

Spatial and Sexual Disorientation in the Films of Tsai Ming-liang

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Abstract

Malaysian-born Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang is known for his films about encounters between strangers in disorienting urban environments. His films are also often tinged with nostalgia and a sense of temporal disorientation in the modern world. In this paper, I examine Tsai's film *The Hole* along with his earlier *Vive L'Amour* in terms of his motifs of disorientation, in both the temporal and spatial senses, adding another dimension that I will call "sexual disorientation" drawing from Michael Moon and Sara Ahmed. Sexual disorientation unsettles our assumptions, our "knowingness," about sexual identity, resulting in uncanny and queer effects on our reading of desire in cinematic narratives. Queer in this sense challenges the fixity implied by the logic of sexual orientation. My reading of Tsai's films as having queer effects is in part a way of understanding his statement that he is "sick of people labeling my films as 'gay films'." I argue that both *Vive L'Amour* and *The Hole* perform a deconstruction of sexual identity, in that they treat sexuality and desire as performed without cohering in an identity. Tsai's framing of how bodies are oriented in space also manages to "queer" space. I end with a coda on the transnational queer encounters in his recent film *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*.

Keywords: TSAI Ming-liang; Taiwan; Sexuality; Queer Theory; Cinema; Diaspora

Tsai Ming-liang's short film *The Skywalk Is Gone* (2002) functions as a coda to his feature film *What Time Is It There?* (2001). In the earlier film, Hsiao Kang (Lee Kang-sheng) and Shiang-chyi (Chen Shiang-chyi) meet briefly at Hsiao Kang's stall where he is selling watches on a skywalk atop the Taipei train station, and she buys his "double time-zone watch" before she leaves for Paris. In *The Skywalk Is Gone*, Shiang-chyi has returned to Taiwan and the audience expects that she will finally rendezvous with Hsiao Kang after each have undergone a similar sort of temporal and spatial dislocation shown through parallel storytelling in *What Time Is It There?* Our expectations are frustrated along with Shiang-chyi however as she finds that the skywalk is now "missing" (it has been torn down), and she is ticketed for jaywalking as she tries to cross the street where the skywalk once was. In regard to this scene, Brian Hu has argued that this sense of absence and longing reflects a kind of nostalgia in Tsai's work that is both spatial and temporal, and results in a unique form of disorientation and dislocation:

The two objects of nostalgia are the city of Taipei, which transforms so continually that Shiang-chyi does not even recognise it after returning from vacation, and the cinema itself, particularly the culturally Chinese cinema of the past and the local Taiwanese cinema of the present. (Hu, 2003)

Nostalgia literally means homesickness and thus suggests longing for a lost place. Hu argues that the nostalgia for the urban landmark is in some senses interminable:

we realise that in an era of continuous dislocation through urban construction, the disappearance of a landmark leads to a search that cannot end: if a skywalk is gone, how does one possibly look for it? Shiang-chyi travels to where she thinks it ought to be, only to be led around it, in front of it, or on the other side of it altogether. The nostalgia for an industrialising city is thus by definition never ending. (Hu, 2003)

Hu thus suggests that the hopeless search for a place that is gone results in a feeling of dislocation that is also stretched out in time.

Like the character Hsiao Kang—who in *What Time Is It There?* is constantly adjusting clocks all over Taipei to read Paris time instead—Tsai himself is hyper-aware of his own temporal dislocation. Indeed, nostalgia is more commonly defined as a wistful affection for a period in the past. Hu's reading of Tsai's "retro" desire emphasizes how the past is mediated through film and music. Cinematic nostalgia and temporal dislocation are activated by the seemingly kitsch or camp Mandarin pop song from the 1960s with which Tsai ends the film. Tsai has declared a great fondness for this sort of song in opposition to the American-influenced pop music currently predominant in Asia, which he sees as a result of what he calls the "terrifying phenomenon" of globalism (Tsai qtd in Berry, 2005, p. 386). While globalism represents a kind of homogenizing effect for Tsai, certainly his films use transnational and cross-cultural relations as a way of reflecting on the contingencies of both place and time. This is evident, for example, in *What Time Is It There?*, a French/Taiwanese co-production which critically reflects on Asian tourism in France, French *nouvelle vague* film, and the significance of "time zones." In an interview with Michael Berry entitled "Tsai Ming-liang: Trapped in the Past," Tsai clarifies:

It is not that I am setting out to introduce sixties culture to a new generation; it is just that my own life, or at least my ability to accept popular culture, is stuck in that era. And it is only natural that my films are a reflection of what's going on in my life. (2005, p. 387)

Hu explains the historical significance of these now unpopular forms of popular musical songs:

As in *The Hole* (1998), *The Skywalk is Gone* communicates with 1960s Chinese cinema through popular song. Famous outside of Asia for its martial arts films, 1960s Hong Kong cinema also saw a flourishing musical genre. Among its most popular stars were Lin Dai and Grace Chang, the latter's songs appearing prominently in *The Hole*. Tsai has cited these early musical films as direct influences on his own filmmaking. (Hu, 2003)

I would like to examine *The Hole* along with Tsai's early work *Vive L'Amour* (1994) in terms of these motifs of disorientation, both in the spatial and temporal sense already established, but also adding another dimension that I will call "sexual disorientation." I draw from Michael Moon's (1998) application of this concept to David Lynch's *Blue Velvet* in my argument that sexual disorientation unsettles our assumptions, our "knowingness," about sexual identity, resulting in uncanny and queer effects on our reading of desire in cinematic narratives.

Queer in the sense used in this paper challenges the fixity implied by the logic of sexual orientation. The sexual orientation model understands desire as a sort of compass with a magnetic north aligned according to gender polarity, with sexual difference therefore determining whether "opposites attract" or whether homosexuality is thought of as same-sex attraction or gender inversion (where a man desiring another man must do so "as" a woman). Moe Meyer argues that unlike the identities labeled "gay and lesbian,"

Queer sexualities become, then, a series of improvised performances whose threat lies in the denial of any social identity derived from participation in those performances. As a refusal of sexually defined identity, this must also include a denial of the difference upon which such identities have been founded (Meyer, 1994, p. 3)

In other words, queer involves the "deconstruction of the homo/hetero binary" (Meyer, 1994, p. 3). My reading of Tsai's films as having queer effects is in part a way of understanding why he has insisted that he is "sick of people labeling my films as 'gay films'" (Berry, 2005, p. 385). I will argue that both *Vive L'Amour* and *The Hole* perform a deconstruction of sexual identity, in that they treat sexuality and desire as performed without cohering in an identity, but also in the way that they understand how bodies are oriented in space, in other words, how they "queer" space (de Villiers, 2008).

In her book *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed extends Moon's concept of sexual disorientation to think about what happens when space is made queer:

What does it mean to think about the "nonresidence" of queer? We can consider the "affect" of disorientation. As I have suggested, for bodies that are out of place, in the spaces in which they gather, the experience can be disorientating. You can feel oblique, after all. You can feel odd, even disturbed. Experiences of migration, of becoming estranged from the contours of life at home, can take this form [. . .] At the same time, it is the proximity of bodies that produces disorientating effects, which, as it were, "disturb" the picture [. . .] queer moments happen when things fail to cohere. In such moments of failure, when things do not stay in place or cohere as place, disorientation happens. The question becomes how we "face" or approach such moments of disorientation [. . .] Queer would become a matter of how one approaches the object that slips away—as a way of inhabiting the world at the point in which things fleet. (Ahmed, 2006, pp. 170–72)

Ahmed's remark here about "the object that slips away" would certainly apply to Hu's understanding of nostalgia in Tsai's *The Skywalk Is Gone*. Furthermore, Tsai's love of songs considered camp might be thought of as a queer way of inhabiting the world at the point in which things are fleeting. But I would first like to consider her very promising connection between the "nonresidence" of queer and the affect of disorientation, which is considered a hallmark of the New Taiwan Cinema movement.

In a familiar plot pattern of "synchronous monadic simultaneity" identified by Fredric Jameson (1994) in relation to urban Taiwanese cinema, Tsai's *Vive L'Amour* observes the convergence or coincidence of three individuals: a young realtor May Lin (played by Yang Kuei-mei), and two street vendors Ah-jung (Chen Chao-jung) and Hsiao Kang (Lee Kang-sheng). May Lin repeatedly fails to rent a large upscale apartment, and the three characters are shown variously occupying the vacant apartment like squatters: Hsiao Kang steals the key to the apartment and surreptitiously uses it as a sort of experimental space like a child might "play house": he unsuccessfully attempts suicide, takes a bath, washes his clothes in the bathtub, tries on women's clothing and does cartwheels in the hallways, makes out with a watermelon with holes cut in it, which he then uses as a bowling ball in one of the hallways. While he is bowling, he is caught by Ah-jung who demands to know how he got in, despite the fact they he also has a dubious right to be there since he was merely brought there for a one-night-stand by May Lin. They form a sort of "buddy" relationship, however, and Ah-jung offers to drive Hsiao Kang anywhere he wishes. They go to a crematorium where people purchase funerary drawers, in a comic parallel with the real estate theme of the film.

Again in a rather childlike or adolescent moment, Hsiao Kang masturbates in the empty apartment but is interrupted by the sound of Ah-jung and May Lin once again coming back to the apartment for a quick tryst, so he quickly hides under the bed, and proceeds to masturbate as they have sex on the bed above him. Once May Lin leaves, Hsiao Kang silently joins the sleeping Ah-jung in bed and gives him a rather coy kiss on the lips. It is for this reason that Hsiao Kang is identified as "gay" in the promotional literature for the film, but I would agree with Angelo Restivo's demurrer: Restivo finds the film "to be ambiguous on this point" (2002, p. 193 n. 16). This is where I think the concept of sexual disorientation is helpful, not only for making sense of a romantic triangle established by the film, but for understanding that Hsiao Kang's "performances" in the apartment have a destabilizing effect on how we read his gender and sexual identity. As Ahmed argues "queer moments happen when things fail to cohere" and Tsai manages to challenge the coherence of the audience's perception of the sexual identities of his characters. This disorientation effect also helps explain a rather coy lesbian kiss in *What Time Is It There?*: Shiang Chyi meets a fellow Chinese woman in Paris, and spends the night at her apartment, but their potential sexual encounter, like most in Tsai's films, is missed or cut short at a kiss. Tsai thus highlights multiple forms of spatial, cultural, and sexual disorientation.

Ahmed also usefully draws attention to the sense of being "oblique" that she identifies in relation to the contours of "life at home." Specifically, domestic space is disoriented by Tsai's film: each character is shown appropriating real estate. Examples include Ah-jung quickly rolling up the clothing he is selling on a blanket in the streets of Taipei, May Lin waiting around in various vacant buildings for potential buyers, and Hsiao Kang "playing house" in a queer fashion. As Ahmed suggests, Tsai depicts bodies that are out of place even as he emphasizes the idiosyncratic ways in which they use the space of the empty apartment. In this way, his film is "queer" in both its treatment of space and its treatment of sexual desire and behavior.

Tsai's foray into the dystopia or disaster film genre, *The Hole*, refines Tsai's concern for the uses of domestic space and his disorienting approach to sexual desire. As Ahmed notes, it is both the sense of estrangement and the proximity of bodies that can result in an oblique or queer relation to space. Tsai constructs a situation in which proximity and social communication are rendered anxious and suspicious through a vague but omnipresent fear of viral infection, in this case by the "Taiwan fever" which causes people to act like cockroaches. The interactions between characters in the film are thus mostly oblique and phobic. In an interview with David Walsh (1998), Tsai explains the concept behind this film that he was commissioned to make as a vision of the new millennium:

I thought the end of the century was too close to describe a future predicament, so it's actually a reflection of contemporary society. And being so dark, and full of disease, I think it's my observation of people also being so lonely, existing in their own solitude. (Walsh, 1998)

The interviewer remarks that this alienation is fairly universal at this point. Tsai agrees:

I think that although I invented a disease called "Taiwan fever," there are similar situations happening in many parts of Asia. There are a lot of strange diseases developing. Ever since AIDS there are all sorts of unprecedented diseases. In terms of the cockroach symptoms [. . .] a lot of people live in poverty, and try to adapt to the role, to the living environment they have, and acquire the characteristics of a cockroach. Being adaptable to a bad situation. Living purely on survival instinct, with a lack of any dignity. (Walsh, 1998)

Like another allegorical and uncanny genre obsessed with infection and survival instinct, namely the modern zombie film, such as Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* [1978], set in a shopping mall, Tsai uses the established genre of the disaster film to in fact throw the realities of modern life into stark relief. In particular, through the character of the woman in the downstairs apartment, he highlights the interconnection of germ phobia and social phobia. As a counterpoint, Tsai reveals the woman's fantasies of contact through rather disjunctive musical sequences using the songs of Grace Chang mentioned earlier in connection with 1960s Hong Kong musicals. It could be argued that the conventions of the song-and-dance musical are now not only camp but are also uncanny to modern audiences. Their appearance is increasingly highlighted as a moment that breaks with the diegesis. Examples include Lars von Trier's *Dancer In the Dark* (2000) or Royston Tan's *15* (2002), with its music video pastiche moments of the boys singing violent Singapore gang anthems. In *The Hole*, Tsai hybridizes two genres—the disaster film and the musical—in a way that is deliberately disorienting.

Reading the desire of *The Hole*'s musical sequences might seem straightforward in that they are about the desire of a woman for a man. But the "alienation effect" which Tsai achieves through such a jarring aesthetic juxtaposition renders the scenes all the more "queer." Certainly, the film is structured by sexual difference, but this sexual difference is problematized and rendered uncanny along with the conventions of romance. For example, the interactions between the man and woman take place around a gaping hole in the floor, with the man above the woman, but if the hole is a sexual metaphor, it is complicated by the fact that both parties "penetrate" it: he through dangling his leg and vomiting through it; she with bug spray that floods his apartment. They also interact on two levels of a courtyard, another hole in the middle of a building, in a way that highlights their missed encounters and renders them each oblique to the other. One could argue that the film demonstrates Jacques Lacan's (1982) assertion that "there is no sexual relation," in other words that fantasies of

overcoming sexual difference and lack are illusory. Yet, rather than Lacan's transcendentalization of heterosexual sexual difference, this obliqueness of gender and sex is "queer." This reading follows Eve Sedgwick's suggestion that queer refers to the "gaps" of meaning where elements of gender, sex, sexual orientation, sexual preference, and sexual identity refuse to line up monolithically (1993, p.8). The camp musical sequences help highlight this non-straight understanding of sexual differentiation and disorientation, and Tsai takes this up again in his "porn musical" *The Wayward Cloud* (2005) which features the same characters as *What Time Is It There?* and *The Skywalk is Gone*. Tsai's skewed or queer handling of genres (romance, comedy, *nouvelle vague*, disaster, musical, pornography) is also disorienting for his critics, perhaps especially with *The Wayward Cloud*, but that is precisely what makes his films so ripe for queer reading: they challenge our orientation to normative plots of heterosexual difference and to normative rules of genre.

Tsai's more recent film *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006) is in some ways a continuation of the kind of queer love triangle explored in *Vive L'Amour*. In this case, the triangulation is between a migrant Bangladeshi laborer Rawang (Norman Bin Atun), a battered Chinese homeless man he rescues and nurses back to health, Hsiao-Kang (Lee Kang-sheng), and a domestic servant (Chen Shiang-Chyi). They all share the same building owned by Chyi's older woman boss (Pearly Chua) in Kuala Lumpur. This time there is much more clear expression of jealousy by the man who so lovingly cared for Hsiao Kang's bruised and frail body. However, although he threatens to cut his throat, he is unable to carry out further violence to this body, and Lee strokes away his tears in a moment pregnant with both possibility and loss. This film marks Tsai's return to his native Malaysia.¹ However, like Ahmed's remarks about feeling oblique, and queer, through the disorienting effects of migration, Tsai's relationship to "home" is complicated. Ian Johnston notes that

the personal roots of this disconnectedness are broader than simply those of Tsai's sexuality. In Taiwan, he is a *huaqiao*, an overseas-born Chinese, someone simultaneously of the culture and outside it; which is a reflection of and variation on his shifting outsider status, growing up in Malaysia, as a Chinese in an officially-sanctioned/mandated majority Malay culture. So, in this return to his country of birth, his identification with migrant labourers — the most despised and discriminated-against portion of the population in wealthier Asian countries (Filipina maids in Hong Kong, Thai labourers in Taiwan etc) — is most appropriate. (Johnston, 2007)

Tsai uses his ambivalent or oblique relationship with his homeland to critically comment in his film on both environmental and political aspects of contemporary Malaysian culture. In terms of the environment, in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* "a smoky haze settles on the world of the film, just like the apocalyptic rain of *The Hole* and the drought of *The Wayward Sky*, enveloping the characters in a cocoon that is frustrating and then finally embracing." Johnston notes "[t]his haze has a realistic basis in the annual forest fires in Indonesia that cause such havoc to the air quality in Malaysia. But in a radio broadcast we hear the blame for this shifted onto migrant workers and the supposed illegal fires that they light in Kuala Lumpur" (Johnston, 2007). Like *The Hole*'s environmental disaster/disease that is introduced and politicized through radio announcements and interviews with distrustful civilians about

¹ Tsai was born in Kuching, Malaysia, but moved to Taiwan to pursue his studies.

garbage and how to sterilize tap water, Tsai uses an environmental problem to comment on the political problem of xenophobia and racism.²

It is therefore important to my discussion of Tsai's sense of dislocation that the film's most tender relationship is between a Bangladeshi laborer and a Chinese homeless man without a passport. Johnston notes that "[t]here's no overt sexuality to Rawang's care for Hsiao Kang. It's a tender act of love, a selfless giving of himself to another" (Johnston, 2007). This underscores the significance of sexual disorientation in Tsai's films. Yet Tsai also uses *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* to comment on the role of homophobia in Malaysian politics, specifically through the Chinese title of the film and the prop of the discarded mattress on which Rawang nurses Hsiao Kang back to health. Johnston explains how the political aspect of Tsai's film

comes not only in the allusions to the xenophobia and discrimination that the migrant workers suffer, but also in the film's Chinese title. "Hei yan quan" translates literally as "Black circles round the eyes" and means both "Shadows under the eyes" (from lack of sleep) and "A black eye." Tsai has himself stated how through both this title and the mattress of the story he is referring to the case of Anwar Ibrahim, the former Deputy Prime Minister and Minister of Finance, whose political downfall was orchestrated by Malaysian Prime Minister Mathahir Mohammad in a patently faked court case. One aspect of the court case was an accusation of sodomy (a crime in Malaysia) where a stained mattress was brought as evidence into the courtroom and where Anwar appeared nursing a black eye. Yet Tsai's own take on this is not so politically orientated but rather developed in a more generalised statement that fits in with his own concerns in the film, namely that "you could really be somebody and be brought down to being nobody"—down, in other words, to the level of *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*'s three main protagonists, Hsiao Kang, Rawang, and Chyi. (Johnston, 2007)

Johnston's suggestion that Tsai's film is less politically "orientated" might be complicated by an attention not only to homophobia as a political problem, but also how queerness and sexual disorientation factor into Tsai's intervention in local political problems of xenophobia and racism as well as that of South-South migration and labor.³ Tsai's concerns are both general and local, his characters figure in problems that are both romantic and political. By calling attention to his own sense of spatial and temporal disorientation in relation to globalization that is also experienced by his migrant characters, Tsai demonstrates the political and critical value of a queer diasporic lens.⁴

Like Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* (1997), Tsai focuses on transnational migration and labor, and like Wong, Tsai manages to make a cheap color-changing fiber-optic toy into a kind of poetic yet ironic image of romantic fantasy. The final shot of the film shows a dream-sequence image of the three main protagonists sleeping on Chyi's bed in the middle of a reflecting pool in a vacant building under construction/demolition. The fiber-optic toy rather comically floats by as another bittersweet nostalgic Mandarin song accompanies the fade to black and credits rolling. But like *The Hole*, Tsai also juxtaposes the rather destitute reality of

² Tsai's use of radio announcements is similar to the foregrounding of government broadcast media misinformation in Romero's zombie films.

³ There is obviously much more to say here, but I want to thank Sim Wai Chew for his comments pointing me in this analytic direction.

⁴ See the website for the International Conference on Queer Diaspora: <http://140.112.180.209/qd/index.php>

urban labor in Malaysia with the Bollywood-style musicals that entertain the migrant workers, and he uses the romantic fantasy elements of the lyrics to these musicals to comment ironically on the decidedly un-idealized vision of sexuality and desire his film depicts. The final disorienting shot of the bed floating off on black water in the midst of ambiguous urban demolition/construction signifies—to twist a phrase from Roland Barthes (1977, p. 142)—the “drift far from that all-too-pure pair” hetero-homo. Tsai’s films and characters thus depict both disturbing experiences of dislocation and productive forms of spatial, temporal, and sexual disorientation that ultimately encourage in his audiences a queer way of inhabiting a fleeting and shifting world.

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