

# Desiring Bodies: Tsai Ming-liang's Representation of Urban Femininity

*Pin-chia Feng*

## ABSTRACT

Tsai Ming-liang's first four films depict the conscious and unconscious of metropolitan Taipei from the perspective of an outsider, simultaneously delineating his characters' physical existence in postmodern 1990s capitalist urbanity. In these films, Tsai's female characters are almost always confined by the conventions of heterosexuality, whereas his male characters experience momentary respite through the acknowledgement of gay desire and identity. Women on the other hand are left to cry.

## KEY WORDS

Taiwanese new cinema  
epistemophilia  
cognitive mapping  
entropic city  
fetishistic desire

identity politics  
diegesis  
dystopia/utopia  
diasporic identity



Among the filmmakers of the second-wave Taiwanese new cinema, Tsai Ming-liang is unique for his urban sensitivity and minimalist film language based on corporeality. His critically acclaimed films artistically document the making of Taipei as a global city by capturing the changing images of its urban renewal and construction.<sup>1</sup> If in the first-wave Taiwanese new cinema by directors like Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang there is a narcissistic fascination with rearranging personal and national histories, Tsai Ming-liang's films, by contrast, are far away from this kind of "primitive passion" and instead concentrate on narrating the present and the possible future.<sup>2</sup> His diasporic experience as a Malaysian Chinese who moved to Taiwan to study in college at twenty also significantly contributes to his auteurship. The relocated Tsai reads and experiences his adopted city with the structure of feeling of an outsider, through which he meticulously translates the conscious and subconscious of Taipei, a city built upon the global influx of capital and visions of an "economic miracle," into cinematic images. At the same time, Tsai's film art travels across the gender boundary and delineates women's physical existence in this metropolitan locale and expresses their desires within the context of a postmodern capitalist urban economy of the 1990s, especially in his first four films: *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), *Vive L'Amour* (1994), *The River* (1997), and *The Hole* (1998). To shed light on the ways in which Tsai Ming-liang visualizes the women of Taipei, in this paper I will engage in a feminist reading of the representation of urban femininity in these four films from the position of a female spectator.

The urban space of Taipei is always an important constituent in Tsai's cinematic practices. His characters reveal different degrees of alienation and present multiple perspectives of how to look at the city in which "the everyday" is both banal and fantastic. The cross-cuttings

of images of the lives of these urban dwellers in Tsai's films at once strengthen the sense of estrangement and embody a postmodern simultaneity of Taipei's urban-ness. Tsai is unique in his treatment of Taipei because he deploys silence to communicate the clamorous desires of the urban crowd, a silence that is heavily laced with a psychological tension that always verges upon the breaking point. Once in a while the silence is broken and then the voice of desire bursts out. The final scene in *Vive L'Amour* in which the female protagonist Lin Mei Mei (played by Yang Kuei-mei) cries wordlessly for four minutes is such a moment when the spectator is allowed the pleasure, and pain, of peeping into this character's repressed psyche. On the soundtrack Mei Mei's sobbing lingers on even after the screen blacks out and the director's signature comes out in white. This separation of the female body and her voice lasts for only a few seconds, yet the disembodied sound of a woman's crying articulates a very important question in Tsai's films—"Why do women cry?"—and opens up a space for different interpretations.

Indeed why does Mei Mei cry? Tsai gives an ambivalent explanation that she cries because of her sense of absurdity and helplessness; also crying is a part of her life, just like all the other physical functions (Hsieh 47). A sexualized reading of the scene is to see it as an emptying-out of heterosexuality since, compared to the gay protagonist Hsiao Kang, Mei Mei as a city girl who indulges in casual sex is unable to love. The man who cannot have the guy he desires does not cry, but the woman who has sex with the same guy cries "because she is certain that she has never loved" (Tsai Kang-yung 163). One may also assume that Mei Mei is upset because her car suddenly breaks down and she loses an important source of mobility in the urban space. She suffers a financial loss and is unable to "*bao chien* 抱錢" or grab money because of this damaged mobility and has nothing left to do but to walk into the nearby Park No. 7, a public space that is, presumably, "the lungs of Taipei" but in reality an incomplete urban project at the time when the scene was shot and is always already marked by the memory of the forceful removal of the original inhabitants of the place.<sup>3</sup> The unpromising prospect of the park on its opening day even

made Tsai change the ending from a hopeful one to one of despair.<sup>4</sup> Thus in a doomed sense Mei Mei's vigorous walk in the park before the outburst can lead her nowhere. At the same time, this scene can also be made into a "national/urban allegory," as Chiang Hsun argues. Mei Mei's tears, in this case, are for the sadness caused by Taiwan's prosperity since the potholed landscape is but "an extension of the motif of urban trauma" (Chiang 150–52).

My own reading of this scene is that a woman cries because she knows her subjectivity created by cinematic technology is always paradoxically represented in a state of lack in the filmic spectacle. This lack, like a wound that cannot and will not heal, constantly alludes to the abyss of desire that constitutes the city. And the female body, like the city's unfulfilled promise of a brighter future, is always suspended in a state of desiring. This final scene from *Vive L'Amour* is an excellent paradigm for viewing the female characters and their relationships with Taipei in Tsai's cinematic texts.

As the problematic task of visualizing women in Tsai's films progresses, the awareness of its challenging nature emerges since the location of a middle position between scopophilia and iconophobia in feminist film criticism is a difficult one. The concept of scopophilia is closely connected with Laura Mulvey's theory of visual pleasure in which she analyzes the operating mechanisms of the optical unconscious. In her seminal essay "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey proposes a political use of psychoanalysis "to discover where and how the fascination of film is reinforced by pre-existing patterns of fascination already at work within the individual subject and the social formations that have moulded him" (14). She offers two models of scopophilia, or "pleasure in looking": the first fetishistic model "arises from pleasure in using another person as an object of sexual stimulation through sight. The second, developed through narcissism and the constitution of the ego, comes from identification with the image seen" (18). The major weakness in Mulvey's argument is that she neglects to analyze women as spectators. Hence in her 1981 "After Thought on Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema," Mulvey tries to amend this weakness by moving beyond the

male gaze toward a "narrative grammar" (32). Here she attempts to expound on the transvestite visual pleasure of female spectators by adapting Freud's theory of oscillation for the construction of female gender identity. However, Mulvey's argument about the "masculinisation" (37) of female spectators and characters remains androcentric and therefore not entirely convincing.

At the same time, Rey Chow's warning against iconophobia needs to be considered. Chow observes in her historical overview of the development of film theory that while feminist film theory in the Anglo-American world has successfully triggered the dissemination of film studies, its overall theoretical framework is rooted in what Michel Foucault has termed "the repressive hypothesis." Chow observes, "what is unique in this instance is that the repressive hypothesis has been put to work in the visual field and takes the form of iconophobia and that the implied agent of repressive (and thus the source of lack) is, paradoxically, none other than the (plenitude of) cinematic image itself" ("A Phantom Discipline" 1390). This paradigm shift in film studies leads to "the study of differences," through which film and cultural critics alike problematize "the naturalness of the cinematic image" (1390). Feminist film theorists are most concerned with, for instance, the fetishized status of women in films and their determination to subvert this cinematic fetishism "produced on the basis of the image (or the visual field) by saturating it from within with an alternative set of gazes, histories, purposes," which, according to Chow, again creates "a newly fetishistic reading in an ever-expanding phantom field" (1392).

Chow's analysis of the rise and reign of iconophobia brings home an important question: What on earth are we going to look at when visual images have been dismantled by the discourses of differences? Within the context of this paper, the question focuses on a female spectator observing the ways in which Tsai Ming-liang looks at women. My personal conviction is that a female spectator has the rights to visual pleasure and her critical position is always flexible and can shift according to different contexts. In other words, a female spectator is not to be limited by identity politics and the base of her criticism should

be descriptive rather than prescriptive. In this case, although Tsai Ming-liang's films are by no means the cinematic production that Claire Johnston will call a feminist "counter cinema," they provide insights into the everyday practice as well as the mindscape of Taipei women with which very few Taiwanese films can compete.

Chow has also warned against indulgence in "anthropomorphic realism" resulting from the practice of identity politics (1392-93). The tendency of "literal, bodily identification" (Chow 1393) in film criticism is of course fallacious. Yet one way to look at Tsai Ming-liang's cinematic representation of urban femininity is from the perspective of body politics because of his fascination with the human body. In a very corporal sense, Tsai's film narrative is almost always somatized. Peter Brooks argues that through "a semioticization of the body" and "a somatization of story," modern narrative makes the body the source and location of meaning (xii). Brooks defines the body in terms of sexual desire; nevertheless this desire goes far beyond the physical level. Intellectual curiosity is in fact more important than physical drive and what sustains the narrative dynamics is a desire he calls "epistemophilia" (xiii). It can be argued that Tsai Ming-liang's films exemplify this epistemophilia in his exploration of the depth of desire through bodily contacts of his characters and that Tsai attempts to semioticize the body of the characters and to somatize his characters' desire and filmic texts through the deployment of various cinematic apparatuses in order to create his unique "body language."

In his films, Tsai's body politics is carried out at both external and internal levels. He prefers to position his characters in relation to their urban environments to set off the haunting sense of postmodern estrangement. As Fiona A. Villella contends,

What is remarkable about Tsai's aesthetic is his uncluttered, finely honed emphasis on the characters themselves, and the way that almost every frame is dominated by their physical actions or sheer presence, usually carried out in silence. Almost never shot in close-up, Tsai observes them in mid-shot or wide-shot without cutting the scene, placing his

characters at a distance and telescoping their silent, minute actions against the backdrop of a larger environment. It's a style that exacerbates the sense of being confined and entrapped by one's environment—a condition that Tsai suggests is specifically a result of modern city life. Although more people live in greater physical proximity to each other than ever before, their emotional and psychological separation is profound.

This gap between physical closeness and psychological alienation explains one of the reasons Tsai often shoots his films on location at run-down city housing projects, which allows him to capture an acute sense of urban decay. Thus the diegetic logic that is permeated with a sense of naturalist determinism is mechanically reproduced to embody Tsai's observations of Taipei as an alienating and disintegrating urban space.

From the external alienation, Tsai also moves into the interior. Oliver Joyard rightly identifies Tsai's politics of corporeal representation when he highlights the importance of the interior and the juxtaposition of the mechanical and the natural in his discussion of Tsai's deployment of the body in films:

What can a body do in Tsai's films? Swallow, ingest food, water and other substances, receive blows, fall down, then form a circuit like a machine—that is why the change receptacle is so important. Numerous scenes of toilets, pissing, vomit, open bathtubs, masturbation in full, screams of pleasure, animal postures. One visits the *interior* of an ideal object, an unknown space to torture, love or pleasure; an interior where real desires and perhaps feelings are revealed [. . .] Rarely has contemporary cinema gone so far, save perhaps Cronenberg, in its obsession with and belief in the body as the final receptacle of even the slightest human actions, the least movement of things. Especially since this constantly filmed receptacle provides access to the world,

the earth and to Tsai's privileged symbolic sphere, discrete and helpless intimacy. Without ever opening the body—Tsai's images are not those of an autopsy, and there is seldom any blood—but rather opening new perspectives, like from a mountain peak. (*Rehm, Joyard, and Riviere* 71, 74).

Through repeated inspection of the body at multiple contexts, therefore, Tsai Ming-liang is able to dissect the work of desire and to complete his epistemophilic project.

The interaction of semioticization and somatization in Tsai's films can lead to polarized readings that are realistic on the one hand and allegorical on the other. Starting from *Rebels of the Neon God*, Tsai constantly uses a style of neo-realism in which the *mise en scène* appears to be "real life" captured by a hidden camera. Bodily functions such as going to the toilet, bathing, masturbating, and having sexual intercourse are shown repeatedly in Tsai's films to create an illusion of reality. In this "realistic" axis of spectatorship, the female body, be it as a sexual agency or as an object of sexual fantasy in "real" life or as a pin-up girl, is always indispensable in the construction and circulation of desire. At the same time, Tsai Ming-liang has effectively created "representative" characters whose minimalist simplification makes them appear to be almost archetypal. His usage of this kind of minimalist film language demands philosophical and allegorical interpretations. As Tsai's film career develops, his works are becoming more and more symbolic, offering more scope for academics to explore their analytical jargons and empty out the realistic dimension that Tsai painstakingly tries to work. My attention to the "body language" and "body politics" in his films is an attempt to reverse the practice of allegorization. This is of particular significance when it comes to reading women's images since symbolic or allegorical spectatorship tends to make women abstract and produces an empty signifier out of the cinematic practice.

One point to be clarified about Tsai's body politics is that he is as interested in the male body as in the female one, especially the gay

body. The recurrent appearance of the actor Lee Kang-sheng (or Hsiao Kang) in all Tsai's films is the most prominent example. The actors who are repeatedly cast in his films such as Miao Tian and Chen Chao-jung also appear to develop a gradual shift in sexual orientation from one film to another. Therefore in his third feature film, *The River*, all the male characters who have starred in the previous two productions are gay; Hsiao Kang's subconscious and displaced gay desire for Ah Tze (played by Chen Chao-jung) in *Rebels of the Neon God* extends into the highly charged scene in *Vive L'Amour* in which he kisses the sleeping Ah Jung (also played by Chen Chao-jung) with a hopeless passion. This is further developed in the gay sauna scene in *The River* in which he engages in incestuous sex with the father Miao Tian; Chen, who plays a heterosexual male in the first films makes a guest appearance as a gay "hooker" who has sex with Miao in the same gay sauna.

Nevertheless, the female body constitutes a powerful narrative in Tsai's films, especially when it comes to narrating the stories of dissatisfied desires in an urban environment such as Taipei. What is most productive when it comes to reading Tsai's urban femininity is to understand his "syntax" of representing women.<sup>5</sup> The basic syntactic composition of Tsai's representation of urban femininity in his first four feature films can be summarized as follows. The women who are almost always seen in their urban environments are highly mobile, economically independent, and sexually active. They appear to be well adjusted to the rhythm of a global city like Taipei and are fully engaged in the life they have chosen. These urban women are also aggressive; hence in almost every heterosexual scene in the four feature films we see a woman in the dominant sexual position. In spite of the fact that Tsai's women are free to fulfill themselves sexually, they are nevertheless always suspended in a state of physical and psychological dissatisfaction. Moreover, from *Rebels of the Neon God* to *The Hole*, Tsai's women are always already represented by a heterosexual body.

This imposition of heterosexuality on his female characters is problematic in view of Tsai's courageous foray into the portrayal of gay desire. His first three films can be collectively considered as a process

through which his male characters are able to come out of the closet, providing a rare insight into Taipei's gay culture. However, portrayal of the lesbian culture and desire remain absent in his representations of urban landscape until his latest production, *What Time Is It There?* (2001). In this film of the new millennium, Tsai tries to work out a lesbian plot that is nevertheless still overwhelmed by a heterosexual desire. The two women from the Chinese diaspora share a bed in a Parisian hotel in order to escape from an overwhelming sense of estrangement; this encounter has very little to do with fulfilling sexual desire. That Tsai cannot envision such a lesbian encounter in Taipei speaks again for the significant absence in Tsai's cognitive mapping of the city.

The absence of lesbian space in Tsai's cognitive mapping of Taipei also contrasts sharply with his meticulous delineation of gay space. A scene from *The River* can best exemplify Tsai's superb construction of gay space. In this film the father Miao Tian roams the city to search for potential sexual partners. In one scene, he comes across a young "hooker" (Chen Chao-jung) in front of McDonald's. Remarkably, there is no direct eye contact in the entire pick-up scene and yet a tidal wave of desire overflows into the neon-signed hallway entrance to the fast-food franchise.<sup>6</sup> Through a long shot and extremely colorful lighting effect, Tsai creates a rich visual sensuality that verges upon a dream fantasy, which is almost excessive compared to his usual minimalist style. Although the two characters keep their distance before entering the dark sauna room, the carefully framed hallway is the out-of-closet gay space in the film. The unbridled release of desire here echoes with the ending scene in which the son Hsiao Kang opens the hotel windows and walks into the sunny balcony, which suggests a symbolic act of coming out of the closet.

While there is a noticeable absence of lesbian desire and space in his first four films, Tsai cannot be accused of under-representing women. His hardworking female characters in fact are apparently more compatible with the tempo of urban economy than the men. For instance, in the self-reflexive sequence of filmmaking in *The River*, the Hong Kong filmmaker Ann Hui makes a guest appearance as a ruthless

female director who is clearly an *alter ego* for Tsai. This decision of having a woman filmmaker to represent the process of filmmaking is a deliberate one because Tsai feels that, as a Hong Kong woman, Hui like himself is also an outsider to Taipei (Rayns 16). Yet the gender aspect of this choice shows a woman's devotion to her work, which is typical in Tsai's films. So while the male characters roam the arcades and fast food joints in search of excitement and satisfaction, the women are almost always working. Ah Kuei (played by Wang Yu-wen) in *Rebels of the Neon God* fixes crooked blades with a hammer in the ice-skating rink; Hsiao Kang's mother (played by Lu Hsiao-ling) in *The River* travels up and down the elevator to invite potential customers to the dim sum house where she works; the nameless woman downstairs (played by Yang Kuei-mei) in *The Hole* is always cleaning her run-down apartment. The women's purposefulness in life presents a sharp contrast to the men's aimless lifestyle, although they all come to the same kind of psychological emptiness at the end. Compared to the men's lack of strong motivation to move up, the women's buzzing around makes life appear as meaningless repetition. The work of Hsiao Kang's mother in the elevator best exemplifies this kind of empty repetition, especially when later in *The River* her elevator trips bring in no customer. The whole purpose of her work is rendered absurd and the very meaning of "work" is under interrogation.

Tsai's women characters who work all the time are mostly highly mobile. The women's movement around the city again shows that they are closer to the commercial spirit of this post-capitalist metropolis. In the interpretation of *Vive L'Amour* one critic even argues that there is a symbolic "sexual reversal" in the film: Mei Mei is a "feeder" since she is more like a steady breadwinner than are the two male characters and the two men appear to compete for her favor (Chang 185). This line of analysis clearly has its base in a patriarchal familial and economic structure; moreover, it also ignores the homoerotic subtext in the film. Yet it pinpoints the close relationship between women and capitalist economy. The mother in *The River* is also the provider of food. Boxes of left-over "dim sums" feed her idle husband. The most typical interaction between her and her lover is feeding. When she is too busy

to take her son Hsiao Kang to the doctor for his strange illness, she buys the expensive tropical fruit durian as a compensation for her neglect (Rayns 17). Although women are traditionally the makers of food, in Tsai's films they are the providers of food and most of the time the main source of family income. In *The River* while the husband can only move the furniture around when the apartment is leaking, it is the wife who climbs up to the unit above theirs to fix the leaking pipe. Here the woman's active way of solving the problem ironically comments on the husband's passivity and inadequacy.

The idea of "climbing up" also has its sexual connotations. This action is a typical movement for women in Tsai's films. Ah Kuei, Mei Mei, and the mother in *The River* have all "climbed their men" and assumed a dominant, top position during sex. Tsai's comment on the character Mei Mei in an interview is paradigmatic of his perspective on financially and sexually independent women. Tsai states in an interview that he sees Mei Mei as a woman who uses her body as bait so she is always the one who takes the initiative in any situation, including in bed. Wanting only physical pleasure, she refuses to be kissed by Ah Jung, the younger man she picks up on the street for sex. Mei Mei leaves right after, while Ah Jung remains in bed, which makes her appear "masculine" (Hsieh 43). Only intercourse and no kiss—a line of wisdom from one of the street walkers in the film *Pretty Woman*—positions the sex scene in the context of casual commercialism which characterizes the city. There is little existence of amour, and therefore belies the title *Vive L'Amour*. Tsai's comment on Mei Mei's "masculine" characteristics somewhat undermines the agency of his filmic women since the operational power structure is still based upon an essentialist definition of gender roles.

Yet Tsai is not conventional when it comes to the interpretation of gender roles. In fact, his films are often parodies of traditional familial or gender discourses. His usual practice is to debunk these traditional discourses by first incorporating them into his filmic texts and then revealing their emptiness. For instance, one of the important motifs in his films is to interrogate the meaning of home in an urban environment and women's role in this familial discourse. By highlighting the

mobility in the urban space, Tsai presents his thesis of an urban identity that is rootless and homeless. In his filmic syntax, a woman whose traditional role is that of a *homemaker* paradoxically becomes a sign of urban *homelessness*. The only traditional housewife in Tsai's first four films is Hsiao Kang's mother in *Rebels of the Neon God*. She is a voiceless woman caught in the intense conflict of her husband and son, a forgettable woman who can do nothing about the disintegration of her family but to pray to gods and season the food with the ashes of oracle papers. Interestingly, this silent housewife figure is to be mimicked by Hsiao Kang in *Vive L'Amour*. He is playing house—he shops, cooks, does the laundry—with Ah Jung, whom he has met in the empty condominium that Mei Mei is trying to sell. This improvised family unit of two men and Mei Mei the saleslady who drops in from time to time to have sex with Ah Jung is a parodic version of the failed family in the previous film. In both films the “homemakers” are the most ignored and least fulfilled characters.

The connection between mobility and home becomes obvious when it comes to nonconventional women characters. Ah Kuei in *Rebels of the Neon God* wakes up in one stranger's room after another, only to find that she is always the one who gets left alone in the empty bed. This girl from the country may appear to enjoy sexual agency in the city, but in reality her life is characterized by emptiness and absence. At the end of the film when upon the request of her boyfriend, Ah Tze, she hugs his dying buddy who has been lusting after her body, showing a strong maternal instinct in the embrace and reminding the spectator that she is still trapped within a traditionally sexualized and maternalized body. The nude female pin-up in Ah Tze's room highlights the “to-be-looked-at-ness” of such a female body. Ah Kuei's appearance in the room is similar to an *embodiment* of the pin-up girl and returns her to the status of an object of desire. She is both a mother and a whore and an object to be shared by men in order to strengthen male bonding. In a sense, Ah Kuei's weeping in the flooded apartment sets the precedent for Mei Mei's crying at the final scene of *Vive L'Amour*.

One of the most direct representations of women's dissatisfied

(Kraicer 560) from the *fin de siècle* chronotope. Science fiction lovers will have little difficulty recognizing a familiar setting of the urban dystopia that characterizes the genre in *The Hole*. Although the city is not named, it is clearly a version of Taipei as an entropic global city. Peggy Chiao points out that “body” is the controlling imagery in the film and the upstairs/downstairs apartments linked by water pipes begin to share a common bodily consciousness when a hole is made on the floor that divides the two rooms (11). In a sense, the apartment complex is like a gigantic dysfunctional body that is traumatized by the unknown plague and desertion of the city authority. The hole is at once a wound and represents an effort to cure. The peeping through the hole of the male protagonist, the man upstairs (again played by Li Kang-sheng), and his attempt to “penetrate” it with his leg make the hole appear in a “feminine” light. The reaction of the female protagonist, the woman downstairs, to the hole—she tries to use pesticide to rid it of roaches, to cover it with tape—reveals her fear and panic while faced with exposed feminine sexuality. Ironically, she has to use her body as bait in order to get someone to fix the hole. In her quasi-pornographic phone calls with the plumber, she attempts to recreate seductive images with her voice in order to lure the plumber to come back to her unit and fix the hole. With yet another ironic turn, however, we see how her own sexual desire is aroused by her own words. The way she repetitively wipes her body with tissue paper echoes the scene in *The River* in which the mother is holding onto the pillow. Both scenes suggest unsuccessful masturbation and articulate unfulfilled sexual desire.

Like all the other women in Tsai's films, the nameless woman protagonist in *The Hole* also cries. Besides crying, however, Tsai Ming-liang uses singing to express female desires in *The Hole*. While there is no white rabbit to lead the Alice-like spectator through the hole into the Wonderland, Tsai uses his film art to lead the spectator into the black hole of the unconscious and explore the fantastic dream world of desire. In this apocalyptic fable, the filmic space is permeated with the threat of an unknown disease that will condemn its victim into a cockroach state of existence. This bleak futurist vision is curiously paralleled with a “sentimental return”<sup>7</sup> to the good old days of

Hollywood-style musicals. Without prior warning, Tsai punctuates the “real life” of his protagonists with musical sequences featuring the singing of a Hong Kong actress and chanteuse of the 1950s and 1960s, Ge Lan (or Grace Chang). This sentimental return not only presents Tsai’s homage to his favorite star whom he has worshipped since his childhood but also bespeaks his diasporic identity. This is a moment of nostalgia for the filmmaker in which he “returns” to the Malaysia of his childhood and relives the acoustic and visual encounters with cinema as a young child in the security of his grandparents’ presence. Such nostalgia marks a return to the “primal scene” of an artist’s *Bildung* and demarcates the historicity of desire in an autobiographical fashion. This “return,” however, is only possible when everything is operated in the logic of the fantastic and dreams.

Tsai carefully maintains the dream logic of these musical sequences and its difference from the “real world”—the colorful and glamorous dancing figures in bright costumes contrast sharply with the dingy characters of the “real life.” Peggy Chiao rightly observes that Tsai attempts to recreate a “utopia” in which emotions are expressed openly and there is no masquerading and distancing of inner feelings as in real life (12–13). However, Tsai also undermines the escapist aura of these sequences as well as his own indulgence in this sentimental return with the persistent use of “realistic” settings. The “age of innocence” recalled by Ge Lan’s singing is always already called into question by the fixed settings inside the rundown housing project. The boundary between “reality” and fantasy is constantly broken down by the visual contrasts of the Hollywood-style costumed figures with the narrow elevator, the dirty hallway and the damp slope in a traditional marketplace. This double operation of at once building a world of fantasy and dismantling its escapist quality effectively creates a Brechtian sense of alienation as in the epic theater; it also underlines the film’s represented reality as a postmodern simulacra.

More importantly, these musical sequences produced within a fantastic logic create multiple alienations and fragmentations of the female body and subjectivity. The vignettes of musicals suggest a battle between the superego and the id of the female protagonist. The

spectator is constantly reminded of the unflattering external environment and tremendous mental pressure under which the woman upstairs labors for her survival. The middle-aged woman in “real” life is a compulsive cleaner and collector of bathroom tissues and appears prudish, except when she is trying to seduce the plumber on the phone. The most she can do in the “realistic” world is to ask the plumber, her invisible interlocutor, “Do you know what a woman wants?” Yet this woman dances uninhibitedly in the dream/musical sequences. The titles of the songs in her dreams seem to be signposts that provide possible answers to her “woman question”: a woman may want to indulge herself in the exotic “Calypso 卡力蘇”; to be a “Tigress 胭脂虎” who could not care less about men; to be outspoken about her desire by singing “I Demand Your Love 我要你的愛”; to be desired by so many men that she keeps on “Sneezing 打噴嚏”; and to enjoy love “No Matter Who You [the partner] Are 我不管你是誰”. The constant shuttling back and forth between realism and dream sequences nevertheless highlights the distance of the two worlds and underscores the character’s state of alienation when the city government abandons her to defend herself against the epidemic. Furthermore, Tsai’s deployment of lip-synch again breaks up the continuity of the voice and the visual image of the female body. It will be too simplistic to read these sequences as merely vicarious wish-fulfillments. When the woman “stars” in her own dreams, the spectator is reminded of how the female star in traditional Hollywood musical genre is first and foremost presented as a spectacle to be gazed at. The case of *The Hole* is even more complicated because in her dance the female protagonist is dubbed with the singing voice of a former star, a voice that comes from the director’s sentimental remembrance of an age lost. Tsai makes no attempt to cover up the fact that the dancing body and the singing voice come from different sources. Thus we are able to observe how female subjectivity becomes fragmentary in the filming process of mechanical reproduction, which again underscores the incompleteness of female existence in Tsai Ming-liang’s world of images.

In the ending of *The Hole*, however, Tsai inserts a rare moment of tenderness in which he allows the man to rescue the woman who has

caught the disease. He offers her a glass of water and then lifts her up to his room through the hole and into the world of final fantasy in which they dance together. The framing of the rescue scene through the kitchen door creates a frame within a frame that self-reflexively questions the abrupt use of *dues ex machina* to facilitate the woman's escape here. Instead of the gaudy costumes as in the previous dream/dance sequences, this time the couple is dressed formally with good taste. The final sequence is highly suggestive of a sense of "uplifting," as if it provides a way out from the bleak dystopia. Yet this again exists only in the world of dreams. Although the woman temporarily returns to humanity from her insect state, her cure is by no means a certainty. At best, Tsai can only offer his audience an open ending and a momentary relief with Ge Lan's enchanting song.<sup>8</sup> As the man and woman slowly dance to the singing of Ge Lan from the soundtrack, the voice of the chanteuse again lingers on after the visual image fades out and a written text as a footnote to the film appears. In this footnote Tsai is thankful that Ge Lan's beautiful voice will accompany us to the new millennium. With all the tender sentiments suggested here, we can barely overlook the fact that the female body is once more separated from and even replaced by her voice and that a woman's desiring body is displaced by the director's fetishistic desire for the female voice.

Thus while in the somatized diegesis of his first four films Tsai Ming-liang is able to picture female mobility and agency befitting a late capitalist economic model, the women in these films cannot escape the confinement of compulsory heterosexuality and are almost always trapped by their desires. Although his male characters are also in a state of lack, at least Tsai offers them a way out through the character of Hsiao Kang, whose recurrent appearances in *Rebels of the Neon God*, *Vive L'Amour*, and *The River* create a continuum in which gay desire is finally free to come out of the closet. Whereas the man can at least momentarily enjoy the light from the balcony after his coming out and be blessed for acknowledging his own queer identity, however, the woman who is exposed to the absurdity of life can only cry. The image of the crying woman is therefore Tsai Ming-liang's embodied

comment on urban femininity of the 1990s. What remains to be seen, finally, is whether women can be something other than desiring bodies in Tsai's developing film language and aesthetic.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Tsai's films have received numerous awards. For instance, *Rebels of the Neon God* won a bronze at the Tokyo Film Festival in 1992; *Vive L'Amour* was awarded the Golden Lion ex aequo at the Venice Film Festival, the FIPRESCI International Critics Award at the Cannes Film Festival and the Best Director Prize at Taiwan's Golden Horse Awards in 1994; *The River* was honored with the Silver Bear Award at the Berlin Film Festival and the Special Jury Prize at the Annual Chicago International Film in 1997; *The Hole* was the winner of the Grand Jury Prize for the Best Director at the Annual Chicago International Film and the FIPRESCI International Critics Award at the Cannes Film Festival in 1998; *What Time is it There?* received the Grand Jury Prize at the 37th Annual Chicago International Film Festival, Best Picture and Best Director Prizes at the Asia-Pacific Film Festival, the Grand Jury Prize at the Golden Horse Awards and the Grand Technical Prize at Cannes in 2001.

<sup>2</sup> I am referring to Rey Chow's term in her monograph *Primitive Passions: Visuality, Sexuality in Contemporary Chinese Cinema*. Tsai states in an interview with Shelly Kraicer that his films are personal instead of historical: "There is very little about history in my films because my films are very personal. Since I am an overseas Chinese from Malaysia, I have no interest in Taiwan history nor any understanding of Taiwanese history" (583).

<sup>3</sup> The film was shot on location the day when the park was open to public use. David Walsh describes the setting well: it is "a park which is not a park. There are no trees, no grass; it looks like an abandoned construction site."

<sup>4</sup> In his interview with David Walsh, Tsai describes how the park setting becomes decisive for the way the ending goes: "When I originally wrote the script, I wanted a ray of hope at the end. And so the

original ending of the film was, after walking and walking and walking in the park, the woman decides that yes, she would like to extend her hand and ask for love. So she goes back to the apartment and waits for the sleeping man. That was the original ending. Then I waited for the new park to open in Taipei. And when it opened, I saw that it was the same as a few days before, nothing had changed. It was in no shape to open, but it opened. And with that disappointment in my heart, there was no way I could shoot the original ending. And so this is how the ending came about.”

<sup>5</sup> This is described by Mary Ann Doane as “the syntax which constitutes the female body as a term” (97). Doane suggests that what is at stake in feminist filmmaking practice is the syntax that speaks the female body differently. I would argue that it is also important to understand the syntax of the female body constructed by male filmmakers like Tsai who do not put women on the screen as spectacle, but who want to create new interpretations of the female body.

<sup>6</sup> Tsai gives an interesting account of the palpable tension in this scene. He points out that the encounter of Miao and Chen is quite similar to the pick-up scene of Mei Mei and Ah Jung; but the tension between the two men derives from Miao’s former career as an actor in knight errant/kung fu movies: “it’s a little like a swordplay movie with the two of them sizing each other up. This takes Miao Tian (the father) back to the genre he’s best known for. The entire scene is quite dreamlike: the footsteps are slightly exaggerated, while background sound is played down. The colorful but phony glamour of the McDonald’s setting makes the whole thing more surreal” (Rayns 17). Clearly, besides the fantastic *mise en scène*, Tsai’s (homo)sexualized reading of a typical duel scene from a swordplay genre is one of the key factors that make this scene impressive and effective.

<sup>7</sup> In her presentation at National Chiao Tung University on 21 June 2002, “Sentimental Returns: The Everyday in the Recent Films of Zhang Yimou and Wong Kar-wai,” Rey Chow theorized the concept of “sentimental return” in her reading of contemporary Chinese and Hong Kong films.

<sup>8</sup> Tsai in fact denies there is any hope in the film. As he states in

his interview with Kraicer: "For me, it is completely a film of utmost despair" (581).

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