassing a *time-image*,<sup>1</sup> could be seen as a form rebellion to complement the content of his films. There was something that felt special and different which drew me to his films. I should note that (as an amateur film enthusiast at the time) that Chinese cinema class offered a large range of films, all of which exposed me to new aspects of film I had not experienced before. Just from Mainland China alone we watched films which ranged from Zhang Yimou's epic productions like *Hero* (英雄) and *Red Sourghum* (红高粱), to Feng Xiaogang's quirky *Big Shot's Funeral* (大腕), Li Shaohong's psychological thriller *Baober in Love* (恋爱中的宝贝), and Jia Zhangke's much quieter *The World* (世界). Moving then to Taiwan, Hong Kong, and Singapore, the range of films were no less diverse. I would have equally enjoyed expanding my understanding of Edward Yang or Ann Hui's films, but Tsai Ming Liang's films stuck with me.

Throughout the initial process of deciding which angle to approach my analysis, the second part of this project unfolded. By analyzing Tsai's films and reading critical works from Rey Chow and several other notable academics, I began to rethink the purpose of my analysis

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, Translated by Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 1989.) 98-105.

and Asian Studies in general. Therefore the second goal for my analysis of Tsai Ming Liang's films is to avoid generalizations and breakdown the definition of national cinema theory and Taiwanese identity, terms which are all too easy to consider with blank-statement value rather than dissecting the complexities of ideas which can encompass a definition. Therefore it became important for my project to relearn how Taiwanese identity and National Cinema Theory are defined, and from the roots of these ideas build an understanding of how Tsai Ming Liang's films interact with these two areas of thought.

In the three chapters of this essay, I begin by explaining the theories which inspired and motivated my project, and then I analyze Tsai's film technique and the themes he's achieved through such a technique to better understand what he adds to the theories mentioned in the beginning. I spend the first chapter exploring the relationship between Tsai's films and understanding Taiwanese identity. This process lead to rethinking the purpose of an Asian Studies education, so I try to deconstruct and understand how these theories are valuable.

In the second chapter, I closely analyze the unique attributes of Tsai's filmmaking technique, including the cinematography, script, setting, and explicit content of his films. While I am sure there are several angles to scrutinize a director's choices, I focus on the choices he makes which I argue are rebellious. Not only are his choices rebellious when compared to Hollywood and other feature film styles, and rebellious against what his producers want (or think audiences want), but he also rebels against social norms, as to what is thinkable to depict on screen—even unthinkable to himself. The characteristics and content I examine specifically include incest, lack of plot, inclusion of choreographed musical interludes, the slow shot, and the manipulation of time within film through editing. This rebellion, thus, becomes an important tool

in his works for provoking his audience and himself to rethink both cinema and our society—or conception of reality.

The final chapter delves deeper into the themes at work in Tsai's films. As I mentioned above, part of my goal in this project is to analyze and find the words and evidence to explain why his films provoke certain feelings. The umbrella word which I finally found to describe this feeling is *disconnection*. I argue that the feeling of disconnection is achieved in two ways. The first way uses the film narrative and setting to illustrate disconnection between the characters and physical space, as well as between one another. The films are full of plots which characters live in "shells" of a home, as well as plots where characters are pushed to leave their homes. As for relationships, it is arguable that there are no healthy relationships depicted in the films. Tsai emphasizes the characters' disconnection in several ways, such as through lighting, actions, and lack of dialogue. The two types of relationships depicted in his films are family and love/sexual relationships. The second method involves understanding Arjun Appadurai's term "ethnoscapes". Essentially I argue Tsai's films depict connections with new landscapes of identity, therefore distancing his characters from associating with Taiwanese national identity. The ultimate goal of this chapter is to understand the disconnection in Tsai's films in relationship to rethinking identity. Appadurai pushes for theorists to break their habit of understanding national identity as a border-drawn, government controlled, collective concept of identity. He complicates how to understand identity in our new transnational world, and how to better understand the identity of diaspora as well. Based on this concept of national identity, Tsai's films help depict diaspora identities on screen, which helps complicate an understanding of a single "Taiwanese" identity.

## Chapter 1: Representation

### *Problems to be Wary of*

Is national cinema reductive? This question of whether or not a film can represent a group of people's experience during a historic period of time came under my radar through the nature of how Taiwanese films are popularly read. Taiwan, a small nation, has become known for a select few filmmakers. Involved Hollywood, Ang Lee is infrequently discussed when critics write about "Taiwanese Cinema." But outside of Hollywood cinema, Taiwan's most famous filmmakers Hou Hsiao Hsien and Edward Yang are explicitly categorized as Taiwanese filmmakers. While compared to Tsai Ming Liang I have not extensively researched the two directors, but throughout my experience studying Taiwanese cinema, I have seen that critics tend to read Edward Yang and Hou Hsiao-Hsien's films with relationship to what they say about Taiwan. Because of the two directors' involvement in the creation of the Taiwanese New Wave cinema movement, critics are not wrong to focus on the subject of Taiwan in their films. But I believe this habit can be reductive. Rey Chow writes extensively about the problematic nature of "Asian Studies," including in her book *Writing Diaspora* and the essay "Introduction to Chinese as a Theoretical Problem." One of her many criticisms is of the department's tendency to perpetuate terms which generalize and reduce the meaning of identity within these areas of study. Part of her argument is that "Chinese" has become a fix-meaning word. She writes: "It is such 'splitting' of the notion of ethnicity that will, I believe, be instrumental to the reimagining of a field such as modern Chinese Studies."<sup>2</sup> Not only is splitting of China from Taiwan an issue,

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<sup>2</sup> Rey Chow, "Introduction: On Chineseness as a Theoretical Problem," *boundary 2*, 1998, 8.

as Chow mentions. Even in the small island of Taiwan, further complication of the term “Taiwanese” is necessary. How one defines Taiwanese identity is not monolithic.

One might begin to explore how to describe Taiwanese identity by first looking at government. Regardless of the historical claims and academic arguments for and against Taiwan’s ties to China, part of understanding Taiwanese identity is understanding Taiwan’s populace is not unified in wanting complete autonomy from China.<sup>3</sup> This said, the current party in power, represented by female president Tsai Ing-Wen, ran her campaign emphasizing independence from China.<sup>4</sup> Breaking down the ethnic makeup of Taiwan is also important for understanding the complexities of Taiwanese identities. Taiwan is generally divided into four main ethnic groups: aboriginals who came to the island over twelve thousand years ago from South and South-East Asia, Hakka and Hoklo who represent ethnic groups defined by two different groups of dialects (the Han Chinese immigrants who came to Taiwan in the sixteenth century), and the huge exodus of military men and their families between 1945–49.<sup>5</sup> A third method of complicating Taiwanese identity is understanding cultural influences. Because of the country’s history of imperialism, starting with the Dutch, then China, then Japan, and China again, and spread of cultural influences through global capitalism, Taiwan’s culture is influenced by multiple sources, like every modern society. Despite Taiwan’s four-century connection with China, in the last century, the two countries went through significant periods of development under different systems and influences. While Taiwan inarguably has maintained by cultural ties with China, political and other social ideologies between the two states began to split with the

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<sup>3</sup> John Franklin Copper, *Taiwan : Nation-State or Province?* (Boulder : Westview Press, 1996.) 109-112.

<sup>4</sup> Austin Ramzy, “Tsai Ing-wen Elected President of Taiwan, First Woman to Hold Office,” *The New York Times*, Jan. 16, 2016.

<sup>5</sup> Jack F. Williams, “Who are the Taiwanese? Taiwan in the Chinese Diaspora,” In *The Chinese Diaspora*, edited by Laurence J. C. Ma and Carolyn Cartier. (New York: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc., 2003.) 164-166.



Japanese occupation of Taiwan, and widened as China developed a communist state and Taiwan developed under capitalism. A fourth interesting complication to understanding Taiwanese identity and its outside influences is that a significant percentage of Taiwanese people study or move abroad.<sup>6</sup> Jack Williams suggests, because of this fact, Taiwan is very much a country made up of the diaspora. I definitely have not exhausted the complexities which make up a “Taiwanese identity”. My point is, aside from the fact that, like most national identities, it is important not to forget the diverse makeup of the identity terms like “Taiwanese” or “Chinese” used in academia.

Describing just some of the complexities which inform understanding Taiwanese identity is important because, with biases and stereotypes, labels have the power to be restrictive and reductive, preventing the artist from being anything more than a product of their native country. This translates negatively in the products of academia as well. As Rey Chow states, work that is done exploring theories or areas of thought loses its magnitude/worth in the field as soon as the subject is grounded in a specific region—as if the ideas explored become less useful to the entire field when one looks at (for example) women, or sexuality, *in China*.<sup>7</sup> This title somehow makes it less valuable compared to the work done in Western countries without a region-specific association (suggesting that the two theories might not be able to overlap and that cultural specificity is not valued.) This makes the field of Asian Studies seem problematic, or even unnecessary. Rey Chow is not asking for removal of the field however, just an understanding of the biases which still exist in academia. With this line of thinking, fundamentally it is not reductive to describe Tsai Ming Liang as a Taiwanese filmmaker. But the current state of biases

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Rey Chow, “Introduction: On Chineseness,” 4

in the worlds of cinema and Asian studies mean that currently the title can produce a limiting lens.

Part of the issue of labeling a film by its country of origin has to do with a global hierarchy which consciously and subconsciously divides the “West” and the “East”. Several critics, such as Lim Song Hwee and Jean Ma, question the authority or markers with which good art cinema is defined.<sup>8</sup> Generally, for films made by filmmakers from Asia, they are compared to the “greats” of French or other Western filmmakers. This is problematic because it implies that global hierarchy, where Western Europe and the USA, the age-old imperialists, dominate the world once again as the “role models” for the rest of the world. In film, this means great non-Western filmmakers are proven great when compared to Western filmmakers (for example, see *New York Times* review of Tsai’s *Vive L’Amour*<sup>9</sup>). And anything that is different, then, must be “exotic.” Rey Chow, in her introduction to *Writing Diaspora*, describes two groups of racism in academic: the “Orientalist” and the “Maoist”. The Orientalist wants their idea of China to remain separate from the West and difficult to translate. The Maoist loves an idea of China for its quality of being “third-world” and deprived—essentially valued for being subaltern.<sup>10</sup> For those trying to survive in art cinema, Asian filmmakers often must sell to a Western audience, where art film has a much larger market and more film festivals. Therefore, based on Chow’s claim, it is this “othered” China which appeals more. In her book *Primitive Passions*, Chow argues, “By consciously exoticizing China and revealing China’s ‘dirty secrets’ to the outside world, contemporary Chinese directors are translators of the violence with which the Chinese culture is

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<sup>8</sup> See Lim’s *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness* and Ma’s *Melancholy Drift*

<sup>9</sup> Stephen Holden, “FILM FESTIVAL REVIEW: VIVE L’AMOUR; A New Apartment as Empty as Its Occupants,” *The New York Times*, March 23, 1995.

<sup>10</sup> Rey Chow, *Writing Diaspora*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993.) 1-26.

"originally' put together."<sup>11</sup> Fredric Jameson's work is a great example of the Western gaze, who uses Edward Yang's *The Terrorizers* to say third-world cinema produces allegories to describe their countries of origin.<sup>12</sup> While in fact some directors do explicitly talk about their country's historical/political/social situation in their work, not every film made by a Chinese, Hong Kong, or Taiwan director should be assumed to be making national commentary.

Therefore, the habit of always qualifying non-Hollywood films, particularly ones from Asia, by their country of origin rather than the genre is problematic. In a sense, it immediately puts the Western audience into the position to "gaze" from an outside perspective. For example, if say Fruit Chan's *Dumplings* is advertised as a psychological thriller, Western participants are more likely to choose the film based on previous psychological thrillers they have seen before and enjoyed. And therefore they are set up, going into the film, to compare *Dumplings* (饺子) to a preconceived idea about psychological thrillers. If the film is instead advertised as a film from Hong Kong, it automatically "others" the perspective for the average Western audience member. This habit is further problematized by the phenomenon of over generalization. In fact, we can complicate the identity of "Chinese directors" as well. Many of them have a complicated history of nationality due to East Asia's last century (and more) of war, colonization, and dispersion as a result. For example, Edward Yang was born in Shanghai, grew up in Taipei, and got his masters degree in the USA. Tsai Ming Liang did not move to Taiwan from Malaysia until he was twenty years old. In interviews, Tsai states that for a long time he did not have a sense of home and at that time saw Taiwan not as home, but "a place I choose to live."<sup>13</sup> Many other ethnic-Chinese

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<sup>11</sup> Rey Chow, *Visibility, Modernity, and Primitive Passions*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995.) 202.

<sup>12</sup> Fredrick Jameson, "Remapping Taipei," In *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System*, (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 114-157.

<sup>13</sup> Tsai Ming Liang, "In Conversation with Director Tsai Ming-Liang: Stray Dogs," by Linda Jaivin. *Youtube*. Australia National University, "Taiwan: The View from the South Conference," 6-9 January 2015.

directors have similarly diverse backgrounds. While their identities and associations with nationality due to China and greater China's unique history may inform their films, it is dangerous to focus entirely or heavily on these concepts when reading and labeling films. The restrictive habits of our subconscious, making generalizations and/or fetishizing an "other," which Chow points out even for scholars in advanced fields of Asian Studies are guilty of, must be accounted for in the proliferation of ideas.<sup>1415</sup>

### *Cultural Barriers*

Provoked by the idea that labeling Tsai's films as Taiwanese can be limiting, I considered whether or not, like Ang Li's Hollywood films, one can read Tsai's films without any connection to Taiwan and still be meaningful. This would imply that the geographic locations of his films and the national identities of the actors/characters he uses are unimportant. This conclusion can be equally reductive. If we are to consider his films within the category of "Taiwanese national cinema," the term needs to be carefully dissected and understood. When a film is categorized, what does it connote and what needs to be emphasized? So before venturing into an analysis of Tsai's films, it is imperative to understand his genre and what we gain and lose by these categorizations.

Returning to Tsai and his films' connection with Taiwan, it is important to not almost all of the actors Tsai uses are Taiwanese. While Tsai's scripts and actors help represent an aspect of Taiwan, or an individual living in Taiwan, this fact does not imply that his films are making a statement about Taiwan as a whole. He states in interviews that his method of script writing and

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<sup>14</sup> Chow, "Introduction: on Chineseness"

<sup>15</sup> Chow, *Writing Diaspora*

shooting involve sparse, incomplete scripts and long shots in order to observe more than direct. He desires to evoke a natural response from his actors, essentially making a large part of his film about the people. His films become an observation of people. The fact that his actors are mostly Taiwanese should not be ignored because, while this notion does not imply that his films reflect a collective Taiwanese unconscious, individuals are influenced by the identity groups which they associate with. I would argue Tsai was not thinking about greater Taiwan in the making of his films. As opposed to a collective Taiwanese consciousness, his films better represent individuals—individuals whose Taiwanese nationality is just a piece of the whole picture.

In addition to using mostly Taiwanese actors, the majority of Tsai's films are shot in part or entirely in Taiwan. And being a director who explicitly is interested in depicting naturalness and reality,<sup>16</sup> his films therefore incorporate many visual descriptions of contemporary Taiwan. Just on the surface, his films include middle-income Taiwanese families, real estate agents, taxi drivers, elevator assistants, acupuncture and western medicine doctors—to name a few. None of these roles are necessarily unique to Taiwan, but they perhaps have idiosyncrasies specific to Taiwan, such as simple car seat decorations in the taxi one not likely to see in America. Temple culture is a unique quality of Taiwanese culture that also plays a role in the backdrop of many of his films as well.<sup>17</sup> All of these qualities contribute to the Taiwanese experience of his films. But, I think, if one views his films only through the “lens of Taiwan,” there is something to be lost within this narrow-reaching lens. I want to argue that Tsai is not limited to making films about Taiwanese people, that his films complicate the concept of “Taiwanese”—a singular identity.

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<sup>16</sup> It should be noted that Tsai has stated, “It isn't necessary for film reality to be 100% the same as real-life reality. What I show in my films isn't necessarily what would be in a documentary.” (Reviere, *Tsai Ming-liang*, 113.)

<sup>17</sup> Robert P. Weller, “Living at the Edge: Religion, Capitalism, and the End of the Nation-State in Taiwan,” *Public Culture* no. 2 (2000): 477, Project MUSE, EBSCOhost.

It would be helpful to situate Tsai's representation of Taiwan by comparing his films to his most well-known and talked about predecessors, ten years his senior, Hou Hsiao Hsien and Edward Yang. As I mentioned before, they were directly involved in the ideas behind and creation of New Taiwanese Cinema with the "1987 Taiwan Film Manifesto." One of the manifesto's main principles was to reflect local Taiwanese culture in films.<sup>18</sup> Critics read Hou and Yang as having consciously thought about Taiwan's history and present society in the making of their films. The strong connection with history explains why narrative is such an important quality in both of their works. Even though the films tend not to feel as fast as a Hollywood film (where arguably the main focus is the progression of the story), their films incorporate a dense amount of narrative and multiple character perspective within the limits of feature films' average timespan. Consider Hou's *City of Sadness* (悲情城市, 1989), which lasts almost three hours, and explicitly returns to history in the film to describe the four years leading up to the February 28th massacre. In *Three Times* (最好的時光, 2005), Hou incorporates three narratives from different time periods into a single, roughly two-hour length feature film. Most of Yang's films are set in contemporary Taiwan, and his narratives are rich with different perspectives. *Yiyi: A One and a Two* (2000) takes one family and explores each member's private lives separate from the family. *The Terrorizers* (恐怖分子, 1986) intermingles multiple narratives of strangers. When Yang goes back in time to the 1950-60's with *A Brighter Summer's Day* (牯嶺街少年殺人事件, 1991), he uses nearly four hours to unpack the complicated web of relationships among adolescents. Lu Tonglin summarizes the two directors as, "two great authors in the cinematic history of Chinese-language communities, largely because

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<sup>18</sup> Tonglin Lu, "Taiwan New Cinema and Its Legacy," In *The Chinese Cinema Book*, edited by Lim Song Hwee and Julian Ward, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011,) 122.

they are products of Taiwan's unique cultural and social circumstances.”<sup>19</sup> In comparison to Tsai Ming Liang, the important difference to highlight about these directors is their devotion to depicting individuals within a group identity and culture that they arguably see as specific to Taiwan. What I aim to describe in this thesis is how Tsai focuses on the individual, particularly individuals disconnected from a collective identity, and how national identity has splintered.

As for Tsai's films, I do not believe political history plays a huge role. Or else, the role of history in his films is used far differently than that of Yang or Hou, which I will explain later. In *Taiwan Cinema*, Hong Guo Jun describes Tsai's work as “ahistorical.”<sup>20</sup> The films lack distinguishing qualities for thinking about history, except for two brief references. The first appears in Tsai's short film *The Skywalk is Gone*. Two women (played by Chen Shiang Chyi and Lu Yi Qing) cross a multi-lane road illegally, and the older woman (Lu) gets into a fight with the traffic guard who tickets them, and therefore tells him she does not have her ID.

Traffic guard: Of course you do. How do you prove your identity if you don't?  
 Lu: Why should I prove it?  
 Traffic guard: How do I know whether you're Taiwanese or not?  
 Lu: Can't you understand Mandarin?  
 Traffic guard: Mainlanders speak Mandarin almost the same.<sup>21</sup>

This scene is the only moment throughout Tsai's films where he makes any explicit mention of tension between Taiwanese and Mainland Chinese. In *Stray Dogs*, the only blatant reference to history is made with a single shot. In the home where the migrant/homeless family dwells, an abandoned building, the walls are decorated with two old framed pictures, one of Chiang Kai Shek, the first president of Taiwan, and in the other Lee Teng Hui, the “father of democracy.”

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., 128-129.

<sup>20</sup> Guo Jun Hong, *Taiwan Cinema: A Contested Nation On Screen*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011.) 161.

<sup>21</sup> Tsai Ming Liang, *The Skywalk is Gone*, 2002

The presence of these two portraits immediately penetrates the film with memories of the history these men represent—for anyone familiar with Taiwanese history.

Aside from Taiwanese history, Tsai's films also interact with film history. He references Hong Kong/Taiwanese filmmaker King Hu in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* and French filmmaker Francois Truffaut in *What Time is it There?* and *Visage*. I also argue later that *Visage* is in conversation with Olivier Assayas' *Irma Vep*. Tsai even enjoys making false histories (and futures too) in his quasi-apocalyptic films *The Hole* and *Wayward Cloud*.

Moving beyond history, the films incorporate many contemporary problems of Taiwan and the world. Hong Guo Jun links Tsai's first feature film *Rebels of the Neon God*, where graffiti reading "AIDS" is briefly featured, to the AIDS documentary *My New Friends* (我新认识的朋友, 1995) Tsai made later. Hong goes on to suggest, despite the single visual reference, the entire film *Rebels* is about AIDS.<sup>22</sup> Lim Song Hwee argues that in *My New Friends* (an internationally-funded project) Tsai turns AIDS into a metaphor about homosexuality. "If the discrimination against AIDS is embedded in the discrimination against homosexuality, instead of producing an educational documentary about AIDS, Tsai has, in a metaphoric operation, made one about homosexuality instead."<sup>23</sup> The films therefore make commentary on an issue that is both local and global. As for Taiwan-specific problems, the post-1980s real estate boom slowdown is referenced in *Vive L'Amour*. And arguably many of the films reflect on the social milieu after the economic boom of the '80s. *Stray Dogs* could also be commenting on the state of migrant workers in Taiwan, which Tsai suggests in an interview.<sup>24</sup> This all said, these local

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<sup>22</sup> Hong, *Taiwan Cinema*, 163.

<sup>23</sup> Song Hwee Lim, *Celluloid Comrades: Representations of Male Homosexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinemas*, (Honolulu : University of Hawai'i Press, 2006.) 135.

<sup>24</sup> Tsai, "In Conversation with Director Tsai Ming-Liang: *Stray Dogs*"



issues are in the background of his film. For example, *Vive L'Amour* is not a film about the housing bubble, and while the empty houses are indicative of the issue, their role in the film is more meaningful as an avenue to understand the characters rather than understanding Taiwan's economy.



*What Time is it There?*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2001

Tsai's films not only feel ahistorical, they also often deal with a nonlinear concept of time. His films, in thinking about time and the present, thus must think about the past and future in unique ways. Time is a central focus point in the film *What Time is it There?*. It confronts linear, capitalist time and considers the metaphysical concept of time. *The Hole* also plays with time. The almost sci-fi drama with comedic musical interludes concludes with the quote written on the screen before the ending credits: "In the year 2000, we are grateful that we still have Grace Cheng's songs to comfort us." -Tsai Ming Liang." This quote, ironically, appears in a film

made in 1999—a quote from the future! One possible reading of why this quote is included is to suggest people are obsessed with the future, not focused on the present or the past—with such questions as, “What will happen to us?” Once again, the themes he works with are not specific to Taiwan.



*Stray Dogs*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2013

To come back to my earlier question about what is lost or gained by reading Tsai’s films within the genre of being a “Taiwanese film,” I want to finally reflect on one of Tsai’s filmmaking techniques which I think make his films accessible with or without background on Taiwan. When describing Tsai’s films, I occasionally mention the possibility of *found* versus *planned* because of his unique filmmaking technique, which seems to value chance and unexpected occurrences. He seems to open himself to outside influences in the process of making his films. I believe this quality makes the films more accessible to the international film

audience because the films lack a culturally-specific agenda, as Taiwanese New Wave films may be seen as having. Therefore details that draw significance to viewers may not have been that significant in the planning process of the film. For example, the poem “Man Jiang Hong” (满江红) Lee sings in *Stray Dogs* was chosen simply because Tsai knew it was a poem Lee could recite from memory, having learned it in school.<sup>25</sup> Since Tsai’s scripts are so sparse,<sup>26</sup> and the diegetic soundtracks are unobtrusive (while they are full of sound, the sounds do not draw much attention), this long monologue immediately attracts the analytical viewers’ attention, thus making the scene seem key to understanding the film on a whole. Despite the seemingly random “collection” system Tsai describes in interviews for the making of his films, the choices made in editing make every scene significant. In this way, a viewer of Tsai’s films can interpret meaning without the weight or necessity of having a deep background in Taiwanese history or culture. One viewer who looks back on the film might analyze the lyrics, another might research the poem’s background, and then apply these ideas to understanding the film. And yet the poem is never referenced again, so a viewer could just as easily forget it. But what they are less likely to forget is the close up shot of Lee’s pained and numb face, which *does* reappear later in the film. Another part of this scene which could be focused on is Lee’s role as a sign holder. This job is common for migrant workers, generally men working away from home to make low wages. So for the Taiwanese viewer, seeing him in this position might lead the viewer to semi-consciously link him with migrant workers. Meanwhile, someone less familiar with this aspect of Taiwan’s labor force might more likely associate Lee with a homeless man. The pitiful story of his alcohol

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<sup>25</sup> Tsai, "In Conversation with Director Tsai Ming-Liang: *Stray Dogs*"

<sup>26</sup> Another quality which makes his films more accessible to an international market is the barrenness of the scripts and dialogue, removing the language barrier feeling for most of the film.

problem inhibiting his role as a single father could leave the viewer with the impression that the film is a critique on the treatment of low-income Taiwanese or migrant dwellers in Taiwan. In this way, Tsai's films enjoy a wealth of representation, and this is one example of how Tsai's films feel more tied to ethnoscapes and diaspora identities rather than a "Taiwanese" identity, which, really, better describes Taiwan<sup>27</sup> and the modern, international landscape of the world.



*Stray Dogs*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2013

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<sup>27</sup> Williams, "Who are the Taiwanese?," 163.

## Chapter 2: Rebellion

After the premier of his first feature film, Tsai Ming Liang was described as, “something new.”<sup>28</sup> His films represented the first change in films made in art cinema from Taiwan since the Taiwanese New Wave movement. I argue that his film style is not only new compared to his predecessors, but also rebellious. This rebellion is incorporated in the content and production of his films. Tsai complicates and confuses narratives with his manipulation of time. He confronts his audience’s level of comfort in the mundane with extended scenes and limited character or plot development, as well as provokes them with social taboos. And in order to produce this new film aesthetic, he too has had to rebel against producers and subsidy providers, moving to international funding for almost all of his subsequent films.

### *Narrative & Content*

Combining the subject of family lives with the family members’ individual sexual lives seems like an unlikely focus for a film. But they are both realities, identities even, which exist simultaneously in life. While society/culture seems to try to dissociate a mother with sexual desire, a woman’s sexual identity and family role are both parts of herself. *The River* addresses both of these identities with Hsiao Kang (Lee Kang Sheng) and his parents (Tien Miao and Lu Yi Ching) in a film about the family’s disconnection and sexual frustrations, where at the forefront Hsiao Kang spends the entire film dealing with an illness without cause or cure. Tsai Ming Liang takes the two themes a step further and pushes everyone out of their comfort zone to completely confront the sexuality and lack of affection between the family members through the infamous father-son incest scene. Tsai describes in an interview how he himself did not plan the

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<sup>28</sup> Hong, *Taiwan Cinema*, 160

scene until the day of the shoot. He pushed his own boundaries, did what he himself could not conceptualize until the day of filming. Instead of the father and son passing each other in the gay sauna and discovering they share a hidden sexual identity—his original plan—Tsai pushes the event a step further.<sup>29</sup> By pushing social boundaries, the scene not only highlights their shared identity as homosexuals, but also suggests their failed identities as father and son. Filmed in a dark room, their moment of ecstasy together, where they accept their sexual selves, illustrates intimacy and respect never visible between the father and son in daylight. Rey Chow describes the scene: "Although the sexual partners have transgressed against most known bounds of custom, culture, and civilization the exchange we witness nonetheless commands sympathy and respect."<sup>30</sup> When the light is turned on, the father is violent and the son runs away. The characters immediately exit the dark sauna, where they were inhabiting their homosexual identity, and re-enter the dysfunctional identities of father-and-son in the daylight. The irony is in that realm of homosexuality, the pair is loving and connected in the most intimate way. In the realm of father and son, there is violence and miscommunication. While controversial, by pushing himself as a director, the role of incest in the film becomes incredibly powerful for pushing his audience. It is arguable that the pair find themselves in this unthinkable situation because they hide themselves from each other so deeply. Another suggestion is that the pair are so disconnected as father and son, they no longer are father and son in the real sense of the identity, and the sex scene could be viewed instead, not as incest, but an emphasis of how little they resemble father and son. In Rey Chow's analysis of the film, she makes two interesting claims. She goes so far as

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<sup>29</sup> Tsai Ming Liang, "Scouting," by Danièle Rivière. In *Tsai Ming-liang*. Paris : Dis Voir, 1999, 98.

<sup>30</sup> Rey Chow, "A Pain in the Neck, a Scene of 'Incest,' and Other Enigmas of an Allegorical Cinema: Tsai Ming-liang's 'The River,'" CR: The New Centennial Review, 2004, 132.

to avoid even calling Tien Miao's character (who is nameless in the film) "the father" and instead says "old man" because she argues Tsai "dephallicized" Tien Miao's character in the film, removing his patriarchal power and showing him completing traditionally mother roles (such as ironing his clothes), she sees him no longer as a father.<sup>31</sup> This is not to ignore all of the fatherly acts he does in the beginning of the film (like trying to feed Hsiao Kang and taking him to doctors), which merely emphasize his empty-shell role as a father. So by taking this rebellious step to include incest in the film, which produced a lot of criticism,<sup>32</sup> Tsai is able to more effectively make his audience think. Rey Chow makes another very interesting claim about how Tsai provokes re-thinking with the inclusion of incest. She says that by not only including incest, but using same-sex incest, Tsai confronts cultural and scholarly understandings of incest as a heterosexual act.<sup>33</sup> As for my own analysis, I believe the scene pushes us to rethink their relationship and better understand the two identities. One identity, their family roles, is assumed, and this fact is perhaps taken for granted. By law and blood they may be father and son, but their actions lack the fulfilling features. Meanwhile, the other identity, homosexuality, is un-assumed unless spoken otherwise, and both father and son feel some unspoken burden to keep their identity a secret.

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., 135

<sup>32</sup> "That scene in *The River* brought me a lot of criticism, really hostile criticism: in some cases, outright insults. They say there are three groups of people who hate the film. First, those who only remember the incest scene. Then, homosexuals who ask: Why does he have to show homosexuals in such a sad, dark setting...?. Finally, feminists who dislike a film which shows a world full of men who reject women." (Tsai, "Scouting," 98.)

<sup>33</sup> Chow, "A Pain in the Neck," 125.



*The River*, Tsai Ming Liang, 1997

At the end of her analysis, Rey Chow includes this quote from Tsai Ming Liang:

I try to reflect the sense of solitude inherent in human nature in a destructive and exaggerated manner because I don't know whether solitude is good or bad, though what the whole society and value system tell us is: 'You cannot/must not be alone.' The burden created by the Chinese' strong sense of family is especially hard to bear. Our society has never told us how to live freely. What it imposes on you is a set of formulas, with no one ever telling you what kind of distance there ought to be between human beings. That is why I want to push my films to extremes (to the limits), and see if human beings become capable of thinking only when there is far enough distance between them.

<sup>34</sup>

I am borrowing again from one of Chow's insights to highlight that the film ends, soon after the incest scene, void of "the classical-tragic/psychoanalytic-traumatic conclusion."<sup>35</sup> Their father-son roles return, and while the father goes to buy breakfast, Hsiao Kang opens the hotel curtain to let in the bright morning light, and he seems almost refreshed as he steps out onto the

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<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 137

<sup>35</sup> Ibid., 138



before-unnoticed balcony and looks at the city around him. This ending coupled with Tsai's quote emphasizes that in rebellion, removing the tragedy from the taboo, his films seek to break down our expectations and comfort levels to seek collective rethinking about the relationships and roles learned and expected from society, in hopes of better understanding ourselves as individuals.



*The River*, Tsai Ming Liang, 1997

Despite the intensity of some of the film content, like the above mentioned incest scene, Tsai's films tend to resist telling a story. Instead of a traditional narrative structure where a problem drives the plot, Tsai's stories begin without any background, end with no clue to the future, and avoid explicit explanations for anything that happens within these windows of time he drops his audience in to. To just list a few examples, *Rebels* starts off with the protagonist, Hsiao Kang, withdrawing from school without any reason given. In *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*,

with parallel editing, two stories unfold with the protagonist (Lee Kang Sheng). In the first he has long, disheveled hair, and in the second his head is shaved and he spends the entire film in a comatose on a makeshift hospital bed. By using the same actor, the editing suggests the first story will reveal answers regarding the sickness in second story. In *What Time is it There?* the narrative begins more classically with the death of the father (Tien Miao). But the mother (Lu Yi Ching) and son's (Lee's) responses are bizarre and create bigger questions. Why would the mother grieve so heavily when their relationship was practically non-existent in *The River*, and is there a connection between Hsiao Kang meeting Shiang Chyi (Chen Shiang Chyi) and his father's death that make him obsessed with clocks? Instead of his narratives following characters solving problems presented within the plot, his characters more so meander through the film without evident meaning or clear intent. Therefore, with the absence of traditional plot structure, his films draw viewers in through the questions his unique narratives provoke (which are never blatantly answered in the films). And some of these questions most likely are provoked because the average film viewer is accustomed to a certain experience and narrative structure when watching films. Tsai's breaking of the narrative norms is both frustrating and fascinating as a viewer.

I believe Tsai uses this technique, this resistance to tell a story, in part to challenge what is expected from film—both challenging himself and his viewers. Just as silence and slowness allow viewers to pause and self-reflect more (which I will expand more on later), since the film is not pulling them along, this absence of a narrative also provokes reflection. So, considering the content of his films, a focus on the mundane and the bizarre qualities of human nature, the lack of narrative lets us put ourselves in the film.

With his first three feature films Tsai surprised cinematic expectations by moving away from Taiwanese New Wave style, using only diegetic soundtracks,<sup>36</sup> unusual narrative structure, and incorporating social taboos in the film content. With this precedent he set up, Tsai then once again shocked expectations by using choreographed musical interludes in his fourth feature film *The Hole* (1999) (and again in *The Wayward Cloud* (2005) and *Visage* (2009)). *The Hole* and *Wayward* also share a new narrative style for Tsai. Unlike his other films which have a documentary style and focus on reality, these two films are based in a quasi-apocalyptic reality. In *The Hole*, the “Taiwan Virus” has taken over and the government is pushing for people to leave their homes and move to refugee camps. The virus causes the people to take on rat-like characteristics, crawling on hands and knees in search of dark spaces. In *Wayward*, Taiwan is overtaken by a serious drought. So the government uses TV news stations to promote drinking watermelon juice instead of water. The film focuses on the series of problems this situation creates for a porn studio. After the filming of a scene that involves watermelons, the actors have no water to clean themselves and start attracting ants. Lee’s character goes so far as to bathe in a water tower on top of an apartment complex. Next, the studio tries to shoot a scene in the shower. But as they soon run out of water, they resort to pour green, dirty water (presumably from a nearby river) on the porn actors. While the setup for these films feel closer to a science fiction narrative, the characters maintain a sense of reality within these bizarre scenarios and continue their mundane lives—until the music scenes cut in.

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<sup>36</sup> The exception being the unmemorable soundtrack in *Rebels*, which Tsai says he was forced by his producer to incorporate. (Tsai, “Scouting,” 111.)



*The Wayward Cloud*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2005

In each of the two movies the choreographed music scenes play a role when a love story develops. The dated love songs, choreographed into musical interludes with colorful, flamboyant costumes and dances, break up both films four to five times, and appear to describe the characters' "true" feelings. These musical interludes feel like an interruption and yet satisfying to watch. The upbeat songs with straight-forward lyrics, bright colors, and slick movements starkly contrast all the qualities which normally describe Tsai's films. In contrast to the reality Tsai tries to find and depict in his films, these scenes are completely staged, the opposite of reality. In reference to *The Hole*, Peter Hitchcock reads the musical interludes as a, "visual relief [in] the form of nostalgia."<sup>37</sup> His analysis is influenced by the quote at the film's end: "In the year two

<sup>37</sup> Peter Hitchcock, "Taiwan Fever: Tsai Ming Liang and the Everyday Postnation.," In *Chinese Connections: Critical Perspectives on Film, Identity, and Diaspora*, edited by See-Kam Tan, Peter X Feng, and Gina Marchetti, (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2009.), 240.

thousand, we are grateful that we still have the songs of Grace Chang to comfort us.” It is arguable, yes, that these musical interludes offer emotional relief from the dreary, decline of society themes in both films. But the *visual* relief comes from the rebellious qualities of his usual film aesthetic. These kitschy music scenes, by contrast, mock the alternatives to reality feature films and television generally offer. By ironically using these music scenes with straightforward lyrics to explicitly inform the audience of the characters’ feelings, the laughable contrast to reality makes these interludes confront the viewer with new questions. How could such artificial sequences be the true description of how these characters feel? Perhaps Tsai generally excludes explicit dialogue which informs our understanding of his characters’ emotions because the characters themselves are not truly capable of verbalizing how they feel. Tsai pushes us again to rethink the reality in cinema and life which we may take for granted.

Tsai’s French-Mandarin-English film *Visage* breaks expectations by pushing the musical interludes to make new commentary. In this film-within-a-film, Lee Kang Sheng goes to Paris to make a movie. In the course of making his films, the tables are turned. Lee manipulates his lead actress, French model Laetitia Casta, like a doll. Sexualized and dressed in skimpy clothes for a winter scene, the actress lip-sings Mandarin songs, in musical scenes reminiscent of Tsai’s earlier films. Lee pushes this fetishization further, objectifying her by valuing the realistic look of cold skin over her own comfort, as he puts ice on her face and prevents her from drinking hot liquids. Lee is so focused on creating the reality in his films that her face becomes more of a manipulative canvas than a human face. As a result, while the film progresses, the actress starts using black tape to block her reflection in a mirror, and later completely blocks out the light from her windows, making herself and the space she exists in pitch black. These sequences suggest

that Lee's objectification made her desire removing self-reflection from her reality, so as to avoid being able to see herself as Lee sees her. The critics who write about *Visage* that I have come across all write about the film's connection with François Truffaut's work because of Tsai's previous film *What Time is it There?* which directly references his film *400 Blows*. In both films Tsai includes Truffaut's long time muse Jean-Pierre Léaud, so the connection is understandable. But I was surprised I could not find any work which wrote about the connection between *Visage* and Olivier Assayas' *Irma Vep* (1996). Another film-within-a-film, Léaud is also in this film, his role being the film director. Also in the film, Maggie Cheung plays herself as the Hong Kong actress in France whom no one seems to understand. She is fitted in a skin-tight, full-body black latex suit, obviously being objectified as an imported Asian beauty more so than an individual human being, and seems to wander through the landscape of the film without making meaningful contact with her colleagues. In a similar scene in *Visage*, Casta tries to navigate through an empty factory with an extremely long and heavy dress. *Irma Vep* provokes questions about how the "East" is fetishized and Asian cinemas misunderstood, and *Visage* re-approaches the question about the relationships and perceptions of identity between "East" and "West" by putting Lee in the position, as a director, of fetishizing the West. Tsai provokes this rethinking by shocking expectations, which he triggers in this film early on by using a white woman to sing an old Mandarin pop song.



*Visage*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2009

### *Production*

Time plays a significant role in the success of Tsai's films. The way in which he manipulates time changes our experience of his films compared to other films. There are multiple levels to how he controls time in the production of his films, such as shot length and camera movement. While his films are average in time length, his technique makes the feeling of time feel slower while watching, despite the fact that the actions are filmed in "real time," which we ought to be accustomed to. He also disrupts expectations for linear time in some of his films. This disruption is also effective for creating a new cinematic viewing experience.

To begin discussing the rebellion found in Tsai Ming Liang's production technique, I think it is fitting to preface the analysis with anecdotes of Tsai's explicit rebellion noted in conflict he has faced with producers and sponsors. Tsai has faced a fair amount of resistance

when it comes to the choices he makes in filmmaking. So not only are his filmmaking techniques rebellious, but he himself has to rebel against the producers sometimes. His decisions as a filmmaker have also forced him to move away from Taiwanese government funding and seek assistance from international production companies for all of his films after *The River*.<sup>38</sup> In his interview with Revière, he cites two examples of conflict in which he did not get his way when making his first film *Rebels*. First was the sound track. He says he feels the film is perfect without the imposed music, but the producer forced him to add the digital music soundtrack that never appears again in Tsai's films.<sup>39</sup> Second was the ending. Tsai says, if he had his way, the film would have added after the bike was defiled. But the film was too short for funding, so his producer wrote the additional sequence where Hsiao Kang tries to make up for his vandalism and help Ah-Tze.<sup>40</sup> The desire to end the film then is another great example of how little Tsai seems cares about his characters growing or changing—again, rebelling against classic methods of storytelling. As for *My New Friends*, the AIDS documentary I mentioned in Chapter 1, Tsai again clashed with the producer, but in this case he was successful. In this case, he wanted to make the AIDS documentary about homosexuals with AIDS because of the double stigmas. His producers wanted him to avoid homosexuals all together. And in fact, it was even difficult for him to find homosexuals who would appear on camera. In order to get their compliance, Tsai filmed his own face during the interview.<sup>41</sup>

Tsai Ming Liang says he became interested with *slowness* as a form of rebellion not because he wanted to be rebellious, but because it captured a return to reality that was lost when

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<sup>38</sup> Song Hwee Lim, *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness*, (Honolulu, Hawaii: University of Hawai'i Press, 2014,) 61-62

<sup>39</sup> Tsai, "Scouting," by Daniele Reviere, 92.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 111.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.



working with trained actors who study tempo and speed. This is not to say quickness is not natural, as Tsai describes himself as a fast person, like his mother. In fact, he says he was drawn to slowness because of Lee Kang Sheng, his muse. Tsai cites an example of when he first started shooting Lee,<sup>42</sup> a young man he found on the street with no previous acting experience. He made Lee re-shoot a scene where he turns his head several times because, to Tsai, the slow speed at which he turned his head seemed unnatural. In response to Tsai's frustration, Lee retorted, "This is how I am, naturally." Tsai claims this experience completely changed his view on performance.<sup>43</sup> While not everyone naturally moves more slowly, Lee reminded Tsai of his own father, who he never got to know very well before passing away. Therefore, Tsai's transition as a director to begin incorporating slowness in his films was not only a product of desiring to restrain himself from controlling the natural actions of his actor, but also stemmed from the desire to better understand both Lee and his late father. Part of the rebellion in slowness comes from how it challenges trained actors to rethink the actions they have become so familiar with. In his interview with Daniele Riviere, Tsai describes his experience producing Brecht's play "The Good Women of Sezuan," where he worked with famous Hong Kong classical dancers and how difficult it was for them to break away from their routine and not to use their most impressive dance and choreography skills. He said, "They told me [after]... that they were used to working to create beautifully-choreographed movements which would be repeated thousands of times, and performed without thinking. With me they were forced to think, to convey an idea and justify each of their movements."<sup>44</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> Then an untrained actor Tsai discovered on the street.

<sup>43</sup> Tsai Ming Liang, "In Conversation with Director Tsai Ming-Liang: No Form and The Skywalk is Gone," by Linda Jaivin. *Youtube*. Australia National University, "Taiwan: The View from the South Conference," 6-9 January 2015.

<sup>44</sup> Tsai, "Scouting," 95-97.

Slowness in his films also seems to come from Tsai's desire to keep asking the question *why*. Tsai says he only writes two-thirds of his screen plays and shoots in order of events so that he can push himself to better understand the film,<sup>45</sup> and he uses a sparse script to allow his actors (professional and nonprofessional) to add to the film in ways he had not considered. He describes how he used to over-analyze and meticulously plan the logic of scenes,<sup>46</sup> which suggests that rigid planning can be reductive for self-reflection in the filmmaking process. While the question, "why?," is simple, his work illustrates how infrequently we ask ourselves the same question. Therefore slowness becomes a tool for reflection. This question slows down our actions, just as it slows down his films.

Slowing down in film and shooting actions in "real time" seems to impact everyone in the making and viewing of Tsai's films. The slow scenes push viewers to rethink how to process the film. Instead of focusing on the meaning behind the actions—the classic method of thinking about film which quick editing provokes (Deleuze terms this "*movement-image*")—slow scenes with "less important" actions allow the audience to focus on the image itself (the "*time-image*").

<sup>47</sup> While the movement-image makes us view the film action-to-action, scene-to-scene, to understand the film's value, the time-image is powerful and unique because it keeps us present. This presence, as Deleuze describes it, is rich with a concept of the past and future, but is not linear, "Time simultaneously makes the present pass and preserves the past in itself."<sup>48</sup> Lim Song

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<sup>45</sup> "When I was making those films, or doing the choreography, it was always in order to engage in a dialogue with myself, to show things or ask questions, or in response to private things which I wasn't able to describe, things I didn't understand. It's always a way of studying myself." Daniele Reviere, "Scouting," *Tsai Ming-liang*, 97

<sup>46</sup> "I put a lot of thought into making that scene in *The Rebels* where Ah-tze's scooter is impounded by the police entirely logical... Everything was worked out to the second. Now when I see that way of operating it seems to me a bit stupid, but after five very 'documentary' TV films, I think that's a fair representation of my state of mind at the time." (Tsai, "Scouting," 88.)

<sup>47</sup> Lim, *Cinema of Slowness*, 19.

<sup>48</sup> Deleuze, *The Time-Image*, 98-105.

Hwee clearly exemplifies the comparison of the movement-image and the time image with Ang Lee's *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) and Nuri Bilge Ceylan's *Uzak* (2002) to describe their effects on the audience's involvement with the film:

Whereas for André Bazin a long take such as the opening shot of *Uzak* demands that the audience 'exercise at least a minimum of personal choice' in terms of what to see within the frame (1967, 36), continuity editing decides for the audience that none of the images per se is worth seeing because what is privileged is the linking of images to form a narrative that, precisely, *continues* rather than lingers. As demonstrated by the opening sequence of *Brokeback Mountain*, continuity editing suggests that there is a story to be told, and, thus, there is literally no time to waste. The long take of *Uzak*'s opening, on the other hand, preserves the unity of space and the integrity of time, allowing the protagonist (and the camera) ample time to wonder, linger, and meander because, even if the protagonist has somewhere else to go, he is in no hurry to do so.<sup>49</sup>

If we apply this concept to understanding the long, slow shots in Tsai's films, it becomes clear that space is a key feature and theme. Without using slow shots, Tsai would not have been able to draw our attention to the importance of space in his films.

The role and use of time in Tsai's films subverts our contemporary, capitalist, lifestyle, where efficiency and speed are highly valued qualities of life. Lim emphasizes that Tsai's films are slow not just because of long shots (and, I will add, limited camera movement), but also the nature of the narrative is slow.<sup>50</sup> The anti-storytelling quality of his narratives, almost documentary-style depiction of the characters' lives, and their lack of significant character development further slow down the films. Consider the classic roller-coaster diagram used to describe plot development, suggesting different speeds and heights of excitement the narrative ought to offer. Even in Tsai's most shocking scenes, such as when father and son in *The River*

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<sup>49</sup> Lim, *Cinema of Slowness*, 19-20.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

have sex, the scene is still, slow, and quiet. There is no speed or warning which brings us to that moment, and the scene and film end equally undramatic in pace, despite the gravity of the scene's content. To further emphasize this point, it is valuable to consider the other scenes which *The River* mainly consists of. Hsiao-Kang's character spends the majority of the film sleeping, eating, and wandering. Lim describes this style of narrative slowness as a form of *wasting time*<sup>51</sup> on screen, which thus creates boredom and wastes the precious and feeling time of the audience members who seek cinema as a source of escape and entertainment. "Under the logic of capitalism, there can be no greater luxury than the luxury of time or, rather, the crime of boredom," Lim argues that cinema of slowness thus, "invites us to reconsider the value of waste even as this notion of waste challenges conventional ideas about utility, productivity, and labor."

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The time-image is not Tsai's only subversive method which causes us to rethink cinema, human relationships, and time itself. In *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, Tsai uses parallel narratives to lure his audience into believing the past will make sense of the present eventually, and then dissolves this possibility by revealing the scenes completely lack logical sequence, thus leaving the view with pieces of the "past" and "present" with nothing to tie them together. In this sense, scenes from *Sleep* encapsulate the ultimate time-image because the scenes before and after can no longer be connected by understanding chronological events and creating cause-and-effect conclusions. Instead, the scenes must be connected by something else, or left to enjoy with the absence of logic.

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<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 24.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 30.

Tsai begins *Sleep Alone* with the question of the protagonist (Lee's) sickness, and perceives to unfold the story with nonlinear parallel narrative, shifting between (an assumed) past and present narrative revolving around the same characters and setting. One point in time is represented with Lee's character wearing long hair, and the second period is shown with Lee's head shaven. This becomes our key marker for understanding two points in time when watching the film, a visual indicator for making sense of the non-linear narrative. The scenes cut between long-haired Lee exploring dirty streets of Malaysia at night, eating street food, and ultimately running into trouble with hustlers. Soon after this, the film cuts to Lee in a sick bed, head shaven, in a clean room where classical music is heard playing on the radio and daylight streams through the window. His narratives fill the viewer with a unique curiosity in yearning to understand the peculiar behavior of Lee and other characters—a longing to understand the bizarre behavior of mundane life. So the question Tsai opens his film with is: how does this immigrant<sup>53</sup> get himself so sick? And as the film begins, we are led to believe that the parallel, nonlinear narrative will reveal the answer. The hardships Lee goes through include being beaten up by money hustlers on the street for having no money, bed bugs, and inhaling haze. But instead, progression into the film only creates more questions, and all the potential reasons seen in the film never appear conclusive enough. Just as in *The Hole* and *The River*, ultimately no reason or explanation is ever given for the illness.

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<sup>53</sup> I am making the assumption that Lee plays a role of an immigrant based on two clues. First, Lee's character naive enough to get hustled and beat up in a street scheme, which he appears to have just wandered into, language-ignorant, observing out of curiosity—the same look of curiosity from the scene before where he watches a street vendor cook food. The second basis for this assumption comes from precedents Tsai has set up in his repertoire of films. His films have a quality of building narratives off each other, in part by always using the same actors and, frequently, using the same characters. In this way it is hard to separate the Taiwanese Lee Hsiao-Kang and the character in this film. Tsai is in no way explicit about whether his characters live in a new world or the old one when he makes new films, and based on the other ways in which he subverts cinema convention, it would not surprise me if this ambiguity is intentional.



*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2006



*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2006

The ambiguity of time and history in the film makes the relationships between the characters also very difficult to define. Even the way the film is shot keeps the audience at a distance from truly understanding their relationships, creating a distance between the audience and the characters as well. One example of such a scene occurs during a house tour, which is shot with just one cut. The camera angle purposefully keeps the audience at an unclear voyeur perspective. The first shot of the scene starts with the camera in the room, looking out toward the hallway, Lee on his sick bed and Chen (Chen Shiang Chyi) by his side, the two in the foreground. In the background we hear a Chinese man giving the tour down the hallway. With just the space visible from the open doorway, we get a glimpse into the background, where the people on the tour try to peer back into the room. While they peer in, Chen pushes Lee's stiff body over and covers him with a blanket. The camera then cuts to a new location, the exact position from before we were positioned to try to look into: the hallway. Once again we are in the position of voyeur as we look from the hallway, through the door, into the room where Chen and Lee are now in the background. A woman (played by Pearly Chan) and a man walk into the room, but they immediately walk out of our point of view. Chan criticizes her husband for trying to sell the house, saying as defense, "Where will your brother and his wife live?" After he leaves, she proceeds to walk over to Chen, slap her, and then exits. Are Chen and Lee's characters the mentioned brother and sister-in-law? And if not, why else would Lee have been moved from the attic to the main floor bedroom? The DVD cover for the film adds to the confusion, by describing Lee as a drifter who begins a relationship with a waitress, suggesting Chen lives in Chan's house for part of her pay as a worker. The obscure cinematography style of this sequence makes the threesome's relationship increasingly ambiguous.

In the end though, none of our questions will be answered. It eventually becomes clear that the “past” and the “future” scenes are not in order. What I illustrated in the previous scene analysis is the use of chronological events to back up an idea. But ultimately, Tsai makes this source of reasoning pointless. By dissolving the method of understanding, this creates tension for the audience. But it also relieves the audience from having to make sense of the film through logic. In one sense, the clues we so carefully tried to collect quickly become meaningless, making it difficult to understand the “present” scenes with background context—especially when it becomes unclear what even came first: the shaved head or the long haired Lee. The editing technique subversively handicaps the audience by removing their ability to make assumptions and connections based on linear time. What is so interesting about this method is that if the audience can get past the tension of forgetting logic and history in the film, they can then focus their attention on the image and characters themselves. This film is Tsai’s most subversive attempt to rid the audience of needing a plot. And in this way, the film becomes more realistic because in reality, life goes on every day without logic, and more often than we may like is history forgotten, or illogical itself.

Tsai confronts viewers’ expectations through film technique and content and makes his audience uncomfortable. This discomfort is interesting because his films’ contents are not obscure subjects (like science fiction or documentaries exposing the unknown), rather they are revealing the obscure in our everyday lives. A great example for how this technique adds to the meaning of the film is in Tsai’s *Sleep Alone*. As mentioned before, he sets up the viewer with parallel narrative structure between two periods of time. But once the audience realizes even those two periods are not presented chronologically, it creates immense confusion and



discomfort. Tsai has taken away the single mode we thought we could believe in and trust: time. But what the film reveals is that time is not actually necessarily a linear object by fact, especially in how we process and conceptualize time—in the same way that film is not something that can be relied on as truth either.

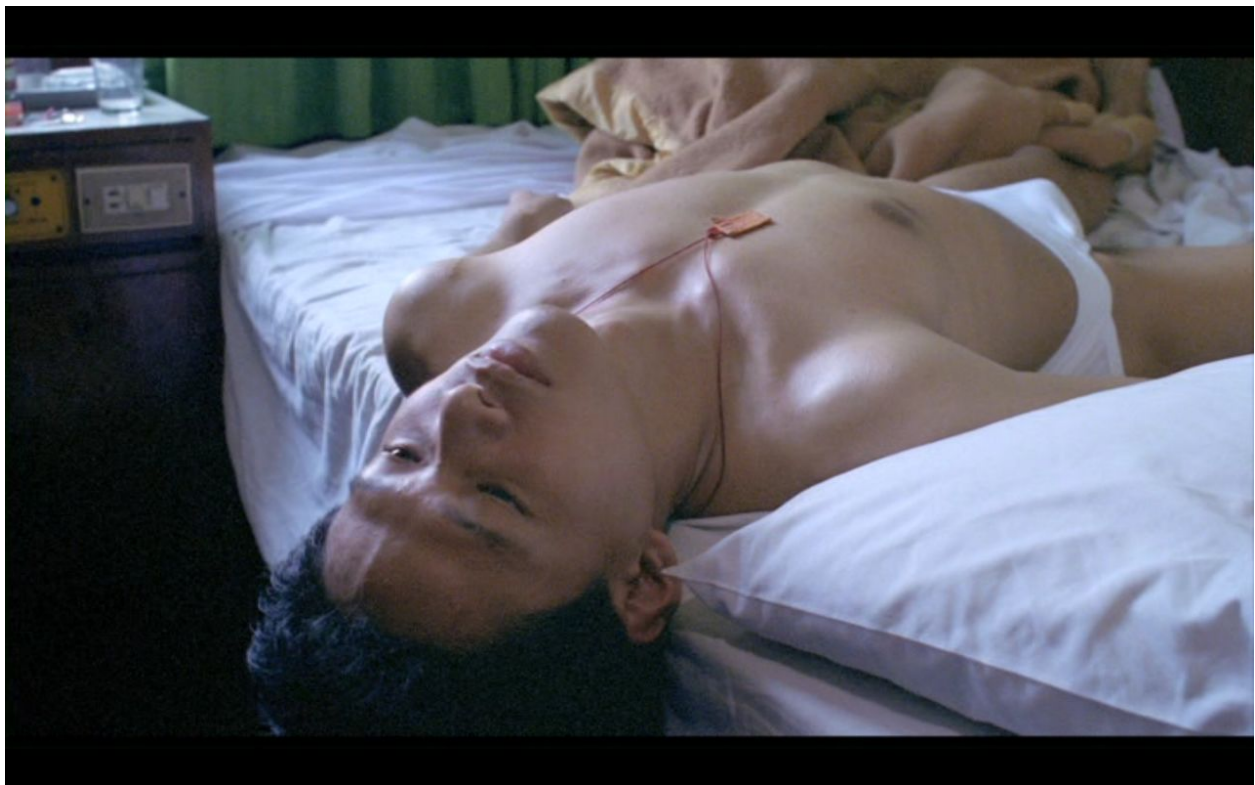
*Sleep Alone* offers the idea that not even time can create understanding for us. So all of the uncomfortable feelings we experience while watching his films—the illness, poverty, and forced sexual intercourse—all of these uncomfortable facets of life cannot be understood by retracing our memories and lining up facts. For example, we're waiting throughout the film for the scenes with long-haired Lee to reveal the cause of his sickness. Yet the list of uncomfortable experiences we see him in cannot explain his current comatose. The relationships are never clarified either. The series of sexual intercourse are all fouled by dirty environments and some kind of set-back or hindrance. Chen and Lee are unable to have sex because they breathe in the haze and fall into coughing fits. In contrast, the Chinese landlord's wife, Chan, will not let Lee kiss her. She is just concerned with her own pleasure in their interaction with one another. And the one time Chen is "successfully" able touch Lee sexually is when her hand is forced by Chan, and Lee is in comatose. This scene is essentially rape, of both Chen and Lee, by Chan's character (who clearly holds a position of power over the two characters). This motif of disconnected sexual intercourse in Tsai's films comments on the status of human connection. Tsai Ming Liang has said in interviews that he depicts sexual intercourse in such a way because he finds it more realistic, but his film style pushes these awkward sex scenes to mean more, emphasizing disconnection through dark lighting, interruption, and social taboo. If the relationship cannot be consummated without some form of rape, what does it mean about the relationships in the film?

*Conclusion*

I have claimed in this chapter that Tsai Ming Liang's techniques and choices in the filmmaking process create what I call rebellious films. This rebellion can play out to produce different interpretations. By resisting making films that both producers and viewers expect, and pushing boundaries both in narrative and film production, Tsai's films push his audience and himself to rethink all the components of a film—scripts, timing, audio, acting, and content—and thus rethink how to watch a film. By elongating scenes and avoiding a generic plot structure, the audience stops waiting for what comes next to move the narrative along, but instead focuses on the scene itself. With these elongated scenes with the minimal dialogue and diegetic soundtracks, the image becomes central. And with a great focus on image, space in turn serves a greater role when thinking about the films. In the following chapter I will explore how the focus on space, the places in which the characters inhabit, relates to figurative spaces where relationships are built or broken, and how these spaces and relationships inform a malleable understanding of identity.

### Chapter 3: Disconnection

In this final chapter where I will focus on the themes in Tsai's films, I am returning to the question: what connection, or disconnection, do his films have with Taiwan? It is possible to see a thread of thought in Tsai's films that has much less to do with Taiwanese nationality and more to do with the feeling of disconnection than with the idea of nationality. What is nationality, if not another form of self-identification—similar to how one's family occupation and relationships are used to help identify the self? One identifies oneself within relationship to one's space, relationships, and country (to name a few). I make the claim that if we can see identity described through relationships, we can look at the multiple themes of disconnection in Tsai's films and use the proliferation of disconnection in relationships to understand what the films say about identity.



*Rebels of the Neon God*, Tsai Ming Liang, 1992

*Disconnection with Space*

One visual and metaphoric representation of diaspora in Tsai's work is through the displacement his homes, seen in several of the films. In *Rebels*, early in the film Hsiao-Kang's mother claims (based off a fortune) that her son is a descendent of Nezha (哪吒), the Chinese mythology god who is notorious for rebelling against his father.<sup>54</sup> In hearing this, Hsiao Kang begins truly rebelling. He freaks out his parents by acting possessed, withdraws from school in secret and pockets the tuition money, and vandalizes another young man's motorcycle. Hsiao Kang's new quasi-identity, in effect given to him by his mother who removes responsibility by blaming the relationship problems on outside causes, ultimately leads him to being kicked out of the house by his father. It is while staying in a hotel room that Hsiao Kang discovers Ah Tze and his bike. When Hsiao Kang watches Ah Tze discover the destroyed bike, he only enjoys a brief moment of joy before he hits head on the ceiling and his face becomes solemn in the hotel room. When he goes to to help Ah Tze and is rejected in anger, the camera pulls away with the traffic and Hsiao Kang is left stunned, getting smaller and farther away as the film reel spins. The film ends with Hsiao Kang at a phone cafe, where he pays money but then proceeds to hang up on all the girls who call him. This conclusion almost overbearingly evokes the feeling of loneliness, which is linked both to Hsiao Kang's disconnection with his home and disconnection with fellow youth. The distance he feels from other youth is in part due to his withdrawing from school, and emphasized by the phone cafe scene where he seems unable to link the connection and start a conversation.

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<sup>54</sup> Sheng Kai, "The Different Faces of Nezha in Modern Taiwanese Culture," *Archiv Orientalni* 81, no. 3 (August 2013), 391-410.



*Vive L'Amour*, Tsai Ming Liang, 1994

*Vive L'Amour* is a film set entirely in a disconnected space. The three characters (Lin Mei Mei played by Yang Kuei Mei, Ah-Jung by Chen Chao-Jung, and Lee Kang Sheng potentially playing Hsiao Kang) all occupy unowned apartments. Again, there is a connection made between these characters occupying homes without legal owners or families, and their own unhappiness. Whether it is loneliness, dissatisfaction with life, or another reason, all the characters are plagued with a desire to commit suicide. Both Lee Kang Sheng's character and Ah-Jung submerge their heads in the bathtub water for long periods of time before being interrupted by the door bell. Lee's character cuts his wrist the same night Lin Mei Mei and Ah-Jung meet and sleep together, consequently causing Lee to stop his wrists from bleeding in order to observe them. And Lin's character, interestingly, contemplates suicide when, later in the film, she finally spends the night in her own apartment and hesitates for a long moment in the boiler room when she discovers a

gas leak. The main for-rent-apartment the characters all co-exist in, without any decoration and simply furnished, becomes a space that represents the hollow relationships the characters develop. One relationship is the heterosexual relationship between Lin and Ah-Jung. While they sleep together twice, the relationship lacks any depth, and after the second night spent together, Lin leaves the house in the early morning and weeps for a full six minutes on screen in Forest Park (at the time of filming under construction)—another space which represents displacement.<sup>55</sup> Meanwhile, the shell of a family and homosexual relationship is built between Ah-Jung and Lee. Once they discover each other, squatting in the same apartment, they start to get to know each other. They visit each other's workspace, and eat a home cooked meal together. But as Lee is seen taking on a traditional woman role by cleaning the dishes and dressing up in heels and a mini dress, Ah-Jung continues pursuing Lin. On their second night together, Lee hides under the bed and masturbates while they have sex. When Yang leaves in the early morning, he crawls out and lies next to the Chen Chao Jung. By occupying the space Yang once was, he wraps his arm over Lee, and Lee tentatively leans in to kiss him. It is clear that his affection is unrequited, and so all three characters occupy the empty relationships in the empty space.

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<sup>55</sup> “The space for the Forest Park had long been designated as the ‘Reserved Land for Park #7.’ For years after the Nationalist government relocated to Taiwan in 1949, the area was mainly a *juancun* (military dependents’ village) occupied by military personnel and their families, a particularly poor neighborhood whose inhabitants lived in overcrowded shacks. As Taipei become more prosperous and urban beautification more valued, this squalid area increasingly became an eyesore, a past that the modernizing city was all too eager to jettison... For people who had lived there for decades, homes were turned overnight into a space in which they themselves suddenly became occupants of a borrowed space: from residents to squatters, all it took was a policy change and the spatial memory, and the sense of belonging with it, was trashed and then erased.” (Hong, *Taiwan Cinema*, 169.)



*The Hole*, Tsai Ming Liang, 1999

*The Hole* visually describes a different kind of spatial disconnection. Lee Kang Sheng and Yang Kuei Mei play characters living in the same apartment complex, one of the few residents left. The people and qualities of the space they call home no longer exist because of the “Taiwan Virus” disease which leads the government to push everyone to evacuate. While trash falls from outside their windows, wallpaper peels off the wall, Yang fails to find a new plumber to repair the hole he made in the apartment above her—Lee’s home. With their refusal to leave their home, loneliness sets in as if they had already left. Lee befriends a cat, and Yang has an erotic phone call with the plumber whom she can reach by phone. In their mutual isolation, the hole grows bigger and bigger, metaphorically illustrating the growing connection between the two individuals. The connection they find through mutual disconnection with space illustrates a diasporic experience.



*Stray Dogs*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2013

In *Stray Dogs*, the story is explicitly focuses on a homeless family. The alcoholic father and his two children squat in a rundown building. They use a public bathroom to wash up at night. And the daughter spends her play time in a grocery store. And yet, despite their extreme poverty and pauper living situation, they are shot living surrounded by incredibly beautiful nature scenery. Later in the film (what Tsai describes as the memory of a home<sup>56</sup>) we see a new space filled with expensive material goods, like gift boxes of alcohol and a leather massage chair, juxtaposed by the surrounding cold, dark cement walls. While the children enjoy the warmth of a young woman treating them with snacks and helping with homework, the space itself lacks warmth, especially compared to the bright scenes in nature surrounding their previously seen “home”. There is an ambiguous relationship between the space they inhabit and

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<sup>56</sup> Tsai Ming Liang, "In Conversation with Director Tsai Ming-Liang: *Stray Dogs*," by Linda Jaivin



the space they dream of. Interestingly, Tsai's matter-of-fact film style does not depict the diasporic family's lifestyle so negatively.



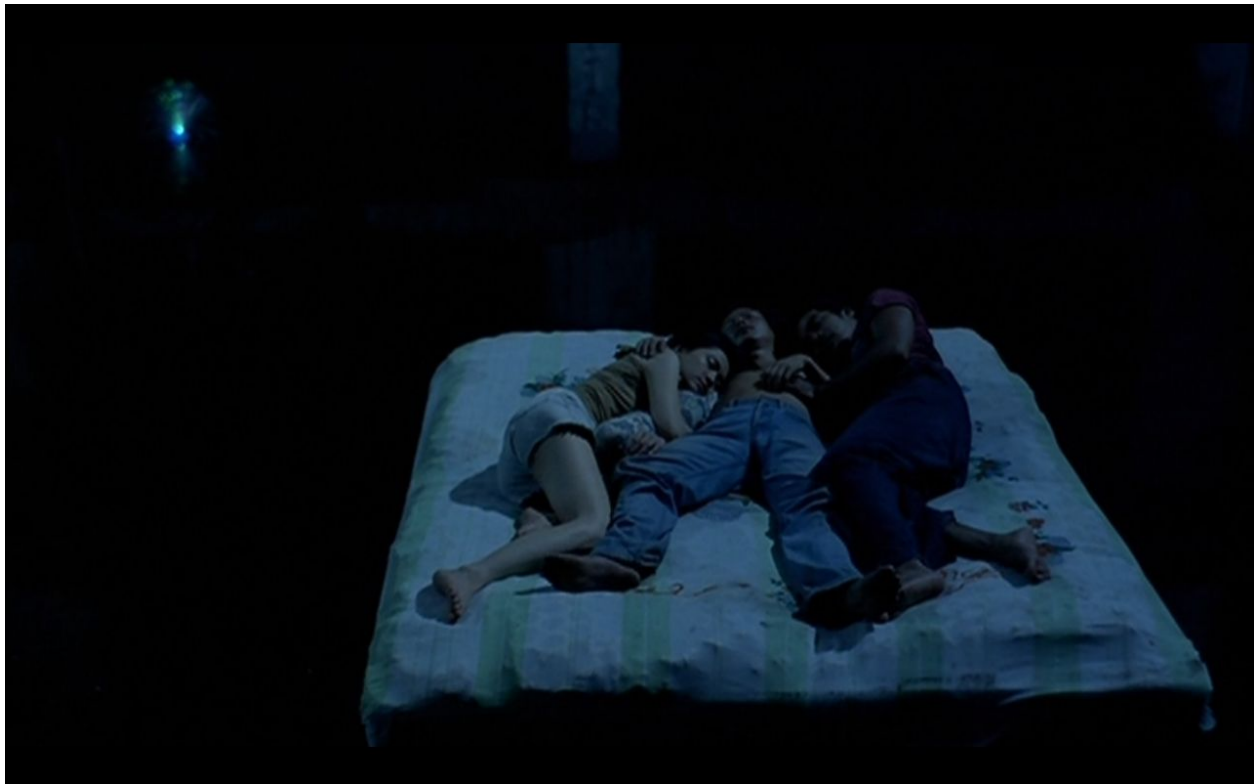
*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2006



*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2006

In *Sleep*, there are multiple homes which appear displaced. Atun lives in a dark, cement building with many other men. The only thing that he seems to have claim to is a futon, which becomes unusable when he discovers it is infested with bugs. The place where Chen and Lee share to sleep is interesting because it is in a higher location compared to the landlady's room. In this way, their room puts them in a position of a voyeur. The film includes several shots of characters looking through the floorboards down below which emphasizes their voyeur quality. Therefore, their "home" positions them as outsiders. And because of the parallel, non-linear narrative, at one point we see shaved-head Lee in his sick bed from the perspective above the ceiling boards. The next shot is of Lee, with long hair, as the voyeur looking through the slates of space, as if he were looking at himself in the future (or past). The shot could suggest that Lee is not only an outsider to his country and his current "home," but even to himself. Can a man be

like a country, not understanding his own history? In the final shot, these three characters are seen sleeping together on a futon, drifting afloat in the pool at the unfinished building's center (where the three characters are seen several times throughout the film). As the credits appear, an old-style love song begins, breaking the film's diegetic soundtrack.<sup>57</sup> This final shot reflects the insuppressible desire to quench loneliness and feel connected despite one's precarious footing in life. The image of a mattress floating above a deep, dark body of water feels unsafe, and yet they drift along and sleep peacefully in each other's arms.



*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2006

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<sup>57</sup> While the film's soundtrack is almost entirely diegetic, this is not to imply the sounds are all "found." In fact Tsai frequently uses background noise, whether from a TV or radio, to inform his films. This technique allows the music or words coming from the boxes feel realistic, and yet they sometimes piece together important aspects of the films. Another whole chapter, or even thesis, could be written on Tsai's "background noise" soundtracks.

*Disconnection with Others*

Sex, particularly cold or impersonal sex, is a motif throughout Tsai's films. Because emotions and inner consciousness cannot be explicitly portrayed in films with such minimal dialogue, the intimate quality of sex works to visually display the state of human connection. Tsai describes his feelings as to why he includes it in his films by saying, "Sex has something quite special and personal about it because it is private, involving the individual's most intimate side. I think that I show this private side of my characters through their sexuality."<sup>58</sup> Instead of successful, healthy sexual relationships, his characters watch porn, masturbate, fetishize vegetables and fruits, have sex in the dark rented rooms or empty houses, and work in the porn industry. He does not shy away from taboo or "dirty" subjects, such as the influence pornography has in our lives. Sex also becomes a tool for evoking a theme desire, which is not just sexual. The prevalence of pornography throughout his films emulate the imagined worlds created from discontent with reality, which I will explain more later.

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<sup>58</sup> Tsai, "Scouting," 100.



*Visage*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2009

The mother of Hsiao Kang, from Tsai's repertoire, has gone through almost twenty years of sexual and family frustrations and dysfunction. In *The River*, the mother has an extramarital boyfriend who distributes pornographic films. She watches porn when at home in her room (her older husband sleeps in a smaller bedroom) and when she visits her boyfriend, because even he rejects her physical advances. In *What Time*, despite the distanced relationship we see in *Rebels* and *The River*, she mourns the death of her husband and starts to go slightly mad wishing for his spirit's return. In the film's final sequence, while at the same time Hsiao Kang sleeps with a prostitute in his car and Shiang Chyi kisses her female friend in the hotel bed in France, the mother gets drunk and masturbates next to a photo of her dead husband on the side table. In *Visage*, Hsiao Kang and his mother reappear, this time at her deathbed. Throughout Tsai's repertoire, this is the most intimate scene between Hsiao-Kang and his mother. He looks at her

concernedly and starts tenderly rubbing ointment on her stomach. This is the first time Hsiao Kang touches his mother in an act of love, and then the mother takes his hand and pushes it down beneath her underwear. In the extended period of sexual frustration and loneliness (from 1992-2009), the sickness of disconnection overtakes her and makes it so she confuses family love with sexually intimacy because she has gone so long without either. This scene, in a sense, mimics or rather completes the “performance” of incest in the family. In *The River*, the mother gives Hsiao Kang her vibrator to massage his neck, and then goes to her room to watch porn while listening to the sound of her vibrator being used by her son. And as mentioned before, the father performs masturbation on Hsiao-Kang in a gay sauna. Not only do these acts in his work push boundaries that upset the norm, as I have discussed in Chapter 2, but they also link the emotion of desire to family. By incorporating sex between family members, it emphasizes the extreme extent in which their disconnection has lasted. This is to say, the family has pushed its disconnection to the breaking point, so that the family *per se* no longer exists and sexual intercourse can even take place between the individuals.



*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2006

Particularly in *Sleep Alone*, Tsai emphasizes disconnection in human relationships through sexual encounters. In *Sleep Alone* the characters' series of sexual encounters make their relationship roles even less clear. In the first sex scene, the landlady (Chan) finds Lee in a dark, dirty alleyway. She barely lets him touch her, and pushes away his attempt to kiss her. She simply directs his hand beneath her clothes for her own pleasure. Chen and Lee's relationship feels more traditional, but is still unhealthy. They are seen sleeping together before we even see what appears to be a courtship. Their attempt to have sex is hindered by trying to find a private space free from the landlady. When they finally find the futon in the empty construction building, they are held back once again by haze. This second sex scene starkly contrasts the previous. Chen and Lee furiously try to keep kissing, but coughing caused by the haze stops

them. Instead of having sex, their attempt to stay connected is humorously and pathetically illustrated by the pant legs Lee hands to Chen for them to breathe through together. In the final sex scene, the threesome come together when Chan, provoked by some unknown thought, covers Chen's hand with the oil and then forces it into Lee's diaper, who is still in a coma. These incidents within the film are isolated, the unexpected quality of each event further emphasizing the disconnection between these characters.

Pornography, another sex motif in his films, obviously also illustrates human disconnection in a big way. But in order to detail its role in Tsai's films, it is necessary important to note how the disconnection is related to being connected with another reality, an imagined one.

### *The Landscape of Identities*

I want to begin by first thinking about Norman Atun's role in *Sleep Alone*, a character who exemplifies making a choice to move away from strongly identifying with his national identity, and then move on to relate this transition to the less concrete landscapes of identity, defined by Arjun Appadurai, to link the theme I see throughout Tsai's films.





*I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2006

There are three “groups” in the film set in Malaysia. Chen and Lee create the first group, as ethnic-Chinese immigrants. They are clearly new to Malaysia, proven in a brief scene shot from a distance where Chen and Lee are seen entering a hotel and being asked to show their passports. They then leave, which suggests they either did not understand the concierge or that they do not have passports, which suggests they may be illegal residents. The second group is the Chinese-Malaysians, including the landlady and the other Chinese seen in the mahjong parlor. The third group is made up of the Indian migrant construction workers, who are seen all living together in a shoddy building. In the film Norman Atun’s character represents a sort of identity “black sheep”. He holds two or three identities in the film that we can assume based on textual clues. First, we know he is Indian. The film also suggests he is a migrant worker, because he does construction work and lives in a single building with other Indian men who do construction.

While the film does not make clear whether he is an immigrant from India, or an overseas Indian whose home is Malaysia, one Mandarin radio broadcast discussing the bad haze provokes the idea that Atun could be an immigrant: “The police suspect the fire may have been started by illegal workers who burn their rubbish in the open. These foreign construction workers live in makeshift houses nearby.” It is hard not to hear this snippet and immediately think of Atun, our only visual connection in the film to people whom the show host might be describing. Therefore this inclusion in the film suggests Tsai wants us to associate Atun with the illegal foreign workers the radio describes.<sup>59</sup> So whether it is Atun’s character’s true identity or not, this identity is associated with him in the film. The third identity suggested throughout the film is that Atun’s character is homosexual.<sup>60</sup> Atun is a “black sheep” because, while described by these three identities, he lacks group conformity. Rather than staying within the comforts of his national identity and diaspora identity groups—both groups which have a strong tendency to keep together—he separates and connects with Lee. With Lee, while they do not share a language or ethnicity, they do share the status of diaspora. What brings them together is not certain, but

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<sup>59</sup> It is entirely possible that the Chinese radio announcer is making race-based assumptions. But like in our own realities, it is easier to get information from one source/perspective than it is to get a well-rounded, multiple perspective account of an event. It should be remembered that Atun’s character never does or says anything to suggest he is illegally in Malaysia. Meanwhile, Lee and Chen’s characters try to visit a hotel and leave because they have to show a passport, suggesting they in fact are illegal residents.

<sup>60</sup> There is suggestion of love interest, at least from the side of Atun. A sequence of scenes hints of this level of their relationship. The sequence begins with Chen and Lee watching a Bollywood music film on a TV outside a store at night, when Lee takes Chen’s hands and the shot cuts to one where we see them from a slight distance walk through an archway and to the left of the shot, into an unlit portion of the street. They are not the only people in the shot, and an indistinct man appears and stares at them as they walk away. The sequence continues to a series of shots which ends with the unsuccessful sex scene between Lee and Chen. The next time we see Atun, the camera returns to close-up shots. First, the shot shows hands taking hold of Lee’s hair and holding an opened can to his throat. Then, after the hands hesitate and ultimately loosen their grip on Lee’s fear-stricken and confused face, the shot switches to Atun’s face. He begins to cry, and Lee tenderly lifts a hand to Atun’s face, which Atun kisses and holds closer as he continues to cry. This scene could lead us to assume the man from the previous sequence was not random, but in fact Atun. And his attempt to physically hurt Lee represents his jealousy, which could not otherwise be expressed through words. Making this assumption is aided by the fact that Tsai does not shy away from including homosexuals in his other films (see Song Hwee Lim’s *Celluloid Comrades*’ fifth chapter “Confessing Desire: The Poetics of Tsai Ming-Liang’s Queer Cinema” (2006)).

perhaps it is their shared marginalized status that links them. Lee's character is injured and left to die because he is in a sense marginalized if no one cares enough to help him (and he was beaten up because he is poor and did not comprehend the hustlers' language). Therefore Atun may have saved Lee because Atun himself is from a marginalized group by being homosexual. To further complicate understanding their connection, the film positively contrasts their relationship with Lee's relationships with the Chinese women. Of all Lee's relationships, he is seen sharing a bed with Atun most frequently. There is also a difference in how Atun is shown nursing Lee compared to the Chinese women. Atun alone carries the weight of a heavy futon up flights of stairs, which he shares with Lee instead of than his fellow countrymen. Atun also carries Lee to help him urinate and clean. The women instead use a catheter and spray him with perfume. In another scene with Atun and Lee both in the shot, Atun painstakingly and carefully tries to tie a bag of cold juice to Lee's head to help with a fever. This shot can be compared to an earlier scene where the camera shoots comatose Lee's face straight on and close up (so the body taking care of him is disconnected) while hands come in and out of the shot to roughly scrub his face. Because of their different identity groups, the strength of their relationship defies expectations. Atun's character is key to understanding the role of identity in Tsai's films because he perfectly illustrates the malleable nature of identity and identification. How Atun associates and disassociates with defined identity groups is arguably what most of Tsai's characters seek through more abstract concepts of identity, such as I will explain using Appadurai's theory on diasporic identities.

Tsai's films highlight identities which break away from the traditional sense of national identity, identities that are more closely represented by Arjun Appadurai's terms *ethnoscape* and

*mediascape*.<sup>61</sup> Appadurai describes these new ways of thinking about “-scape” identities as follows:

The suffix *-scape* allows us to point to the fluid, irregular shapes of these landscapes... these are not objectively given relations that look the same from every angle of vision but, rather, that they are deeply perspectival constructs, inflected by the historical, linguistic, and political situatedness of different sorts of actors: nation-states, multinationals, diasporic communities, as well as subnational groupings and movements (whether religious, political, or economic), and even intimate face-to-face groups, such as villages, neighborhoods, and families. Indeed, the individual actor is the last locus of this perspectival set of landscapes, for these landscapes are eventually navigated by agents who both experience and constitute larger formations, in part from their own sense of what these landscapes offer.<sup>62</sup>

Appadurai’s ideas connect with Tsai’s films because *-scape* identities are defined as dependent on the individual (as opposed to a state) and Tsai’s films are intensely focused on the individual rather than group identity. Tsai even said in an interview that he originally started making films by trying to realistically represent and understand a "collective social mentality, the social reality of today," but that he failed. He admits he really never learned to understand his subject (referring to Taiwanese youth in the West Gate District (*xi men ding* 西门町)) because he claims they are constantly changing.<sup>63</sup> Instead, he found the most success in his films by working with the same actors which he has gotten to know well over the years. Appadurai’s language is also prevalent to Tsai’s films because he describes these concepts for identity with the word “landscape.” This metaphor of space used to describe identity is an idea that can be applied to Tsai’s films.

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<sup>61</sup> Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1996,) 33-35.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, 33.

<sup>63</sup> Tsai, “Scouting,” 83-84.

Appadurai's term *ethnoscape* describes identity groups formed by national identity group diaspora.<sup>64</sup> *Mediascapes* describe a type of diaspora identity which comes from imagined worlds influenced by media which is circulated across the world. In his words, "mediascapes, whether produced by private or state interests, tend to be image-centered, narrative-based accounts of strips of reality and what they offer to those who experience and transform them... can be formed of imagined lives."<sup>65</sup> In Tsai's films, the spaces are closely connected with human relationships and disconnection. The home is a space of disconnection, a motif and theme frequently seen. From Tsai's ten feature films, four (*Rebels*, *The River*, *Time*, and *Visage*) take part in the same family's apartment. This setting is plain, simply furnished, and encapsulates the disconnected family within. Essentially this cold home environment pushes the characters out and into new spaces. As I mentioned in Chapter 2, Tsai's film technique pushes for emphasis on space over plot. And *Vive L'Amour* is a film that centers around three individuals living in a house that is not their own. And in these new spaces, the characters begin occupying new identity *-scapes* at the same time. Another motif in Tsai's films is the prevalence of imagery relating to spaces of transition. The films always include staircases, elevators, and hallways, often either empty or with a single person walking through. This visual motif of spaces of transition, and the motif of characters wandering through the spaces, suggest a searching for a new space, a new *-scape* for identity.

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<sup>64</sup> Appadurai, *Modernity at Large*, 33.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.



*Stray Dogs*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2013

*Mediascapes* have a more abstract presence in Tsai's films. Consider Hsiao-Kang's obsession with France in *Time*. In a sense, this obsession is started by an (assumed) desire to stay connected to Shiang Chyi. His obsession with this imagined world begins with repeatedly watching François Truffaut's film *400 Blows*, and leads him to change the time on every clock to France's timezone. Meanwhile, Shiang Chyi is desperate to buy a dual-time watch to keep track of Taiwan time for when she goes to France for an undetermined amount of time. Time becomes another space which represents the imagined world.



*Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2003



*Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2003

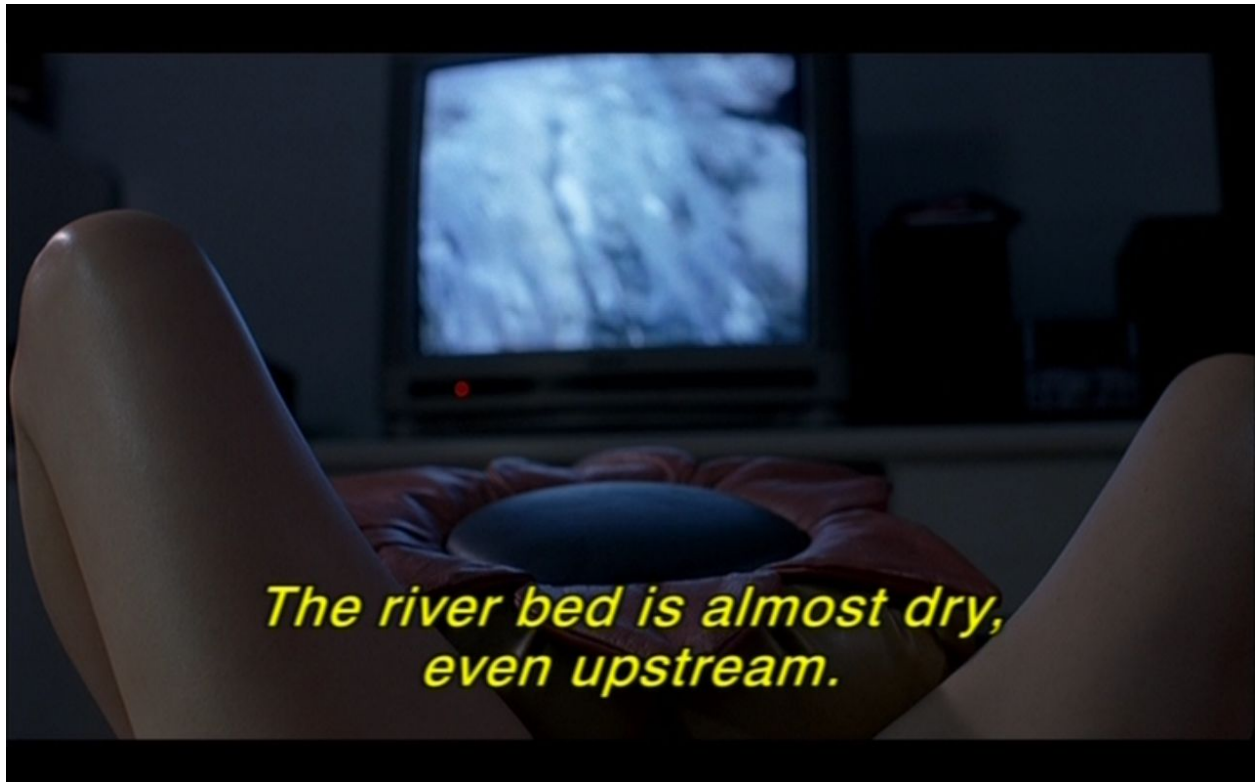
In the film *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, the characters seem to have lost all connection with one another whilst immersed in the movies and the darkness of the theater's back rooms. Chen's character is seen staring up at the female fighter on screen, in a quasi shot-countershot sequence which highlights her absorption into the world of the film. The film progresses with simple transition of people moving in and out of film screenings of King Hu's *Dragon Inn*,<sup>66</sup> and back and forth through hallways. In one scene, one patron even mistakes another person for a ghost in a humorous exchange where he hears the sound of a woman cracking sunflower seeds, but suddenly cannot see her from his perspective because she keeps bends over. This scene compliments the ghostly feeling the many men in the film give off as they wander throughout the building without communicating with anyone. This lack of communication disconnects the patrons from their connection with one another—and allows for greater immersion into the mediascape created by the imagined world within *Dragon Gate*. One of the few moments of communication takes place between the unnamed-protagonist and a Japanese man. Only the Japanese man speaks. He says, in Mandarin, "This movie theater is haunted. Did you know it has ghosts?" The protagonist takes a step towards him in the narrow hallway, and leans in as if to rest on the other man's shoulder. Without reacting to this unexpected intimacy from a stranger, but before he can make physical contact, the Japanese man coolly walks away. Once he is out of the shot, he says bluntly, "I am Japanese." And then he switches to Japanese and says, "Good bye." The man's words seem nonsensical. What is the connection between ghosts in the movie theater, and his being Japanese? In the short monologue, he disassociates himself from the language he uses by claiming his nationality, and then estranges himself from the other man by

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<sup>66</sup> A film which was made both people and money from Taiwan and Hong Kong.



switching languages. This sequence further emphasizes the bizarre, disconnected feeling the entire movie provokes.



*The Wayward Cloud*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2005

Pornography creates another mediascape in many of his films, especially in *The Wayward Cloud*. Porn is a frequent motif in his films, which appear on small screens and magazines in *Rebels*, *Vive L'Amour*, and *The River*. Tsai sees the role of porn in his films as an important part of reality because, he claims, “Today a large part of sexual behaviour is based on imitation” (due to the ease of access to porn in Taiwan). “To such an extent,” he says, “that every time I want to shoot a love scene I have to tell my actors and film crew that I want a very porn-life effect. Yes, I want to imitate that because it’s also a part of reality.”<sup>67</sup> This concept of imitation suggests porn creates another imagined world. The idea is taken to the extreme in the

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<sup>67</sup> Tsai, “Scouting,” 100.

film *The Wayward Cloud*. Tsai's favorite leads, Lee Kang Sheng and Chen Shiang Chyi, appear again, making reference to their relationship in *What Time* (as watch seller and customer). The pair finally begin what looks like a healthy relationship. For the first times in one of Tsai's films, characters laugh, cook, and enjoy each other's company together, absent of sex. But there is a disconnection that prevents Hsiao Kang from consummating the relationship. Chen Shiang Chyi, immersed in the imagined world porn creates, rents several pornography videos and clearly desires sex with Lee. This is made clear by the multiple glasses of watermelon juice she drinks, referencing the watermelon porn scene with which the film opens. When she offers Lee a cup, he graciously accepts and then pours it out the window—illustrating his lack of desire. It is only when she discovers Lee's profession and watches as he has sex with a passed-out porn actress that reality of porn's false reality begins to sink in. But instead of rejecting the new facts of her imagined world, Chen holds onto it and joins in, filling in for the moans the lifeless porn actress cannot make. Her moans turn into screams of frustration, which Lee silences by suddenly thrusting himself into her mouth and climaxing. Where before he rejected her sexual advances, once she has entered the reality of his world he finally accepts her and can sexually connect with her.



*The Wayward Cloud*, Tsai Ming Liang, 2005

This scene's final pose lasts almost four minutes, emphasizing the moment. Comprised of multiple close-up shots from different angles, and a final shot of both characters in the entire frame, Chen's back and Lee's hands seen still gripping onto the back of her head as Chen drops the shoe in her hand, and eventually lets go of the wall as well. Tsai's emphasis on creating documentary-style films which highly values reality suggests that our reality is full of imagined realities. And by incorporating these new landscapes of identity in the films, it provokes the feeling of diaspora in his films.

## Conclusion

In the introduction to Hong Guo Jun's book on Taiwan cinema, he considers the problem of national cinema theory, and pinpoints a narrow-minded argument made by Andrew Higson in an essay "The Concepts of National Cinema." After criticism, Higson readdressed his ideas and discusses the errors he made in the essay "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema."<sup>68</sup> In this essay he writes that the problem with national cinema film theory is its tendency just to talk about films that neatly fit an idea of the nation with "finite boundaries."<sup>69</sup> The problem with the national cinema theory that Andrew Higson writes about clarifies for me the problem I previously had difficulty expressing. The issue with national cinema theory is, for me, its limiting qualities. For example, one by-product of national cinema theory is the assumption of a collective unconscious, which in turn creates an over-generalized understanding of the nation through the film.<sup>70</sup> What Higson highlights as a dangerous side effect is the tendency for films to be chosen to fit a theory, rather than allow the cinemas of a nation to broaden the understanding of what exactly is national. He also suggests that national theory could be more productive if defined less by fixed borders and characteristics and more so by how these "finite" qualities of nation are dissolving.<sup>71</sup>

All that said, there are productive arguments for the existence and thoughtful construction of national cinemas. In Taiwan, the "nativist" quality of the Taiwanese New Wave cinema movement in the 1980s was based in the literary debates in the 1960s between nativists and

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<sup>68</sup> Andrew Higson, "The Limiting Imagination of National Cinema," in *Cinema and National*, edited by Mette Hjort and Scott MacKenzie, (New York: Routledge, 2000,) 63-74.

<sup>69</sup> Higson, *Cinema and National*, 66.

<sup>70</sup> Philip Rosen, "History, Textuality, Nation: Kracauer, Burch and Some Problems in the Study of National Cinemas," In *Theorizing National Cinema*, edited by Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemsen, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 25.

<sup>71</sup> Higson, *Cinema and National*, 67.

modernists.<sup>72</sup> But Tsai immigrated to Taiwan just a few years before the martial law was lifted, meaning he did not experience the post-WWII martial law period to the degree with which directors like Hou and Yang did.<sup>73</sup> So the literary basis focused on nativist history of Taiwan makes it difficult to include Tsai in the Taiwanese New Wave movement. Hong writes about how Tsai's films represent a new landscape for cinema in Taiwan and he links Tsai to a part of national cinema that is ahistorical.<sup>74</sup> At first I found his reading problematic for why Tsai would be linked with Taiwanese national cinema if his films lacked historical specificity—another key feature critics like Paul Rosen<sup>75</sup> link to defining a national cinema (a concept I felt was a necessary quality for national cinema theory to be useful at all). If I am to continue under this line of optimism though, I will also now disagree with Willemen, whose claim that identity is a “straight jacket” I previously supported.<sup>76</sup> In fact, as my advisor, Wah Guan Lim proposed, identity can be seen as a straitjacket, something reductive, or it can be viewed as just a *part* of a person, where a person is not locked down by one identity, but rather the nature of multiple identities connects the person to different facets of the world, which complicates and diversifies our concept of each individual.

This concept of identity, which is multifaceted and malleable, can be productively applied to a new understanding of national cinema theory. With this in mind, my argument that proposes Tsai's rebellious film techniques describe the feeling of a diasporic identity, in opposition to the idea that his films describe a Taiwanese identity, are really not so diametric. In

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<sup>72</sup> James Udden, "8. Taiwan," *The Cinema of Small Nations*, edited by Mette Hjort & Duncan Petrie, (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2007). 151.

<sup>73</sup> Lim, *Celluloid Comrades*, 126-128.

<sup>74</sup> Hong, *Taiwan Cinema*, 159-181.

<sup>75</sup> Rosen, "History, Textuality, Nation," 26.

<sup>76</sup> Paul Willemen, "The National Revisited," In *Theorizing National Cinema*, edited by Valentina Vitali and Paul Willemen, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006) 31.

fact, Taiwan is a nation whose identity is largely defined by the diaspora. To understand the feeling of diaspora in Tsai's films complementary to our understanding of Taiwanese history, because in fact Taiwan's history and current status is complicated by, in part, history of the diaspora. Thus, while before I strongly believed Tsai does not belong in Taiwanese national cinema theory, now I will say Tsai in fact *benefits* Taiwanese national cinema theory, by complicating its "new" definition. Tsai's films evoke a feeling for understanding Taiwan which Yang and Hou lack, as I would argue their films focus on very different politics and feelings.

But while he can be included in a progressive theory for national cinema, by accepting and understanding our transnational world thanks to the proliferation of ethnoscares over national identities, and the diverse interaction with and between other identities (such as gender, class, etc), it would still be limiting in some regard to define Tsai as a Taiwanese filmmaker. An ideal world of cinema theory would use filmmakers like Tsai as a stepping stone to break away from the cinema industry trend of defining and segregating markets by nations, in part to avoid further proliferation of marketing the "culturally exotic." And, moreover, it would help against limiting our concept of the filmmaker, allowing them to create something beyond their nation, allowing us to see something bigger about the world, to explore concepts not limited by borders, or even to see something more intimate and specific about the individual in the filmmaker. Thinking in line with Hong, who describes the "boundaries" of national cinema as a concept that "must be grasped, finally, as unstable, as changeable, and as historical... 'history' itself is consistently under siege and 'national always contended,'" <sup>77</sup> this in turn will allow us to see more about our world and truly dissolve old boundaries, and perhaps make new ones.

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<sup>77</sup> Hong, *Taiwan Cinema*, 3.

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