

Tsai Ming Liang's Alternative Narratives of Working-Class Life in Taiwan

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Abstract

Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming Liang is celebrated for his slow, poetic filmmaking and the philosophical treatment of time in his work. Tsai tends to eschew linear narrative and his films consist of scenes, each capable of standing alone as an individual art work. The one constant in Tsai's films is his lead actor, Lee Kang Sheng, who embodies Tsai's ideas in his intensely physical performances. One aspect of Tsai's films that tends to be overlooked though is his representation of class – the character played by Lee and the scenarios that unfold, focus on Taiwan's working classes and contain a sensory and physical depiction of class in Taiwan's cities. The everyday of Taiwan's working class is visible, but the approach taken by Tsai is an alternative one, creating art house films that, I argue, offer an intense and insightful portrayal of working class life. Tsai also blends fantasy with realism in a number of his films, and the fantasy elements compliment the working class realism by tapping into Taiwanese popular culture. While admired as an auteur, Tsai's films arguably offer an artistic but also realistic representation of working-class Taiwan.

Keywords: Tsai Ming Liang, working-class representation, Taiwanese cinema, embodied viewing, phenomenology, Marxist analysis

Introduction

How does an art house auteur evoke working-class life and bring working-class experience to audiences while also creating slow, sometimes abstract, experimental and always unusual films? I would argue that Tsai Ming Liang does just this – his films offer audiences a taste of working-class life in Taiwan and south-east Asia, and he does this through techniques that create a sensory and physical viewing experience. In this way, Tsai's films recreate the lived experience of class.

Tsai Ming Liang¹ is a well-regarded auteur whose work is celebrated for its slow, poetic style (Rapfogel 2004). There is much written on Tsai's films and scholars have commented on many aspects of his work such as his adherence to slow cinema (Lim 2014), the artistic value of his work (Saint-Cyr 2011; Bordeleau 2013), his exploration of marginalized sexualities and challenges to heteronormativity (Martin 1999; Lee 2007), his use of allegory (Chow 2004), the rejection of linear narrative and his philosophical approach to time (Rapfogel 2002; Martin 2003).

Other analyses of Tsai's films foreground themes of loneliness, alienation, isolation, urban life and urban decay (Rapfogel 2002). There has been discussion of his use of realism and his favoured techniques of static shooting, long scenes, “still and minimalist images” (Chow 2004: 130), minimal dialogue, and use (or not) of music (Wood 2007; Bao 2014). His references to Taiwanese popular culture have been examined and his European cineliteracy explored (Lim 2007). Scholars point to the enigmatic qualities of Tsai's work and note how his films take viewers outside of their comfort zones and leave many questions unanswered (Chow 2004: 125).

Although some reviewers have noted Tsai's preference for characters from marginalised and “lower class” backgrounds (Carew 2015: 60), Tsai's depiction of class experience is not often considered by scholars, and I would argue that many elements of Tsai's work mentioned above are also used effectively to depict the lived experience of class. The physicality of Tsai's films has been examined, and the sensory effects of his use of sound design have been highlighted (Birtwistle 2015; De Lucia 2011), but it has not been linked to how these particular devices provide the viewer with a sensory experience of the characters' class positions. Tsai himself has stated that he has always been interested in films about ordinary people (Leopold 2002) probably due to his own “humble” background (Tsai in Rehm et al. 1999: 83). During his first ten years in Taiwan he would walk around the working-class districts of Taipei, observing local people and noting the rapid changes occurring (Tsai in Rehm et al. 1999: 83). According to Yeh and Davis (2012: 235), Tsai lived a working-class life both in his native Malaysia and adoptive Taiwan and has maintained a closeness to working-class life. This was how he discovered Lee Kang Sheng, the young “bike boy” (Stephens 1996: 23) who would become his principle actor and muse. The characters played by Lee are based on Lee's own life (this was certainly the case for Lee in Tsai's first feature, *Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), in which Lee plays a young working-class lad who frequents video arcades and hangs around on the streets), and it follows that Lee's working-class background informs the characters and performances.

Tsai represents the physicality of class experience in his films – particularly the experience of being working class, of poverty, homelessness and the accompanying marginalisation and

¹ For biographical information on Tsai Ming Liang, see <http://sensesofcinema.com/2003/great-directors/tsai/>

isolation. Tsai's films reveal the difficulties sometimes faced by working-class people in Taiwan, but he also injects humour into his work – there are many amusing moments in Tsai's films, usually as a result of the absurdity of human existence (it is funny watching a character urinate into a plastic bag in real time). The humour (often based around bodily functions) is characteristic of working-class culture, and the inclusion of funny scenes shows that Tsai does not take his work too seriously, a trait that would likely be frowned upon in many working-class communities.

Theoretical Approaches

The theoretical framework adopted in this paper is broadly Marxist, and informed by a phenomenological and embodied approach to film reception. A Marxist approach considers the filmmaker's class background and explores how class is represented on screen and how a class background impacts on a filmmaker's creative decisions. Films made by filmmakers who are self-consciously Marxist in approach offer critiques of capitalism and highlight class inequalities – they also acknowledge that the creation of films requires capital, but attempt to create works that Mazierska and Kristensen (2014) suggest, avoid “serving the god of capital” (22). While Tsai Ming Liang may not have described himself as a Marxist filmmaker, there is a strong sense in his body of work that he is critiquing capitalism (and the inequalities it creates). Tsai's work, despite being art cinema, also avoids privileging “form or style over the referent”, which is a Marxist critique of some avant garde work (Wayne 2005: 16). Additionally, the work of Vivian Sobchack (1992) is also influential. Her phenomenological approach fits in well with my own experience of watching film. Her attention to the role of the senses in viewing film is very useful in understanding the embodied experiences of watching film, and how this can then be applied to the embodied experience of class. Steven Shaviro's (1993) work on embodied viewing is also helpful, particularly when he describes the visceral effects of watching films as “being assaulted by a flux of sensations” (46).

These approaches are tied together via working-class studies. This is an interdisciplinary field committed to study of working-class life, with a focus on the lived experience of working-class people and analysis of how class works in everyday life (Linkon & Russo 2005: 11). The study of the representation of working-class life is an important aspect of working-class studies (Linkon & Russo 2005: 11) and film provides a wealth of material. Zaniello (2005) states that film reveals much of how class works, both in terms of how working-class people are represented on screen, but also because the particular inclusions and exclusions within film tell us much about whose stories and experiences are privileged and which voices are suppressed (152).

In working-class studies, autobiographical approaches are valued (Strangleman 2005: 140) and it is therefore relevant to mention that my interest in the work of Tsai Ming Liang comes from my own working-class background and the experience of living in Taiwan from 1992 to 1995. The Taiwan neighbourhood I lived in was working-class – situated in a town just under an hour's drive southwest of Taipei (Taoyuan). The town consisted mainly of blocks of apartments with cheap rent. There were video arcades, street food, pavement hawkers, illegal gambling dens, barber shops (brothels), betel nut stands and an old cinema in the centre of the town. I am aware that when I watch a film, I do so with an acute sense of how class works – my working-class background has made me very aware of class issues. Tsai's depictions of working-class life appeal to me and I am impressed with his affectionate but astute representation of working-class culture. A poetic style, slow approach and rejection of traditional narrative is not antithetical to a representation of working class experience and in

this essay I will argue that there is potential for working class viewer to identify with the experiences of Tsai's characters on various levels, regardless of connections or lack thereof with Taiwan.

According to Yeh and Davis (2012), the “working-class element is a highly visible attribute in Tsai's characters” (213). Lee plays the same character (usually known as Hsiao Kang) who drifts around various cities (mainly Taipei) taking on any work that he can find (street vendor, movie extra, store manager, film projectionist, porn actor). With the exception of *Visage* (2009), where Lee plays a film director, Hsiao Kang lives a working-class life. He lives in small and run-down apartments; he rides a motor scooter rather than drive a car. He eats at street stalls or at home, he dresses in casual clothes and often wears Taiwanese flip flops. Yeh and Davis (2012) suggest that Tsai's films display a specifically Taiwanese working-class culture (234), which is interesting considering Tsai is not Taiwanese born. They point to Tsai's inclusion of the Taiwanese sensibility of earthiness – a way of behaving (and an aesthetic) that is brash, street wise and considered tacky or vulgar by the middle class elite (2012: 209). Yeh and Davis (2012) describe Tsai as an “ethnographer” (235) who manages to combine “experimental avant garde...with queer issues and...the Taiwanese working class” (234). This treatment of working-class Taiwan also includes elements of camp which Yeh and Davis suggest challenges middle class sensibilities and privileges instead a “kitsch” (219) and “tawdry” (224) aesthetic, providing the films with a “distinctly shabby working-class aura” (214), an “aura” that I would suggest can be celebrated rather than dismissed as inferior.

Working-Class Themes

Work and Home

In *What Time is it There?* (2001), the action takes place in two cities, and follows Tsai's recurring character, Hsiao Kang (Lee) in Taipei and Shiang-chyi (Chen Shiang-chyi) in Paris. In this film, Hsiao Kang is a street vendor, selling watches from a suitcase on one of Taipei's (since demolished) pedestrian bridges near the main railway station. We watch Hsiao Kang at work, standing on the bridge spruiking his wares and demonstrating an “unbreakable” watch by banging it repeatedly on the metal railings of the bridge. Tsai foregrounds the sound of the watch clanging on the metal and it creates a sense of repetition akin to the timepiece itself, and also the repetitive nature of Hsiao Kang's work. It is as if the banging of the watch is marking time for Hsiao Kang, counting down each minute of his working day. The scene provides a tactile auralty that evokes the nature of repetitive work and arguably brings the viewer closer to Hsiao Kang's experience. There is much of the everyday in *What Time is it There?*, and the everyday is mainly that of working-class people. While the scenes set in Paris offer a different perspective (of a lonely tourist apparently not enjoying her experience), the Taipei scenes depict the small family apartment of Hsiao Kang, working-class neighborhoods, street food, betel nut stands and sex workers. Although Hsiao Kang does drive a car, and splurges on French wine, he is still living at home and seemingly scraping a living from his watch sales. Hsiao Kang's obsession with all things French suggests a working-class ‘misunderstanding’ of high culture – he asks for French films at the video store and buys French wine, but he doesn't consume these products in a bourgeois fashion. After initially drinking the wine from a glass, he eventually abandons the glass and gulps the wine from the bottle while sitting in his car eating snacks from the night market. He sits on the floor in his bedroom, smokes a cigarette and sleepily watches the classic art film (François Truffaut's 1959 *Les Quatre Cents Coups*) on a small television in his working-class apartment. The scenes from Truffaut's film that the audience can see on Hsiao Kang's screen contrast strongly with the other objects we have seen in his bedroom – the kitsch objects such as soft toys.

In Tsai's 2013 *Stray Dogs*, the character of the father, played by Lee Kang Sheng, works as a sign holder for a real estate company in Taiwan. In a number of scenes, we watch him stand at a busy Taipei intersection holding his sign up for passing motorists as he battles with driving rain and strong wind. Next to Lee's character is another sign holder also fighting to stay upright and the two of them stand silently at the mercy of the elements as they persevere with their work. The sound of their flimsy plastic rain ponchos rustling violently in the wind is foregrounded and creates a sense of "affective tonality" (Birtwistle 2015: 82) – we can *feel* the battering wind and muscles tensing as the men hold tightly to their signs. We lean into the wind, and for the duration of the scenes, stand at the same intersection gripping our only source of income. In the last of these scenes, there is a shift to a close up of Lee's face as his character starts singing, and the image reveals tears in his eyes. In this moment the physical and mental endurance required to do the job has finally overwhelmed the character and his song is a lament, made poignant not just by Lee's understated depiction of distress, but also because in previous scenes we have observed dozens of other sign holders trying to make a living in the city (Lisiak 2015: 837). The physicality of the work, the impact on mental health is made acute – and Tsai privileges the working-class experience through such scenes.

Stray Dogs (2013) is the story of a homeless father and his two children (played by Lee Yi-cheng and Lee Yi-chieh) and a supermarket employee who helps them. The film has many of the usual features of Tsai's filmmaking. His favoured use of static camera long scenes reaches new heights, with the penultimate close up shot of the father and woman staring at a mural for almost fifteen minutes, followed by a final six-minute medium long shot of the pair leaving the scene individually. There is no narrative to speak of; the film is a series of scenes depicting the family and the woman going about their daily activities. There is very little dialogue and no non-diegetic music. Disorientation occurs due to the character of the woman being played by three actors at different stages of the film (Lu Yi-ching, Chen Shiang-chyi and Yang Kuei-mei). Strange things occur with no explanation, and there are the Tsai's trademark scenes of urination and public toilet moments. Because it is the epitome of Tsai's style, it is interesting to note that *Stray Dogs* is his most explicit treatment of class thus far, demonstrating that working-class experience and class inequalities can be explored in non-narrative forms.

The family in the film is homeless; the father's job is grueling and presumably low-paid and insecure. The children squat with their father in an abandoned building and wash themselves in a public bathroom. Although the father does provide food for the children, they also make use of the numerous food samples dished out in Taiwan's large supermarkets. The son takes extra toilet tissue from the store toilets and the children seem to spend time just hanging out in the supermarket.

The long scenes allow the audience to experience some of the characteristics of homelessness along with the characters. With no home to go to, the children and the father have to kill time. Days are long and there is little opportunity to rest comfortably. Tsai, as an expert in films that "last" (Rapfogel 2002: 6), creates the sense that time is lengthened for people in physically and mentally demanding but low paid work (such as sign holding), and for people trying to get through a day on the streets. In one scene, the girl sits in a food court watching a man eat a large bowl of noodles. The girl doesn't say anything, but she slumps on the table and rests her head on her arms, expressing the fatigue that comes with hunger and homelessness. The scene is shot from above and the long wide shot situates the girl within the food court and reveals her isolation from the shoppers around her. She doesn't belong in this world of consumption, she is an anomaly – young girls should be with their parents, not staring at a stranger's meal. The brightness of the scene adds to this sense of isolation. The scene is bathed in supermarket

fluorescent light, and she can clearly be seen in the centre of the frame. While her hunger and poverty are on display, she is ignored by the other customers. It is only when she encounters the woman that we realise she has been noticed and her situation acknowledged. The woman has an interest in waifs and strays and spends her evenings feeding stray dogs. She extends this charity to the family and tries to help them (albeit in a surreal and strange manner). While the characters seem abandoned by society and left behind by capitalism, they are assisted by a working-class person. It isn't the authorities that "rescue" them, but a supermarket employee. There are moments of humour amid the bleakness – the girl purchases a cabbage from the supermarket and uses it as a doll. The sight of the vegetable with a painted face is absurd and amusing and the desire to have a doll is endearingly childish. The amusement later takes a despairing turn though, when the father "attacks" the cabbage doll in a drunken rage. The family's situation, experienced mainly in stoic silence, feels real despite the strange elements and distancing techniques employed by Tsai. Certain scenes in the film add to this effect, particularly those involving food. We watch the family or the father eat meals in transient spaces such as a bus shelter or waste ground. Tsai often shoots characters eating in real time, and food is a "pervasive" element of his films (De Lucia 2011: 168), and in *Stray Dogs*, the combination of observing characters eating cheap food from takeaway containers in uncomfortable locations creates a visceral effect – there is a great sense of loss in these moments; due to being homeless, such a simple part of family life as eating together is out of reach to this family.

Life and Love

In *Vive L'Amour* (1994), Lee plays a burial site salesman who begins squatting in an empty apartment. The apartment is being used by a real estate agent, Mei-Mei Lin (Yang Kuei-mei) as a place to have sex with street seller, Ah-Jung (Chen Chao-jung). The film evokes Tsai's often noted themes of urban alienation and loneliness (Rapfogel 2002). Despite the characters' physical proximity and intimacy, each appears to be completely alone, attempting to make a living and to find some joy in life (although Hsiao Kang does attempt suicide at one point). Although Mei-Lin works as a real estate agent (a job that can be very high paying), she doesn't appear to be enjoying much success and we see her struggle physically and emotionally. At one point we observe her trying to fasten "for sale" signs to trees – a task that is difficult and requires her to dangerously stand on top of her car. There is a sense here of her character's lack of power, although she is attempting to make money from Taiwan's speculative property boom of the 1990s, she is one of many agents in a similar position, unable to sell properties that have been built for investment and are likely to remain empty and eventually abandoned.

According to Birtwistle (2015), the characters in Tsai's film display a "sense of exhaustion, powerlessness and acceptance" (87) and this can be seen in Hsiao Kang's attempt to end his life and in Mei-Lin's uncontrollable crying at the end of the film. In the final six-minute scene, she sits on a bench in a new Taipei park (at that time, still under construction) and cries. This is a particularly affecting scene – the close of up her face as she sobs allows the audience to clearly see her tears, the snot running from her nose and the hair that blows into her face sticking to the wetness in what has been described as an example of "hyperbolic realism" (Berry & Lu 2005: 89). The viewer can feel the texture of her hair and bodily fluids, made more acute by the foregrounding of the sounds of her crying, sniffing and blowing her nose. This is an example of what Laura Marks calls "haptic visuality" (2000:162) where the "eyes function as organs of touch" (162). This creates an embodied viewing experience which according to Sobchack (2004) allows the audience to relate bodily to what is on the screen – we can feel, smell, hear, taste what is on screen, because the images on screen are projected onto our bodies in a "rebound" (Sobchack 2004: 78). This technique brings us closer to the

emotions experienced by the characters and makes us feel their loneliness and distance acutely. The particular distress displayed by the characters in *Vive L'Amour* is connected to their marginal class statuses – Hsiao Kang as a seller of burial plots, Ah-Jung as a street hawker and Mei-Lin as a failed real estate worker who is victim to the effects of capitalism at the same time as being complicit in a system that demolishes working-class neighbourhoods to make way for new developments and city beautification schemes (such as Da'an Park where she cries).

Tsai's next film, *The River* (1997), also contains characters who are dislocated and transient. Lee's character Hsiao Kang doesn't have an identifiable occupation and he is easily persuaded to take a role as film extra after bumping into an old friend. Hsiao Kang develops an acute torticollis and is unable to move his neck. We watch him struggle at home in the small Taipei apartment he shares with his parents and follow him as he visits various practitioners who try to cure him. Again, the narrative here is sparse and the film (like its character) drifts from one scene to the next. The focus becomes Hsiao Kang's pain, but there are themes here of marginalisation, particularly in terms of sexuality as both Hsiao Kang and his father hide their homosexuality. The scenes in the apartment and on the streets reveal working-class Taipei. The characters do not live in luxury apartments or drive expensive European cars, they are not Taiwan's elite (those made rich by property development and business). Instead we see what Berry and Lu (2005) describe as the ruinous side of Taipei, "demolished buildings, construction debris...the family home...cramped and drab...also plagued by substandard plumbing" (118). For Berry and Lu (2005), and other scholars, this representation of Taipei (characteristic of most of Tsai's films) reveals a "bleakness" (Stucky 2014: 34) associated with the negative impact of capitalism on the city's inhabitants – people who are "set adrift" (Stucky 2014: 37) and constantly challenged by "urban alienation" (Martin: 2007, 83) brought about by modernity. There is a sense of 'absence' within the urban setting too – absence of the comforts enjoyed by bourgeois city dwellers. The cities of Tsai's films do not include the expensive neighbourhoods of luxury apartments, fancy restaurants and high end stores. What they do include are the ways in which working-class people negotiate the spaces of the city and deal with the often harshness of "contemporary urban space" (Lisiak 2015: 840).

While it might be true that Tsai is critiquing modernity in his films, the settings also offer an insight into everyday life in working-class Taiwan, and the social and political reality of the characters' lives are expressed through details in the mise-en-scene. These details include Hsiao Kang's family home (despite being an adult, he still lives at home which suggests his lack of income). The family home is a small apartment, typical of the older style of Taipei apartment buildings. There are stairs, no elevator, and the apartment has a very small kitchen (not big enough for the fridge, this is situated in the living room). There is a small balcony where washing can be hung and every space is used. The living room is where the family eat and the dining table (often complete with rice cooker) also sometimes serves as an altar when loved-ones pass away. There are kitsch objects placed within the apartment which take on a significance, described by Yeh and Davis (2012) as an aestheticisation of working-class objects (217) which indicates the aforementioned "camp" sensibility as Tsai "defamiliarises...the familiar and the everyday" (217). In other words, filming ordinary everyday working-class objects and décor is unexpected in an art house film. The apartment is quite dark due to the overshadowing of neighbouring buildings and there are often problems with the plumbing. In *The River*, Hsiao Kang's father battles with a persistent leak, and while Tsai has commented on the symbolic use of water in his films – representing the characters' desires (Tsai in Rehm, et al. 1999: 114), the problems with plumbing are common in old and run-down buildings. There are also particularly working-class behaviours, described by Yeh and Davis (2012) as

“practices of Taiwan’s folk rituals” (221), which include superstitious behaviours and visits to traditional medicine practitioners and faith healers.

Popular Culture

The Hole (1998) is less straightforwardly realist and contains fantasy musical numbers incorporating lip synching and dancing to popular Taiwanese songs. The film depicts two characters played by Lee Kang Sheng and Yang Kuei-Mei as neighbours living in an apartment block that has been evacuated due to a mysterious virus in the city. The man upstairs (Lee) and the woman living below him (Yang), seem to be stuck in their low rent building (Chang 2008: 28). with nowhere else to escape to. The mostly abandoned city, and the apartments that become linked by a growing hole in the floor/ceiling between them, operate as a liminal space typical of Tsai’s penchant for “places no longer in existence or doomed to be torn down” (Davis & Chen 2007: 57). These places, while having a metaphorical function, are also not atypical of working-class neighborhoods (albeit in a less surreal way). Working-class neighborhoods often have low-rent housing, waste grounds, transient areas awaiting redevelopment and old, decaying buildings. Amid the strangeness of the scenario in *The Hole*, there is also a class reality on display. The musical numbers are interesting – Tsai uses popular culture to express his stoic characters’ feelings (there is very little dialogue in Tsai’s films). There is something very Taiwanese too in the choice of songs and staging, creating what Yeh and Davis (2012) describe as “gaudy, vulgar...smelling of the street” (224). In these scenes the songs used are by Taiwanese singer Grace Chang, a popular artist with working-class Taiwanese people. At the end of the film there is an epitaph which states “we still have Grace Chang’s singing to keep us company” which suggests the importance of working-class popular culture in difficult times. The privileging of working-class songs over ‘high art’ demonstrates Tsai’s immersion in working-class culture.

Popular culture references occur quite frequently in Tsai’s films and in *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003), Tsai presents a strong sense of intertextuality, particularly in relation to popular forms of Chinese cinema. The film is set in an old cinema earmarked for demolition and redevelopment. In any big city, it is the working-class residents who lose out when areas are redeveloped. This occurs when people are evicted to make way for new high-end homes or commercial buildings, and when areas become gentrified. Working-class spaces – those that have served to entertain the local people are not valued by developers and city planners. It is significant that the building is a cinema, due to the popularity of film in working-class communities. There is a sense of nostalgia in *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, of a social haunting as the remaining patrons of the soon to be closed cinema watch a final film in an attempt to resist “modern homogenous time” (Stucky 2014: 40). The cinema is haunted by a history of popular film (particularly *wu xia*), but also by the presence of working-class cinema goers, who would have enjoyed the spectacles on screen while eating water melon seeds and chewing sugar cane. For Chan (2007), the film captures a “structure of feeling” (93) and the remaining patrons represent a “lingering” (90) – they are attempting to resist the changes brought about by capitalism that will destroy the working-class space they have enjoyed. There is also a sense here too of a working-class queer space, with male patrons using the cinema as a way to find partners for sex. In a way, the cinema provides a sanctuary for working-class gay men who might not have the means to seek partners in other gay spaces (such as city night clubs). Yeh and Davis (2012) point to Tsai’s interest in “remnants” (237) of working-class life that are not seen as desirable to the middle classes. In *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, Tsai places value on the heterotopic space of the old cinema and provides it with a “stateliness” (Yeh and Davis 2012: 238) despite the run down nature of the building and the possible salubrious behaviour of some patrons.

Elements of popular culture are prominent in *The Wayward Cloud* (2005), but this time “cinema” is in the form of pornographic films alongside lip-synching musical numbers. Tsai takes a stigmatized form of popular culture (pornography) and combines it with an often undervalued form (the musical) in what has been described as an avant garde treatment (Bao 2007: 41). The ever-drifting Hsiao Kang turns to porn acting to make ends meet and Tsai normalises this occupation by making the porn scenes quite matter of fact (for the most part – the role of porn actors becomes more complicated when Hsiao Kang’s Japanese porn colleague, Sumomo Yozakura, appears to be unconscious during filming in the final scenes). Lim (2011) suggests that musical numbers and porn are both “spatially constructed to deny human interaction, intimacy and agency” (143) and this can certainly be seen in *The Wayward Cloud* as the characters struggle to find meaningful connections. But it’s possible to extend this idea to suggest that the sorts of meaningful connections that might be associated with love and romance are made more difficult within a backdrop of financial hardship and insecure employment. When faced with precarious modes of employment and a transient life of drifting from city to city to find work (*The Wayward Cloud* is set in Kaohsiung rather than Taipei), it is difficult to commit to love and relationships. Human relationships are affected and put under strain by economic insecurity and the seeming inability of Tsai’s characters to connect with one another or have satisfying sexual encounters can be linked to their social and economic positions of powerlessness.

Spaces

This sense of intransience is further explored and made more acute in *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* (2006). This film is set in Tsai’s country of birth, Malaysia, and filmed in Kuala Lumpur. Lee Kang Sheng plays two parts in the film, that of a homeless worker in Kuala Lumpur who is attacked in the street and taken in by a migrant worker, and a comatose man attended to in his family home by a paid carer (Chen Shiang-chyi). The migrant worker, Rawang (Norman Atun), who tends to Lee’s character’s wounds and provides him with food and shelter is a Bangladeshi labourer sharing a dwelling with a number of other men and barely earning enough to feed himself. The kindness he shows Lee points to the ways in which people on the bottom rungs of the social ladder will often go out of their way to help others. There is a sense here of class solidarity as Rawang cares for a fellow worker. This is emphasised in scenes where Rawang is washing Lee’s body – he cleans Lee with extreme tenderness and does his best to make him comfortable. Closeness is created through Tsai’s attention to small detail in the mise-en-scene and his “representations of the intimate bodily practices of individual everyday life” (Martin 2007: 83). The long scenes of Rawang caring for Lee challenge the impulse in conventional film to avoid “empty cinematic time” (De Lucia 2016: 32) and to only focus on propelling the plot. Tsai allows the viewer time to watch every small move and observe the scene – small details such as the posters on Rawang’s wall, presumably placed there to add some colour to the drab concrete walls of his room, the mismatched bedding and the very basic washing and toileting facilities used by the migrant workers. The treatment of Lee by Rawang is contrasted with the care administered to Lee’s other character, the comatose man, by his paid carer. A scene where the carer is washing the comatose man appears to contain none of the tenderness displayed by Rawang. The carer wears plastic gloves and seems to be rough in her actions. She scrubs the man vigorously and completes her work in silence. The sound of her cleaning is foregrounded, the squishy sound of soap lather on skin combined with the plastic rustling of her gloves and apron creates affect. The audience can feel for the man in this scene – he is passive except for sadness in his open eyes as the carer rubs at his face and cleans his ears. It is also possible to feel for the carer, who works for an abusive boss and is forced to engage in tasks that leave her distressed. The carer is trapped in her job, presumably relying on

the income and accommodation the job provides. I'd suggest that her actions are not cruel, she isn't being deliberately rough with the comatose man, but she is trying to complete her tasks as quickly and efficiently as possible, a characteristic of workers in difficult and physically demanding occupations. The discomfort felt by the viewer due to the visceral nature of the scene, provides a sense of the embodied nature of class.

Tsai's next film, *Visage* (2009), is somewhat different in terms of its representations of class as there is inclusion of bourgeois characters. In *Visage*, Lee plays a Taiwanese film director, Hsiao Kang, making a film in Paris. The film within the film is a strange and lavish affair based on the story of Salome and includes lip synching musical numbers and scenes of filming in underground basements and Parisian parks. The French characters appear to be bourgeois in contrast to the director who, despite his current position as a filmmaker, has come from a humble background. This is made evident when Hsiao Kang returns to Taipei when his mother dies. We enter the family apartment, the same apartment that has suffered from bad plumbing (as evident in the film's opening scene when Hsiao Kang fights with a raging burst pipe in the kitchen). The green rice cooker sits on the dining table, the fridge is in the living room and the rooms are small and sparsely furnished. Hsiao Kang takes his French producer with him to Taipei and she seems extremely out of place – not because she is not Chinese, but because her bourgeois presence seems at odds with the working-class surroundings. In one scene, she sits at the dining table which has been set up as a shrine for the deceased mother, and proceeds to eat the food piled up on the shrine as offerings while casually flicking through a book on the French director Truffaut. Her indifference to her environment reveals a sense of class arrogance. The bourgeois characters in the film are depicted as ridiculous; they display diva behavior and talk much more than Tsai's Taiwanese characters. Their eccentric behaviour doesn't appear to have any reason behind. In contrast, in *What Time is it There?*, Hsiao Kang's mother (Lu Yi-Ching) begins to obsessively darken her apartment by placing black tape and sheets over the windows. She has a reason for this behaviour, she is convinced that her recently deceased husband is reincarnated but can't return home because of the light. Her actions are explained by grief and by her belief in Taiwanese folk lore. In *Visage*, the actor playing Salomé (Laetitia Casta) also begins to tape over windows, but there is no apparent reason for her strange behaviour. She is beautiful, lives in a large bourgeois home but behaves erratically. She seems to want Hsiao Kang (who doesn't reciprocate) and in the manner of Salomé, demands his attention. This indicates a sense of bourgeois entitlement not evident in Tsai's working-class characters.

A Note on Audience

Although I am suggesting that there is a working-class sensibility that runs through Tsai's films, one of the contradictions that should be acknowledged is that of audience. Tsai's films are generally considered art house and do not enjoy a wide distribution. Lim (2007) suggests that audiences for Tsai's films tend to be "cultural elites and aficionados" (227). The filmmaker himself acknowledges the majority of his audience are likely to be university students (Rapfogel 2004: 29). The films are popular at international film festivals and among critics and scholars but do not reach the audience arguably represented in the films themselves – working class Taiwanese and immigrant workers (Yeh & Davis 2012: 238). This is a perennial problem of independent and art house films globally that engage with working-class themes and offer interesting and nuanced representation of working-class life that is not often seen in conventional and mainstream film.

Conclusion

Tsai's films demonstrate that working-class life can be the subject of art films and that the experience of class can be conveyed through cinematic devices and non-conventional narrative techniques. There is a sense in Tsai's films of an interest (possible obsession) with the daily lives and routines of working-class Taiwanese, in what Yeh and Davis (2012) describe as an "insistent pull towards the routine, the quotidian" (239). The everyday in Tsai's films is mainly that of working-class people, amid the more avant-garde elements of his films, working-class characters eat at street stalls, visit cinemas, hire videos, use public bathrooms, hang out in public spaces, ride scooters. They eat, sleep, piss, shit, vomit and have sex in a working-class setting. Although there are examples of art film that deal with class issues (Zaniello 2005: 163), these earthy activities are not often the subject of so-called "high art" but, despite his position as an auteur, Tsai brings the working-class experience into the world of art house cinema. According to Wayne (2005), the bourgeois notion of the auteur has the effect of potentially removing any sense of collectivity in the film making process and therefore obscuring "the role of culture and collective systems of representation and society" (21), ultimately leading to class being "evacuated from cultural discourse across film studies" (27). It's possible therefore that the distance that some critics might feel while watching Tsai's films is due to a lack of connection or understanding of working-class life. The cinematic techniques he uses actually evoke working-class life and culture and his "ethnographic" approach (Yeh & Davis 2012: 234) reveals an insider's eye. Tsai provides the audience with a lived and acutely embodied experience of class that challenges the readings of his films as merely intellectual exercises in existentialism. Class is experienced in the mind and the body simultaneously and Hsiao Kang's daily struggles take us into the heart of working-class experience.

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