

WASTE, BOREDOM, AND GHOSTLY TIME IN THE FILMS OF TSAI MING-LIANG

Desperdício, tédio e tempo fantasmagórico nos filmes de tsai ming-liang

Pérdida, aburrimiento y tiempo fantasmal en las películas de Tsai Ming-liang

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Resumo

Este estudo examina vários temas que surgem frequentemente na obra do cineasta taiwanês Tsai Ming-liang, focalizando sua preocupação com o desperdício, o tédio e um tempo secreto e “fantasmagórico” paralelo ao tempo humano. Embora as comparações sejam inevitavelmente feitas com a Nouvelle Vague francesa em termos de atitudes em relação à modernidade, argumento que Tsai desenvolve um tom muito diferente. Enquanto a Nouvelle Vague francesa pode ser mais bem caracterizada por frescor, ingenuidade, improvisação, diversão e senso de possibilidade, Tsai, em vez disso, oferece um mundo pós-apocalíptico muito mais sombrio no qual as consequências da modernidade avançada agora se tornam um fardo pesado para seus personagens.

Palavras-chave: desperdício, tédio, corpo, tempo fantasmagórico, modernidade

Abstract

This study examines several themes that often emerge in the work of Taiwanese filmmaker Tsai Ming-liang, focusing on his preoccupation with waste, boredom, and a secret, “ghostly” time that runs parallel to human time. While comparisons are inevitably drawn to the French New Wave in terms of attitudes toward modernity, I argue that Tsai develops a much different tone. While the French New Wave might best be characterized by freshness, naiveté, improvisation, playfulness, and a sense of possibility, then Tsai instead offers a much more bleak, post-apocalyptic world in which the consequences of advanced modernity now become a heavy burden on his characters.

Keywords: waste, boredom, the body, ghostly time, modernity

Resumen

Este estudio examina varios temas que surgen con frecuencia en el trabajo del cineasta taiwanés Tsai Ming-liang, centrándose en su preocupación por el despilfarro, el aburrimiento y un tiempo secreto y "fantasmal" que corre paralelo al tiempo humano. Si bien las

comparaciones se hacen inevitablemente con la Nouvelle Vague francesa en términos de actitudes hacia la modernidad, sostengo que Tsai desarrolla un tono muy diferente. Si bien la Nouvelle Vague francesa podría caracterizarse mejor por la frescura, la ingenuidad, la improvisación, la alegría y un sentido de posibilidad, Tsai, en cambio, ofrece un mundo post-apocalíptico mucho más sombrío en el que las consecuencias de la modernidad avanzada ahora se convierten en una pesada carga para sus personajes.

Palabras clave: desperdicio, aburrimiento, el cuerpo, tiempo fantasmal, modernidad

1 INTRODUÇÃO

In *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization* (2013), James Tweetie establishes a common set of themes and characteristics of the French New Wave and subsequent new wave movements in Taiwan and China, focusing on the way all three respond in congruent ways to the encroaching fears of globalization and advanced modernity. However, Tweetie is also careful to enumerate differences among new waves based on the particular cultural and historical conditions of each country. He observes, for example, that Taiwanese New Wave of the 1980s presents “Deteriorating walls and mounds of rubble [that] mark the fading of the ideals of utopian modernism” (196). He continues: “No longer a utopian future glimpsed in the present, the Taipei of [the Taiwanese New Wave] has outlived a modernizing era and now faces a new wave of expansion, eviction, and demolition” (196).

In this study, I want to examine the particular method of demolition employed by Tsai Ming-liang. My goal is to better understand the way Tsai’s aesthetic departs from French New Wave precedent, and introduces an isolation and desperation largely absent from more upbeat French manifestations. As Song Hwee Lim explains in *Tsai Ming-liang and a Cinema of Slowness* (2014), Tsai builds on concepts of waste and boredom as a way of overturning the modern logic of Taylorist efficiency and productivity. Instead, Tsai approaches boredom, waste, and the return to the human body as healthy values that can help us escape the alienation of modern life. My argument is ultimately a refinement of Tweetie’s claims: although we can see many of the same themes and preoccupations in French cinema, they are developed to their logical conclusion and present a much more serious assault against the damaging influences of urban modernity in Tsai Ming-liang’s minimalist settings.

2 DESENVOLVIMENTO

In the following three subsections, I will discuss three central themes in Tsai Ming-liang’s work, focusing on the central importance of the human body, a secret “ghostly” time

that operates in parallel with our habitual understanding of time and place, and finally, the creation of a uninhabitable “in-between” living space for his characters, which I refer to as a wasteland.

2.1 The Truth of the Body/A verdade do corpo

Tsai’s films strip away the façade of human communication and community to discuss the truth of the body engaged in its most involuntary, automatic functions, functions that cannot be contrived or controlled. In interviews, Tsai admits that his priority is not slowness, but rather getting to a human authenticity of bodily existence, of pure movement and gesture. It was shocking for him to first learn that the movements of his principle actor Lee Kang-sheng are not intentional or contrived, but that Lee naturally moves with slow deliberation.

Tsai’s characters often suffer from maladies and ailments precisely as a way of slowing the pace of the film, in order to match the movements of the human body. The camera lingers patiently in long shots of the woman in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003)—the only staff member in the theatre, other than the projectionist who disappears from the projection booth—who wears an iron brace on her leg and rhythmically swings her lame leg as she walks down long corridors, cleans up the empty auditorium, or climbs an extended series of stairs and other obstacles to get to the projection room. Her disability and extreme difficulty in moving seems to be the point of these scenes, since the viewer is forced to follow her belabored rhythms. The son in *The River* (1997), played by Lee Kang-sheng, is equally overtaken by an increasingly serious neck injury that prevents him from moving his head. Like an epileptic or someone with a nerve disorder, the disease gets progressively worse and takes over his personality, bordering on a horror film. Finally, *I Don’t Want to Sleep Alone* (2006) features Lee in two different roles: as the paralyzed man who is abused by his family and taken care of by a maid, and as a homeless man who is severely beaten by a mob, and is nursed back to health by Rawang. Thus, the film focuses on the two caretakers who devote themselves to these injured and immobilized characters played by Lee Kang-sheng. Much the same is true of the monk in *Journey to the West* (2014), also played by Lee, who travels at a very slow pace as people race past him in the streets of Marseilles, or as he moves in excruciating slow motion on the steps leading into the subway. All of these examples point to the importance for Tsai of changing the focus from a narrative or plot to the gestures and movements of the human body, which are almost always embodied in the character of Lee Kang-sheng.

We can see this emphasis on the physical movement of the human body to be an equally central preoccupation in post-war French cinema. Examples are numerous, but perhaps the most famous can be seen in the partnership between the filmmaker Leos Carax and the actor Denis Lavant, in which Lavant displays his considerable skills in physical movement, dance, and acrobatics in a series of Carax films. Lavant subsequently appears in Claire Denis' film *Beau travail* (1999), where his role builds on his performances in Carax's films to emphasize his ability to communicate through gesture, dance, and a non-verbal style. The opening shot of *Beau travail*, for example, is a four-minute extreme close up of Denis Lavant's head that focuses on the rhythmic pulsations of the side of his neck as the blood moves through his carotid artery. In this way, Claire Denis seems to be interested in the same impulsive, involuntary bodily reactions of Levant as those captured by Tsai especially in his documentation of Lee Kang-sheng's body and gestures.

Tsai's concern with the body is emphasized not only through the automatism of the body, but equally through the proliferation of bodily fluids that escape from the body, especially through the act of peeing. Lee Kang-sheng throws up in the hole in the floor of his apartment in *The Hole* (1999), which is then examined and touched by Yang Kuei-mei in the downstairs apartment, or his toilet leaks into her apartment later in the film. Similarly, a woman pees on the floor in *Stray Dogs* (2013) just after feeding the stray dogs in front of the mural in the abandoned building. This preoccupation with peeing is linked to the abundance of water, flooding and rain in almost all of Tsai's films, as if the water is a method of returning the apartment flat to a more primitive, elemental condition.

2.2 Ghostly Time/Tempo fantasmagórico

One of Tsai's central themes is the disconnect between chronology, temporality, often by superimposing one moment in time onto another as a consequence of the workings of memory. Dead fathers, in particular, come back to haunt the present in a number of Tsai films, such as the reemergence of the dead father in Paris at the end of *What Time is it There* (2001), a film that overtly plays on the temporal disconnect between one character in Taiwan (played by Lee Kang-sheng) and one in Paris (played by Chen Shiang-chyi). Beyond meeting at an outdoor stand where Lee sells watches—yet another reference to time—these two characters have no contact with each other in the film. But Tsai weaves a complex narrative by cross-cutting between them at critical moments that reveal each character's equal loneliness and detachment. They seem to want to speak to one another given their respective predicament, even if there is never any communication between them.

Tsai's impulse to slow down the film's pace to more carefully focus on singular acts of gesture and movement is related to the impulse to introduce other temporalities into his films, a kind of ghostly conception of time in which the past continues to live in and haunt the present, much like Apichatpong Weerasethakul's meditation on the way past and present mutually infect one another in *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives* (2010).

Karl Schoonover provides a useful way of understanding the value of this "slow cinema" style in his essay, "Wastrels of Time: Slow Cinema's Laboring Body, the Political Spectator, and the Queer." Within a neo-liberal context, Schoonover interrogates terms like boredom, inefficiency, and wasted time, to show that slow cinema directors are engaged in a political act to redefine our relationship to time. As he puts it, the slow art film, "anticipates a spectator not only eager to clarify the value of wasted time and uneconomical temporalities but also curious about the impact of broadening what counts as productive human labor" (65). In this way, slowing down the pace of the film, and suddenly introducing alternative story lines are both strategies for offering new political solutions to the alienation of contemporary modernity. Through his emphasis on obsolescence and waste, Tsai develops a no-longer present haunted by ghosts, where people and objects are always "out of time" next to the bustling speedway of modernity. The viewer therefore sees the world very much like the father (and protagonist) of *Stray Dogs*, whose job is to hold a large real-estate sign on the concrete median, as cars, scooters, trucks and other machines of modernity race past him.

2.3 The Wasteland/ Terra de desperdício: Between Public and Private Space

One of Tsai's trademark characteristics is to conflate the public and private sphere, most often because characters are unable to obtain a contained, public space where they can be sheltered from the ravages of an outside world. Perhaps the best example appears in *Stray Dogs*, in which the protagonist's children wander through grocery stores during the day, then wash in public restrooms and sleep in abandoned buildings at night. There is seldom a space that a character can call his or her own, but instead characters live in an abandoned wasteland, such as the enormous upscale condos that are used illegally by the central characters as a refuge to express their secret sexual and emotional lives in *Vive L'amour* (1994). Or, the unused wastelands sandwiched between high rise buildings where the protagonist goes to the bathroom and eats lunch as is famished in *Stray Dogs*.

Shots in Tsai's films most often take place in hallways, corridors, outdated theaters, deserted buildings, and other structures that, as we watch, return to the elemental earth through decay due to the ravages of fire (*Stray Dogs*, *Face*), flooding water (*Vive L'Amour*, *The River*, *The Hole*), disease (*The Hole*, *The River*), crumbling, outdated structures (*Goodbye*, *Dragon Inn*, *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*), or a combination of all four in many of these same films. The location is no longer a place suitable for human life. Elevators are an ideal example, since in Tsai's films these normally public spaces become private domains of desire and love, such as the dance number in *Stray Dogs* that transforms a small

elevator into a nightclub with Yang Kuei-mei performing an idealized Grace Chung musical number, complete with lights, microphone, musical accompaniment, and 1950s dress.

Related to the concept of the wasteland is the way Tsai uses architecture and space to organize the movement of his characters. For example, *The Hole* (1998) features lonely, alienated characters who communicate with each other through an enlarged, crumbling hole in the floor/ceiling of their apartments. The action centers on efforts by either character to physically occupy this hole with parts of the body. The focus is on the deterioration and decay of a character's surroundings, whether due to fire that leaves deep black hieroglyphics on the walls of the home in *Stray Dogs*, which look like fossils embedded in highly stylized patterns on black, smutty, bathroom walls, or the way the water flows down the stairs in *I Don't Want to Die Alone*. The repeated emphasis is on a return to a primordial existence outside the confine of the modern world. In this respect, Tsai's art is not unlike the photographs of graffiti taken by Brassai in France in the 1930s. In a gesture that seems as much anthropological and artistic, Brassai is especially interested in faces that had been dug into slabs of concrete by children as a kind of collective, unconscious impulse. While Brassai was under the influence of surrealist impulses, his photographs nevertheless have something in common with the way Tsai uses elemental, found materials as backdrop to his character's living conditions.

3 CONSIDERAÇÕES

The goal of this study, clearly, has not been to demonstrate a set of common themes between the French and Taiwanese New Wave as seen through the work of Tsai Ming-liang. Such a connection has already been sufficiently established by James Tweatie, Michelle Bloom, as well as Tsai himself in occasional allusions to French cinema and through his French co-productions, which overtly recycle iconic figures and scenes from the French New Wave. The point has instead been to examine shifts in tone. If the French New Wave is characterized by freshness, naiveté, improvisation, playfulness, and a sense of possibility, then Tsai instead offers a much more bleak, post-apocalyptic world in which the consequences of advanced modernity are taken fully into account twenty years later. An exception might be the films of Jean-Luc Godard, whose critique of capitalism and sense of entrapment is not so different in his Marxist phase from the conclusions of Tsai, but even at his most bleak, Godard still maintains a playfulness and whimsy that is seldom characteristic of Tsai. We can certainly see the ominous signs planted throughout the French New Wave, even if such ideas are conveyed with a sense of lightness and play. The depiction of Jean-Pierre Léaud in *Face* (2009) is perhaps the best case in point, since Tsai was fascinated with capturing the passing of time on Léaud's face, as if to create a portrait of French newness and possibility that instead stresses wrinkles, a drooping mouth, and a receding hair line. The Léaud rewrite seems the most appropriate visual metaphor for the way Tsai layers onto a youthful French landscape the subsequent conditions of demolition and decay.



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