The European Undead: Tsai Ming-liang’s Temporal Dysphoria

Fran Martin  July 25, 2003

My first appointment with Jean-Pierre Léaud in Paris was in a café that he frequents. However, he got the time wrong and thought that I was late. He left without waiting, and I only found his empty cup.

- Tsai Ming-liang, ”Director’s Notes”, What Time Is It There?

The ghost, uncanny manifestation of the past within the present, is no stranger to Chinese film and television screens (1). Central to the ghost genre is Pu Songling’s 17th-century classic of supernatural fiction, Liaozhai Zhiyi (Tales of the Strange), whose stories provide the basis for Ching Siu-tung’s Chinese Ghost Story trilogy (Hong Kong 1987, 1990 and 1991) and Tsui Hark’s animated adaptation (Hong Kong, 1997). The Liaozhai popular cultural phenomenon has also generated supernaturalist TV productions, including one eponymous mid-’90s Taiwanese program in which members of the public were invited to relate their own “true” ghost stories in front of a live studio audience, accompanied by spooky music and silhouetted by atmospherically dimmed lighting. A popular narrative was that of the dead relative returning in spirit form to communicate with the living (2).

Taiwan-based director Tsai Ming-liang’s most recent film, What Time Is It There? (2001) is similarly preoccupied with ghosts and haunting. In the first scene, we see Miao Tien, playing the father of Hsiao Kang (Lee Kang-sheng), sitting down with a plate of dumplings and vainly calling Hsiao Kang to eat. In the next scene, Hsiao Kang sits in the back of a car with the funerary urn containing his dead father’s ashes balanced on his knee. When the car passes through a tunnel he reminds his father’s spirit to keep flying along above the vehicle to rejoin them at the other end of the tunnel (and Hsiao Kang’s unruffled assumption that his father is hanging about in spectral form perhaps causes us to wonder: was it, in fact, already his father’s ghost that we saw in the first scene?). Recalling the earnest everyday supernaturalists of the Liaozhai TV show, Hsiao Kang’s mother (Lu Yi-ching) attempts to induce her dead husband’s spirit to return to the family’s apartment through a series of increasingly elaborate measures. These begin with the standard provision of fruit and incense on the household altar, and progress to the offer of magic yin-yang water prepared by a Buddhist priest; the exclusion of daylight by means of blankets and paper fixed over windows (since, as she claims, “he’s afraid of the light”); invitations for the spirit to sit down to a meal of roast duck with herself and Hsiao Kang; the reorganization of daily routine in order to live by “your father’s time,” to which the living-room clock has mysteriously been switched; and finally, the provision of a romantic candle-lit dinner for two, followed by sex.

Hsiao Kang works as an itinerant watch vendor on the street. Soon after his father’s death, Shiang Chyi (Chen Shiang Chyi), a young woman about to take a trip to Paris, turns up at Hsiao Kang’s stand and demands to buy Hsiao Kang’s own dual-time watch. At first he refuses to sell it to her, but he later relents, and Shiang Chyi buys the watch and takes it with her to Paris. The film’s middle section is composed of cross-cuts between Shiang Chyi’s lonely sojourn in Paris, Hsiao Kang’s days at the watch-stand and sleepless nights at home in his dark bedroom, and Hsiao Kang’s mother’s escalating obsession with the return of her dead husband’s spirit. Hsiao Kang...
develops a parallel obsession of his own, with the distant Shiang Chyi. This obsession takes the form of a compulsion to turn the clocks around him back seven hours to Paris time, as well as a fascination with all things French, including the films of François Truffaut and French wine, both of which he consumes with interest. Meanwhile, in a Paris café, Shiang Chyi meets a woman from Hong Kong (Cecilia Yip). The two share a bed at the woman’s hotel, where Shiang Chyi tentatively kisses the other woman, who reacts ambivalently. This ambiguous sex scene is intercut with two others: Hsiao Kang in his car in a Taipei laneway having sex with a female prostitute; and his mother at home in an erotic encounter with what can only be her dead husband’s ghost, embodied in a cane headrest with which she masturbates. At dawn in Taipei, the prostitute leaves Hsiao Kang’s car, carting away his case of watches. At dawn in Paris, Shiang Chyi leaves the other woman’s hotel, taking her own suitcase to a park, where she sits on a bench, cries for a little while, then falls asleep. Children steal her suitcase, then set it afloat in the lake beside which she sleeps. The case floats across the screen in front of the oblivious Shiang Chyi, until finally it is fished out of the water by none other than Hsiao Kang’s father, who carefully sets it down before walking away from the camera toward a large, gently rotating ferris wheel.

European haunting

Even more than Tsai’s previous films, What Time is an intentionally reflexive and overtly intertextual film: a film that is self-consciously about the subject of cinema itself and, as I will argue, especially about cinema history in a global frame. I propose that the reflexive or meta-cinematic element in What Time in fact bespeaks another kind of haunting: that of Tsai’s own work, like the work of other contemporary Taiwan directors, by the unquiet ghosts of the European art cinemas of the mid-to-late 20th century. Tsai occupies an ambiguous position vis-à-vis the Taiwan New Cinema: from a younger generation than the directors who pioneered the New Cinema in the early 1980s – including Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Wang Jen, and Chang Yi – the Malaysian Tsai is also distinguished within Taiwan’s “second wave” cinema of the 1990s as something of an outsider-insider within the local scene. Tsai, the son of a working-class family in Malaysia, originally came to Taiwan as a teenager in 1977, to study. Remaining in Taiwan following his graduation, he began directing feature films after commencing his career in television. He returned to Malaysia in the late 1990s, and was based there when he directed What Time. However, notwithstanding Tsai’s own liminal position at the margins of the Taiwan second wave – or even, perhaps, because of his own relative mobility and liminality – I want to argue that What Time can be read as a commentary on the intercultural “haunting” of recent Taiwan cinema more broadly by the migratory vestiges of film traditions from elsewhere.

Although the major question addressed in this paper is about the relation between recent Taiwanese film and European art cinema, it is worth noting at the outset that Tsai’s films also perform parallel citations of Chinese cinemas. This is apparent, for example, in the casting of Miao Tien, who is best known to local audiences from his roles in over 100 of the Taiwan and Hong Kong swordplay genre (wuxia) films of the 1960s and ‘70s, including the films of veteran swordplay director King Hu (for example Dragon Gate Inn [1966] and A Touch of Zen [1970]). Miao Tien has also worked with Tsai in three of his previous films, Rebels of the Neon God (1992), The River (1996) and The Hole (1998). The Hole, in turn, is punctuated by song-and-dance numbers featuring the songs of Grace Chang (Ge Lan), star of many 1950s Hong Kong musicals (for example Mambo Girl [1957], Air Hostess [1959] and Wild, Wild Rose [1960]). Comparably, in What Time, at the video stall where Hsiao Kang buys a copy of Truffaut’s The 400 Blows, we overhear another customer asking for films starring Grace Chang, Yu Ming, or Lin Dai. This double citation of European art film, on the one hand, and popular Taiwan and Hong Kong cinema, on the other, demonstrates that cinematic citation in Tsai’s films is in itself a complex, hybrid practice, rather than any simple emulation of European film modernism.

Nonetheless, Taiwan cinema since the 1980s has undeniably been marked by the shadowy presence of earlier European film, most obviously at the level of film form and style. The preference of the Taiwanese directors for long takes, static framing, and departures from classical narrative form sees commentators on the films of Taiwan New Cinema directors Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang, and more recently also Tsai himself, routinely invoking the names of Italian Neo-realist, French New Wave, and New German Cinema auteurs: Antonioni, Bresson, Truffaut, Fassbinder (3). In What Time, Tsai’s cinema’s relationship with its European predecessors is made very
explicit: fixated on Shiang Chi in Paris, Hsiao Kang buys a pirate video of Truffaut’s *The 400 Blows* (1959) – Tsai’s own favorite film – and we watch Hsiao Kang watching the sequence in which Jean-Pierre Léaud’s Antoine rides on the fairground gravitron machine. Later, the scene where little Antoine steals the bottle of milk takes over Tsai’s frame as we watch Truffaut’s film from Hsiao Kang’s point of view. In Paris, Shiang Chi even meets the now-elderly Léaud, played by himself, while wandering in a cemetery (4).

In interviews, Tsai has frequently discussed his fascination with European cinema, and the films of François Truffaut in particular. He relates:

> Before I got to Taipei I was exposed to a lot of movies, but almost all of them were from Hollywood. I rarely saw films from Europe or anywhere else, so I thought that the Hollywood style was the only way to make a movie. But after I got to Taipei, I had access to the Taiwan Film Archives, and I was exposed to a full range of European movies – the German expressionists, the French New Wave, the Italian neo-realists. All of a sudden, my mind opened up to a whole new world of moviemaking, and it affected me a lot, especially the period during the late ’60s and early ’70s. I think that time was the highest point in film history (5).

Tsai’s own stance on the *nouvelle vague* and other European art cinemas, as he expresses it here, is a straightforwardly modernist one: he enthuses over the greatness of the art, and expresses hopes that he might aspire to make films of comparable artistic value. Such a stance perhaps risks supporting the developmentalist narrative that underlies some Western accounts of Taiwan cinema, in which the Taiwan directors’ appropriation of elements of European modernist film style is treated as if it were a “natural stage” in Taiwan cinema’s progress toward some presumptively universal film aesthetic based on European norms. But I want to read *What Time*’s thematicization of the relations between European and Taiwan cinemas in a rather different way than Tsai’s own comments imply, since I think this film in fact suggests something more complex about the historical and ideological relations between European and Taiwan film cultures.

From a historical perspective cinema has clearly been, from its inception, a form and set of practices closely imbricated with transnational cultural and technological flows, not least in Taiwan (6). Today, these questions are further complicated by the intensified globalization of film production and the proliferation of transnational co-productions (7). However, the obviously transnational character of contemporary Taiwan film production and the ease with which the stylistic traces of European art cinema can be discerned in contemporary Taiwan films can lead, at times, away from the necessary recognition of the fundamental complexities of such anachronous transcultural citation, and toward reductive and inherently Eurocentric approaches that simply, and approvingly, highlight these films’ apparent reflections of European style. Yet an adequate understanding of Tsai’s cinema cannot be gained from simply observing stylistic resemblances between Tsai’s style and those of particular European directors; the play of citations in historical context is too complex for the simple notion of “influence” to retain much analytic bite in this situation. We need to look as well to the historical and cultural specificities of the local context of these films’ production, conditions that determine, to a great degree, the cultural meanings of the films’ emphatic European citations.

One alternative to the simplistic “influence” argument is found in a recent article by David Bordwell (8). Attempting to account for the apparent transcultural convergence of film style between certain Chinese and non-Chinese cinemas, Bordwell proposes that the universal conditions of filmmaking itself, as craft practice, inevitably result in Chinese film poetics that are as similar to as they are also distinct from the poetics of non-Chinese cinemas: a kind of “parallel evolution” of film style. Proposing a bottom-up approach that takes the micro-level of film form as primary and sees culture exerting an influence only within the fixed parameters set by craft practice, Bordwell nevertheless argues that this focus on film form need not preclude attention to cultural factors, since “real-world activities” – mode of production, “cultural processes” – inevitably leave their traces in film poetics (9). This argument is persuasive, and the analytic framework toward which Bordwell gestures in this article – that of decoding the traces of cultural and historical processes within film style – is a framework within which I would also situate my discussion here. Indeed, later in the same article Bordwell directly poses a question that is central to my project: how to account for the seeming stylistic convergence of recent Taiwan cinema with earlier European film, especially in the predilection for long takes and static framing (10). However, despite the promise of his earlier focus on the potential to read the traces of cultural processes in film poetics, when it comes to the key question of why contemporary Taiwan directors may have adopted the long take in the first place, Bordwell’s argument somewhat loses force. Speculating that Taiwan directors might have favoured the long take because it uses less
film, or because it is less demanding on non-professional actors, or as a means of marking their films as non-commercial, Bordwell misses an opportunity to interrogate the broader cultural politics at work in the Taiwan filmmakers’ appropriation of the stylistic hallmarks of earlier European film (11). In what follows, then, starting from the assumption that cultural processes in filmmaking exceed the exigencies of how a film gets made in a merely practical sense, and that, as a result, the cultural significance of cinema cannot be accounted for fully by a purely formalist approach, I want to raise some broader questions about Tsai’s citations of European film style. I think that addressing the complex question of what is signified by such transcultural citation necessitates a move “outside the frame,” as it were, to consider the wider contexts in which What Time is produced and consumed: contexts crucially conditioned, as I will argue, by Taiwan’s cultural postcoloniality, and the place of Taiwan cinema within global film networks today. If, as I have suggested, What Time is about the haunting of Tsai’s cinema – and perhaps by extension, of contemporary Taiwan cinema more generally – by the ghosts of European film modernism, then what can this haunting tell us not just about film aesthetics, but about the historical and cultural conditions of filmmaking in Taiwan in the early 21st century?

Taiwan, Europe, postcoloniality

Taiwan fiction author Ta-wei Chi draws attention to an often-neglected aspect of such cross-cultural citation in recent Taiwanese cultural production. Like much contemporary writing from Taiwan, Chi’s own Chinese fiction regularly references European film classics – he has published stories entitled “L’Eclisse” (cf. Antonioni, 1962), “La Guerre N’est Pas Finie” (cf. La Guerre Est Finie, Resnais, 1966), Nuit et Brouillard (cf Resnais, 1955), and “L’apres-midi d’un Faune” (cf. Prelude a L’apres-midi d’un Faune, Rossellini, 1937) (12). In response to a question from me about the tendency of Taiwan filmmakers and intellectuals over the past 15 years to cite aspects of European new wave cinemas in their work, Chi highlights Taiwan’s status as postcolonial in its relation to “Europe” as signifier of a mythologized modernity:

There is some implicit connection between the intellectuals in Taiwan in [the] 1990[s] and those in Europe in the good old days. […] [T]his is […] common among the writers and artists in (post-colonial) Taiwan and other similar countries. Because the [writers and artists] cannot find inspiration locally (not because there is no local tradition, but because the localness is so chaotic), they look away and “up to” the mythology in Europe. Since the European films and literature are so well ordered and made into mythology, the [writers and artists] in Taiwan are so fascinated with the halo over there. It is a postcolonial fact that they (or, we) need to allude to Europe from time to time. Unofficially, Edward Yang was compared to Michelangelo Antonioni. Later, Tsai was compared in a similar fashion. […] You will be surprised how well conversant the local [writers and artists] are with Federico Fellini, Antonioni, Gide, Truffaut, Godard etc. Postcolonial (13).

Taking my cue from Chi’s analysis, I propose that What Time indexes two related questions. First, as I have already discussed, it reflexively foregrounds the question of transcultural citation, drawing attention to the history of citations by Taiwan New Cinema and second wave directors of aspects of the European new wave cinemas. Second, in its preoccupation with time, the film explores the question of postcolonial temporality. Analysis of the representation and experience of time makes up a significant strand in postcolonial scholarship, from Johannes Fabian’s thesis that chronopolitics – the politics of time – constitutes the ideological foundation of geopolitics, to Homi Bhabha’s theorization, via Fanon, of the “postcolonial time-lag.” (14) I argue, then, that Tsai’s film indexes a characteristically postcolonial relation to time that I call temporal dysphoria: a disorientation in relation to time rather than space. Designating something analogous to motion-sickness (time-sickness?) that is a subjective effect of the regime of cultural time-lag as experienced by postcolonial subjects, this temporal dysphoria underlines the enduring effects of the former, strongly hierarchized relations between centre and periphery; west and non-west; and, arguably, between European film and its “others.” I think that in its meditation on temporal dysphoria, What Time implies a broad, relatively non-specific – yet, arguably, nonetheless consequential – postcolonial relation that, as Chi’s comments above indicate, positions Taiwan as peripheral “other” to the presumptively European centre of world art film culture. What Time brings the two questions I noted above – that of the retrospective transcultural citation by recent East Asian film of earlier European cinema, and that of postcolonial chronopolitics – into suggestive proximity. Even more importantly, and crucially for the postcolonial significance I am reading in it, the film foregrounds the actual, though often unacknowledged, interiority of the latter question to the former. Through its sustained rumination on postcolonial temporal dysphoria, the film
intimates that the ongoing stylistic dialogue between contemporary Taiwan film and European films of the past compels broad questions about the politics of time in the lengthy cultural shadow of the colonial-era division of the globe into West and non-West.

In arguing for the inadequacy of simple statements about the “influence” of European film modernism on recent Taiwan cinema, I am not suggesting that commentators ought to refrain from drawing attention to the aesthetic and thematic dialogue between these film movements. On the contrary, I would suggest that more attention might be paid to the conditions—material, historical, ideological—under which such a dialogue becomes possible, or even, as Chi suggests, imperative. For there is nothing obvious, “natural,” or straightforward about contemporary Taiwanese cinema having entered into such an intimate dialogue with European film modernism. Some of the questions that this phenomenon raises—which I note here without pretending to be able to answer them comprehensively—include: How is it that the modernist European cinema of the mid- to late-20th century was able to become such a productive fulcrum for the cinematic ruminations of contemporary Taiwan directors on Taiwan’s own very specific, postcolonial present in the late 20th and early 21st centuries? If the appropriation of aspects of European film style by Taiwan directors bespeaks a resistance to American narrative film form, then might this resistance relate, in some way, to the locally embedded histories of American post-war military neo-colonialism and cultural imperialism both within Taiwan and across the Asia-Pacific region? How can the Taiwan directors’ westward focus be interpreted as part of an ideological project of defining the place of Taiwan’s cinema and culture in a regional frame—in relation (and distinction) to the cinematic cultures of the People’s Republic of China, Hong Kong, and the island’s former colonizer, Japan? In short, could one interpret this European obsession as a tactical appropriation of a fortuitous tool with which to address some specific, local questions pertaining to contemporary Taiwan culture? (15) Eliding such questions, and thereby disavowing the particular postcolonial historicity of Taiwan as a location of film production, risks effectively naturalizing European film as the master referent of Taiwan culture? (16) Eliding such questions, and thereby disavowing the particular postcolonial historicity of Taiwan as a location of film production, risks effectively naturalizing European film as the master referent of Taiwan culture? (16)

Owing to a complex modern history that has seen waves of successive colonization and cultural and military neo-colonization by Japan, the Chinese KMT, and the USA, Taiwan’s status as postcolonial is a more intricate question than can be detailed here at length. Although the island’s earliest colonial history, in the 17th century, was as a Dutch and then a Spanish possession, its more recent colonization by East Asian powers and its subsequent cultural, military, and economic neocolonization by the United States set it apart somewhat from the former European colonies that are often taken as representative of the condition of postcoloniality. This history produces a particularly complex ideological relation between Taiwan and Europe in the present. First, while “Europe” may signify a yearned-for modernity, it does not connote imperial domination in any specific, local sense. Indeed, both “modernity” and “imperial domination” may be signified more readily in this instance by the idea of Japan (16). However, as I think What Time compellingly illustrates, the ideological division between “east” and “west,” and the concomitant regime of east-west postcolonial chronopolitics is certainly not inoperative in this context. Confusingly, Taiwan is frequently self-represented in its contemporary public cultures as occupying a relation of alterity both to “the west” and to Japan, thus instituting not one but two chronopolitical regimes where both the west and Japan are produced, albeit differently, as the loci of temporally and geographically distant modernities (17).

Second, there is the question of competing constructions of “Europe” (Ou-Mei) in relation both to “America” (Meiguo) and to “the west” in general. In Taiwan Mandarin the equivalent of the generalizing English term “the west” is often designated by the equally generalizing term Ou-Mei: literally “Europe-and-America.” This everyday colloquial usage effectively effaces the difference between Taiwan’s historical relationship to North America, which has exerted a profound neocolonial influence since the conclusion of the second world war, versus its relationship to European nations, which colonized Taiwan only very briefly and three centuries earlier. The generalized cultural “other” of Ou-Mei is represented within Taiwan’s contemporary public culture in multiple, sometimes contradictory ways, as an object of repudiation, identification, and desire—but quite consistently as something from which “Taiwan” (or “China” or “the east” (dongfang)) is presumed to be consequentially differentiated. Yet, whilst in popular discussions Europe and America are regularly conflated in Ou-Mei, elsewhere the two terms are also mobilized against one another. For example in Tsai’s films, citation of European film modernism could be seen as a deliberate rejection of the globally extensive Hollywood style, as is indicated in the explicit contrast Tsai draws between the two styles in his comments quoted above (18). In sum, the signifier “Europe” works in contradictory ways in contemporary Taiwanese film and public culture. On the one hand, “Europe” may offer itself as an imaginative resource by means of which the specific regional history of American post-war cultural dominance is implicitly critiqued by Tsai and other Taiwan filmmakers. On the other hand, however, “Europe” also functions as a mythologized cultural “other” that is sometimes conflated with “the west” in general, and is popularly represented as existing in a relation of alterity to “Taiwan,” “China,” or “the east.”
It is this latter relation between the Taiwan local and “Europe” as signifier of a mythologized, temporally and geographically removed modernity on which I concentrate here, because it is this relation to which I think Tsai’s film speaks most powerfully in its structuring obsession with the temporal disjunction between Taipei and Paris. I use the term “postcolonial,” then, in the relatively broad sense of designating the relation of alterity self-perceived by Taiwanese intellectuals to “Europe” as a mythic geo-cultural formation connoting modernity, a relation conditioned by the persistent modern division of the world into “east” and “west.” As many scholars argue, such a division becomes ever less credible in the polycentric, postcolonial world system of the present. Yet this conceptual division nevertheless leaves a discernible, if fading imprint on particular forms of contemporary cultural production; among them, Tsai’s film (19).

Temporal dysphoria

In different ways, Johannes Fabian and Homi Bhabha have both criticized the tenacious developmentalist teleology that they respectively argue undergirds and enables the discipline of anthropology, and the project of European modernity itself (20). Bhabha develops his critique of “postcolonial belatedness” based on Frantz Fanon’s writing. In his autobiographical reminiscences as a black Martinican arriving in France in the 1940s, Fanon’s writing makes all too clear the strange and destructive subjective consequences of interpellation as a “belated” colonial subject. Fanon famously and compellingly ventriloquizes the statement implicitly directed to him by French culture: “You come too late, much too late.” (21) The modernist teleology of development and “progress” that both Fabian and Bhabha critique, in their different ways, produces a (post)colonial temporality according to which the present “there,” in the non-west, is the pre-history of “here,” in the west, and the future “there” is projected as approximating the past or the present “here.” (22) Bhabha’s notion of the postcolonial time-lag, and the subjective dysphoria that it can produce in subjects interpellated as belated finds an interesting, refracted echo in the thematics of What Time (23).

The figure of the ghost, discussed above, relates closely to the other central theme of Tsai’s film: that of time, and more particularly temporal confusion, since the ghost’s uncanniness arises precisely from its simultaneous manifestation of both the past (the time in which the dead person was alive) and the future (the afterlife) within the present. Tsai’s predilection for obtrusively long takes means that all of his films have in this sense foregrounded their own temporal organization at a formal level, but

What Time intensifies this preoccupation through a diegesis, mise en scène, and soundscape obsessed with representations of timekeeping. Hsiao Kang divides his time between his watch stall near Taipei Railway Station and the clock shop where he picks up his merchandise, and his escalating compulsion to turn all the clocks around him backward seven hours to Paris time means that his non-working hours, too, are organized around clocks. Clock faces figure prominently in the film’s mise en scène: in the clock shop scenes, the frame is crowded with them, and they also maintain an emphatic presence throughout the film. Inside the railway station, Hsiao Kang rests overlooked by two large, digital clocks; later, he sneaks into what seems to be a clock repair room, a peculiar space that suggests a metaphorical reading as a kind of temporal nerve-centre – “Time Central” – where Hsiao Kang creeps about excitedly among numerous digital clocks in various stages of dismemberment. Finally, Hsiao Kang makes a determined attempt to turn back the time on a gargantuan clock on the exterior of a downtown building, opposite the Far Eastern Department Store which is surmounted – incongruously, yet also with peculiar aptness – by a flagpole flying the tricolore. Hsiao Kang is even “flashed” by a man in the toilets of a cinema, who, in place of his own flesh, reveals an outsize wall-clock that Hsiao Kang had previously removed, whose erect hands now waggle suggestively at 12:00. These scenes in the cinema situate Hsiao Kang’s and the other man’s fetishistic stealing, manipulation, exchange and display of the wall-clock explicitly in the context of cinema technology and culture – for example with the beam of silver light flickering between projector and screen as Hsiao Kang sits in the cinema adjusting the stolen clock, and the raked rows of seating seen behind him. In this way, these scenes link the film’s two central subjects: cinema itself, and time. The film’s soundscape, as well, is filled with clock-related noises: the obtrusive electronic beeping of alarm clocks in the clock shop; the mechanical clack of the elements of a digital clock in the clock repair room.

More than simply time in general, the film compellingly thematizes temporal dysphoria, most obviously in the structuring preoccupation of both Hsiao Kang and the film itself with the time difference between Taipei and Paris. The subject is raised initially in Shiang Chyi’s passionate desire to possess Hsiao Kang’s own dual-time watch, and develops through Hsiao Kang’s compulsive turning-back of various clocks and watches to Paris time – perhaps mirroring the film’s own self-reflexive desire to “turn back time” in order to re-inhabit the lost moment of the nouvelle vague. Temporal confusion occurs, too, in the mysterious adjustment of the time on the clock in Hsiao
Kang and his mother’s apartment (was it Hsiao Kang, or was it really the spirit of his father changing the clock to reflect “his time” in the afterlife?), which leads to Hsiao Kang’s mother reconfiguring the temporal organization of their days and nights to accord with her dead husband’s time.

The sequencing of scenes at this point in the film is very suggestive in its articulation of the film’s central preoccupations. A scene in which Hsiao Kang squats in his bedroom, obsessively altering the time on each of the watches in his merchandise case, one by one, to Paris time, is followed by a street scene with Hsiao Kang at a video/VCD stall requesting French films about Paris. After the store owner recommends Hiroshima, Mon Amour and The 400 Blows, the film cuts to Hsiao Kang at home in his room, watching the gravitron scene in the latter film with rapt attention. The next shot is from Hsiao Kang’s apartment’s living room, as Hsiao Kang’s mother calls him out to witness the miracle of the altered time on the wall-clock – changed, she assumes, by her dead husband’s returning spirit. Next, we see Shiang Chyi cowering in bed in Paris as mysterious, insistent footsteps sound overhead. Notable in this sequence is the paralleling of the three themes of disjunctive time (Hsiao Kang’s altering of the watches; the changed time on the living room clock), haunting (Hsiao Kang’s father’s spirit and the disembodied footsteps in Shiang Chyi’s Paris hostel), and Truffaut’s cinema. The scene where Hsiao Kang lies bathed in the flickering blue light of his TV screen, caught in motionless fascination by Truffaut’s film, crystallizes the sense of yearning for a mythic “France” that permeates the film as a whole, and underlines the affective force exerted by this ardently imagined European object of desire. Further, the juxtaposition of this scene with two scenes that centre explicitly on ghosts implies a parallel between the ghost theme and the dream of France. More precisely, I would argue that this sequencing works as a synecdoche of the effect of film as a whole, in that it intimates that the yearned-for Europe of the imagination may effect a psychic haunting every bit as strange and compelling as the more literal haunting by spectres of the dead.

As I suggested above, the film’s central preoccupation with the temporal disjuncture between Taipei and Paris produces an uncomfortable sense, both in the film’s characters and in the spectator, of temporal dysphoria. This central theme of “time-sickness” crystallizes very suggestively in the question that is the film’s title: “What time is it there?” – questions that most obviously evoke the instantaneous telephonic communication of contemporary global culture, but may also index Taiwan’s cultural postcoloniality and the attendant snarls of questions about time, development, and geopolitics. With its thematic focus on the temporal dysphoria generated between the Taiwanese characters and their dream of an imagined Europe, the film seems to intimate that far from vanishing altogether in the present, the old ingrained conceptual frameworks for imagining the world as divided into east and west; periphery and centre continue today to produce the dysphoric subjective effects of postcolonial time-lag. But I want to suggest, below, that while the film registers the effects of the tenacious Europhilia of Taiwan’s postcolonial artistic and intellectual cultures, it does so with a suggestive ambivalence. As much as it re-inscribes this Europhilia, What Time also finishes by gesturing toward its transformation and displacement.

**Cinematic recycling**

With its loving attention to Truffaut’s 400 Blows and the yearning trajectory its diegesis describes between Taiwan and France, What Time could be interpreted as shoring up a teleological imaginary in which the present and future of Taiwan film can only be found in the past of European cinema. On that reading, the film would simply instantiate the postcolonial time-lag in which the modern is always elsewhere. Equally, however, I think the film can be seen as problematizing its own westward trajectory, insofar as ultimately, as much as it appears as the locus of the characters’ and the film’s own desire, Paris is also figured, precisely, as the land of the dead, when it turns out, in the final scene, to be the place of residence of Hsiao Kang’s deceased father (24).

The idea that Paris may, in some sense, represent the land of the dead is related explicitly to the film’s meditation on Truffaut’s cinema in the sequence with Shiang Chyi in the cemetery. In one scene, we watch Shiang Chyi standing transfixed beside an ornate tomb, decorated with a stone sculpture of a human figure lying face-down on the slab. Shiang Chyi stands gazing at the stone figure, framed by an immobile camera, for about 50 seconds, the slight movements of her head and eyes highlighting by contrast the figure’s deathly stillness. The film then cuts to another long shot with two figures: a bench in the same cemetery, with gravestones and crosses making up the background, where a rather seedy-looking Jean-Pierre Léaud sits as Shiang Chyi enters the frame and begins rummaging energetically through her backpack. Léaud becomes minimally animated to watch the woman, exchange a few words, and offer her his phone number, but the rhyme...
with the previous shot is undeniable: once again Shiang Chyi is the more animated of the two figures in frame, and by this logic Léaud is paralleled with the stone tomb sculpture of the previous shot: angel of death. Interestingly, then, through the appearance of Hsiao Kang’s dead father in Paris and the alignment of Léaud with the tomb sculpture, an association is made between France and the nouvelle vague – not with notions of futurity and progress, but on the contrary, with impressions of ghostliness and death.

“What Time” concludes with a characteristically striking yet enigmatic shot: we watch Hsiao Kang’s father walk slowly into the distance in the pearly light of the Paris park, toward a giant ferris wheel that begins, gently, to rotate. The arresting image of the ferris wheel – a transfiguration of the image of the clock-face that has dominated the film up to this point – seems symbolic in at least two, interrelated ways which, read alongside one other, relate back to the film’s reflexive meditation on the anachronistic relationship between contemporary Taiwanese and past European cinemas. First, the ferris wheel recalls the spinning graviton on which little Antoine rides in The 400 Blows, in the scene that Hsiao Kang watched in his room, earlier in the film. In relation to this scene, and his own relation to Truffaut, Tsai has observed:

I was born about 20 years after Truffaut. We are from different backgrounds and eras. But I share one experience with him. In his first feature, The 400 Blows, little Antoine is seen escaping school to go to the fun fair, and we catch sight of Truffaut among the passengers stuck to the wall in a spinning cylinder, like lizards. I used to love this ride as a child; it has vanished now. The 400 Blows is my all-time favorite film. (25)

Tsai’s statements here are striking for the way in which, like the epigraph at the beginning of this paper, they evoke not only a sense of Tsai’s self-perceived belatedness in relation to his beloved nouvelle vague, but also the intense subjective pathos and melancholia that accompanies such a self-perception. Tsai arrives 20 years after Truffaut, and the one thing that links them is now long vanished, like Léaud who mistook the time, assumed Tsai was late, and left only his drained coffee cup in the café where they were supposed to meet. In the quote above, it seems that The 400 Blows is Tsai’s favorite film precisely because it indexes this melancholic relation: it is as if Tsai’s passion for Truffaut is partly a passion for his own ineluctable belatedness.

And yet in another sense, the vanishing of the spinning graviton makes way, in the final shot of What Time, for the appearance of the rotating ferris wheel. The second association of the ferris wheel – particularly given Hsiao Kang’s dead father’s progress toward its spinning form – is with the Buddhist notion of the “wheel of rebirth,” which sees the soul reincarnated in new form after each death until the cycle can be broken and nirvana achieved (26). Characteristically, then, with the progress of Hsiao Kang’s father toward an unknown future incarnation as he approaches the giant wheel, this film ends with a cryptic gesture toward an as yet unimagined time of future possibility (27). Given the overt reflexivity of the film as a whole, it is tempting to read this final, markedly non-European symbol of cosmic “recycling” as bearing also on the question of Taiwan cinema within world film culture. Truffaut’s vanished graviton is displaced by Tsai’s ferris-wheel of rebirth: the ghosts of European art film are reincarnated in a new, uncannily familiar yet also distinctly different cinema. As when our look is sutured into the look of an itinerant Taipei street vendor watching Truffaut’s 1959 film at the start of a new century, this film challenges us to re-see the familiar and find in this altered perspective the glimmer of newness. Gesturing toward a transforming relation between East Asia and “the west” – a relation whose contours are yet to emerge fully – What Time recycles its own belatedness to project a cinematic imaginary proper to the particular time-sickness of the present.

This essay was refereed.

Endnotes

1. Many thanks to Chris Berry, whose comments on an earlier draft of this paper have enabled me further to refine and develop the argument presented here. This article is indebted, too, to my electronic dialogue with Ta-wei Chi about Taiwanese postcoloniality and Europhilia. Thanks to Ta-wei for allowing me to reproduce some of his comments here. My thanks also to the two anonymous readers engaged by Senses of Cinema, whose constructive criticisms of an earlier draft were extremely helpful.


3. In a typical example, John Stratton of Australia’s SBS television station introduced Tsai’s Vive L’Amour through comparison with the films of Antonioni (Richard Read, “Alienation, Aesthetic Distance, and Absorption in Tsai Ming-liang’s Vive L’Amour,” New Formations 40 [Spring 2000]: 102-112, 103). Similarly, Olivier Joyard notes the tendency in Europe to interpret Tsai’s films as “Antonioni marches” (“Corporate Interference,” trans. J. Ames Hodges, in Jean-Pierre Rehm, Olivier Joyard and Daniele Riviere, Tsai Ming-liang [Paris: Editions Dis Voir, 2000], 51); see also Jared Rapfogel, “Tsai Ming-liang:
4. The cross-citation of East Asian and European film cultures has at times been two-sided, most notably, perhaps, in the case of French director Olivier Assayas, who directed a documentary about Hou Hsiao-Hsien entitled *HHH: A Portrait of Hou Hsiao-hsien* (1997), and whose *Irma Vep* (1996) starred Hong Kong star Maggie Cheung as well as Jean-Pierre Léaud. Similarly, Virginie Leyoden, who has appeared in Olivier Assayas’ films, also has a part in Edward Yang’s film *Mahjong* (1996). (Thanks to the anonymous reader for *Senses of Cinema* for drawing this last point to my attention).

5. Tsai in interview with Scott Tobias, *The Onion* 38:7 (February 27, 2002), http://www.theonionavclub.com/avclub/3807/bonusfeature1_3807.html (accessed 15 August 2002). There is an interesting parallel to be drawn, too, between Truffaut’s relationship with Léaud throughout the Antoine series, and Tsai’s own relationship with Lee Kang-sheng through all of his feature films to date – a non-professional actor who Tsai picked up as a teenager on the streets of Taipei (Thanks to Rolando Caputo for bringing this parallel to my attention).


7. Due in large part to dwindling government subsidies, the most recent films by Taiwan’s four best known contemporary directors have all been transnational co-productions: Edward Yang’s *A One and A Two* (2000, Taiwan/ Japan); Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* (2000, China/ Hong Kong/ Taiwan/ USA); Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Millennium Mambo* (2001, France/ Taiwan); and Tsai’s *What Time* (Taiwan/ France).


15. One way that these questions might usefully be further investigated would be through a detailed critical and historical study of discussions of European film in Taiwanese film writing since the mid-20th century – as far as I know, this is a study that still waits to be carried out.


17. Of course, to complicate things further Taiwan has also been identified by some politicians and other public figures as identified with Japan, as a modern, post-industrialized East Asian economy and society.

18. Cf. Bordwell’s more general speculation that 1990s Taiwanese directors’ use of the long take seems to be “in defiance of Hollywood’s ‘intensified continuity’” in the same period; “Transcultural Spaces,” 19.


20. Fabian, *Time and the Other*, Bhabha, “‘Race,’ time and the revision of modernity.”


23. One might argue further that this same developmentalist teleology also provides an unstated foundation for those approaches that see recent Taiwanese cinema as interesting primarily insofar as it comes to appear populated by shools of tardy Antonionis (see note 3 and Ta-wei Chi’s comments, above).

24. Relatedly, this film also returns to the exploration begun in Tsai’s earlier work of a conceptual linkage...
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between homosexuality, death, and ghosts. Elsewhere, I argue in detail that Hsiao Kang’s ghostliness in Tsai’s earlier film, *Vive L’Amour*, works logically alongside Hsiao Kang’s exploration of his own homosexual desire for A’Rong (Chen Zhaorong), since in several forms of 1990s Taiwanese cultural production, homosexual characters have been paralleled with ghosts, demons, angels and other unquiet spirits hovering on the margins of the human world. (Martin, “*Vive L’Amour: Eloquent Emptiness,*” forthcoming in Chris Berry (ed.), *Chinese Films in Focus: 25 New Takes*, London: BFI, 2003.) This tendency is particularly notable in 1990s Taiwanese queer fiction; see for example Chen Xue, “Searching For the Lost Wings of the Angel,” and Hong Ling, “Poem from the Glass Womb,” in Fran Martin (trans.) Angelwings: Contemporary Queer Fiction from Taiwan, Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2003, 167-212. See also discussion by Naifei Ding in “Tongxingliande zhengzhi zuotanhui” (Seminar on homosexual politics), in Josephine Chun-rui Ho (ed.), *Xing / bie Yanjiude Xin Shiye* (Visionary Essays in Sexuality/Gender Studies) Vol 1 (Taipei: Meta Media 1997), 189-94. An analogous logic can be read in *What Time* when the Shiang Chyi, lonely and adrift in Paris, meets the woman from Hong Kong and the two end up sharing a bed and kissing. Given the preexisting linkage in 1990s Taiwanese cultural production of homosexuality with the spectral and other-worldly, the fact that lesbian desire finds its expression in Paris, rather than in either of the women’s home cities of Taipei or Hong Kong, reinforces the film’s connection of Paris with ghostliness. Although in this film Hsiao Kang arguably seems most erotically drawn to a female character, Shiang Chyi, there also remains a hint of ambiguity around his sexuality with the inclusion of the scenes in which Hsiao Kang is openly cruised by the clock-stealing man in the cinema. Thus although homosexual desire is not anchored decisively to Hsiao Kang’s character in this film, it nevertheless continues to make its presence felt in a more diffuse form. Arguably, this diffuse mode of homosexual representation reinforces the preexisting linkage between the homosexual and the miasmatic or apparitional.


27. Cf. my discussion of *The River* in Martin, *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2003), 163-84

About the Author
Dr Fran Martin is Lecturer in Cinema Studies at La Trobe University, Australia. She has published widely on media and public culture in contemporary Taiwan, and is author of *Situating Sexualities: Queer Representation in Taiwanese Fiction, Film and Public Culture* (Hong Kong University Press, 2003), co-editor of *Mobile Cultures: New Media and Queer Asia* (Duke University Press, 2003) and translator of Angelwings: Contemporary Queer Fiction from Taiwan (Hawaii University Press, 2003). Her current research project investigates lesbian representation in the transnational Chinese popular cultures that span Hong Kong, Taiwan and the People's Republic of China.

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