

Contemporary Cinema

Transcendental Style and the Poetics of Tsai Ming-liang

In his article in the reader, Jarod Rapfogel states that Tsai Ming-Liang's films are characterised by an "overwhelming physicality". Through a detailed analysis of one or more of Tsai's films, discuss how, and with what effects, this sense of "overwhelming physicality" is generated in Tsai's work.

"The more realistic I make my films, the more absurd they look. There's actually something absurd and laughable about the way people behave in reality."

Tsai Ming-liang, 2004

When Jarod Rapfogel wrote that the films of Tsai Ming-liang have an "overwhelming physicality", his description seemed to focus on the notion of physical realism – that "Tsai's films are clammy, cramped, and tactile"; that the physical and temporal dimensions and the texture of the locations and environments can be felt by the viewer. It is a rare thing indeed to be able to say this of any film, yet upon viewing a film like What Time is it There?, Rapfogel's description seems inexplicably appropriate. However, saying this about a film raises some important questions; questions that Rapfogel doesn't seek to answer: how exactly does Tsai generate such physicality, and by which process can a film be 'felt' by a viewer? Is a viewer convinced of What Time's reality by way of an intellectual process, where we are presented with a believable situation that we can then feel based on association with our own experiences? Or is the relationship between film and viewer mediated by Tsai's narrative, so we may 'feel' it as the characters might?

It is interesting that Rapfogel describes Tsai's body of work as not only physical, but *overwhelmingly* so. 'Overwhelming' implies greatness and profoundness; it suggests experiences that are too great to be fully registered and understood by human faculties and understanding. In short, it implies the unknowable. Paul Schrader theorised that there was such a thing as a transcendental style in film – a style, unbound by the culture, religion or personality of the director, expressive of that which lies beyond human experience or understanding. He explains: "Human works... cannot *inform* one about the Transcendent, they can only be *expressive* of the Transcendent" (Schrader, 1972, p. 6). Schrader's argument is problematic in some respects, especially since he doesn't at any stage seek to address the heady and well-established epistemological debate regarding the opposing concepts of transcendence and immanence. However, this was never his aim. In essence, Schrader was trying to rationalise an important idea – why some films, like What Time, possess a mysterious quality that surpasses our understanding, and resonate within us long after we have seen them. As such, Schrader provides us with a useful framework with which to analyse films that have this effect, and his discussion of Yasujiro Ozu's films in particular (to whom Tsai bears some striking similarities) provides an insight into the overwhelming physicality of the films of Tsai Ming-liang, in particular What Time is it There?.

Like Ozu, Tsai's career has been one of refinement: he has constantly limited his technique and subject matter, and this is plainly evident within minutes of beginning What Time. The film consists of a minimal number of camera and compositional techniques and editing patterns: Mid-shots and long shots are used in variation, and are never separated by zooms, pans, tilts or tracking shots. Tsai uses two-dimensional composition in much the same way as Kathe Geist identified in Ozu's films, where the Japanese director sought to "play deliberately with our perception of flat versus deep space" (Geist, 1994, p. 291). While Tsai does not use codas, and almost musically-structured shot sequencing the way Ozu did, he sets his films' pace with extremely lengthy shots that allow individual actions to begin and completely finish within the scene. Ozu's codas are in the form of shots that occur between the scenes in which action (of the kind that forwards the narrative) takes place, so that "the dialogue gives

meaning to the silence, the action to the still life” (Schrader, 1972, p. 29). Tsai’s equivalent to this is somewhat different. At either side of actions are moments of contemplative silence and stillness; handles of frozen time that frame and pronounce the movements and dialogue of characters in the frame. In What Time, shots that do not follow this approach of contrasting stillness with bodily action will usually consist of nothing more than a single, repeated action of no particular narrative importance, as when Hsiao Kang sits at his watch-selling post, expressionless, banging a watch against the metal railing to test its durability. These are the constitutive parts of Tsai’s cinematic toolkit, and they vary little from film to film – the content has little effect on the form. It is through these that the overwhelming physicality can be identified and, in turn, shown to be indicative of something more profound. This ‘something’ is the point at which Tsai truly diverges from Ozu – where the profound resonance of Tokyo Story was a “feeling of inevitability”, of the gentle transience of life (Richie, 1974, p. 160), What Time expresses the solitude, loneliness and absurdity of life. Rapfogel likened Tsai’s films to the absurdist plays of Samuel Beckett due to their “balance between comedy and despair” (2004, p. 29). In this sense, What Time provides an alternate interpretation of Schrader’s transcendental style – expressive not of the divine and the unknowable, but of the actual human state of *not knowing*; confusion, relationships of simultaneous distance and closeness, and the mundane but absurd nature of everyday actions.

It is difficult to choose a single scene that effectively demonstrates the overwhelming physicality of What Time, as Tsai’s technique is so constant and invariable from scene to scene. It seems appropriate, then, to analyse first the pace and structure of the film as a whole. The pace of What Time, broadly speaking, is slow. The film runs for 110 minutes, and consists of 106 shots, making the average shot length approximately 1 minute and 3 seconds. (Ozu has similarly been described as ‘slow’ and, according to Rosenbaum, each shot in Tokyo Story averages 10.2 seconds). Moreover, the shots get longer as the film progresses. Cutting scenes to such a length serves multiple purposes: first and foremost, it allows time for characters’ actions to be contemplated, prepared for, and carried out in their entirety, even if the action is as simple as frying onions, drinking water, or opening a window. Richie stated that Ozu’s films portray the “aimless, self-sufficient eternal now” (1964, p. 15), a description that befits What Time. On one (simple) level,

this presentation of the 'eternal now' – actions taking place at their normal speed in their natural context – is realistic in that it is a non-editorialised portrayal of an action. In his interview with Rapfogel, Tsai gave the impression of a director who, like Ozu, tries to minimise editorialising. Because Ozu hated the editing process, he wrote mundane actions into his script, and did not allow his shots to go any longer or shorter than he originally conceived in pre-production by forbidding his actors from improvising. Tsai encourages his actors to improvise and interpret the scene themselves, and stays true to the action by not editing the shots mid-action. Both approaches have the same effect of creating a sense of realism through completeness of actions. The aforementioned handles – the pauses and motionless moments – that frame actions in What Time are part of the void that gives form to the bodily movements of the characters; the actions, however mundane, are made significant by the stillness that precedes them. "Tsai believes in the body's ability to be a shared space, the only thing that everyone has in common" (Joyard, Rehm & Rivière, 1999, p. 74). If this were indeed the case, it would suggest that Tsai's over-emphasis on the human body through pacing and editing (or lack thereof) might contribute to the viewer 'feeling' the physicality of What Time. In Tsai's 'non-narrative' approach (Rapfogel, 2004, p. 75), the human body is more than a vessel by which characters move from place to place, and the mouth is not just a tool that characters use to communicate. The body is "the final receptacle of even the slightest human actions", the limit of our existence (Joyard, Rehm & Rivière, 1999, p. 74); the world outside of it is forever strange and unfamiliar. Fran Martin summarises the effect well: "this film challenges us to re-see the familiar and find in this altered perspective the glimmer of newness" (2003). In sequence, the constant repetition of these mundane actions is reminiscent of Schrader's description of the Transcendental in Ozu's films: "The everyday celebrates the bare threshold of existence, those banal occurrences which separate the living from the dead... those experiences which so many people equate with life itself" (1972, p. 39). However, Tsai's emphasis on the absurd and comedic aspects of these actions suggests that he is expressing a form of the Transcendent that bears a likeness to existentialism.

The lengthy shots in What Time also give the viewer time to take in the details of the frame. Two-dimensional framing, as Branigan argued, has the effect of "allowing graphic

elements to define a flat space” and therefore “motivates an awareness of the entire frame and not just the centre” (1976, p. 102). In the scene where Hsiao Kang watches the film in the theatre, the frame consists of numerous graphical elements that exist independently of each other, and independently of the narrative. Compositional objects here are not containers of a function or of symbolic meaning, but of texture, light and colour. Hsiao sits, partially in shadow, at the bottom left of frame; a ray of white projector light cuts across the top right of frame, above the heads of other audience members at frame right, all set upon a sloping wall of red seats. Earlier in the film, when Hsiao sits looking at the clocks at a train station in Taipei, objects in the frame (the spinning water wheel that fills the left half of the screen, Hsiao on frame left on a deeper compositional plane and, finally, the clocks at the top of the frame) exist for their own sake, with their own texture and movements independent of each other.

If the graphical qualities of the framing alone do not encourage the viewer to take in all its details, then the sheer length of the shots demands our attention. In response to the stillness of each shot we look to the compositional objects that stand out (like the recurring fish tank or the clocks) as points of reference. Therefore, the physicality to which Rapfogel referred is evoked, in part, by the sheer volume of each frame. Stripped of narrative or symbolic meaning, an object in a film frame is nothing more than a shape or texture or mass. In other words, its physical properties become all the more important – they demand our attention. In stripping objects and actions of conventional meaning in this way, Tsai is presenting us with a view of life stripped of all meaning, in the existential Absurdist tradition. As with the objects in What Time, “we know nothing of [the characters’] past or of their birth. They seem to have always been on screen” (Joyard, Rehm & Rivière, 1999, p. 53); this idea relates to Richie’s concept of the eternal present. Yet they are always alert, never familiar with their environment, completely open to sensation; Shiang-chyi drinks bottled water in her hotel as if for the first time, tests the temperature of the bath water with her foot, observing her reddened skin with the sensory awareness of a child. The result is a tension between characters and the space they inhabit, where characters are never at ease with their environment, and therefore never sure of their place within it. To continue the Absurdist comparison, What Time presents a situation not dissimilar to Beckett’s Waiting for Godot; the

characters seem to be waiting passively for something – in Tsai’s own words, “they keep trying to find their own identity” (Kraicer, 2000, p. 587) – and they fill in the time by way of aimless repetitions, such as Hsiao obsessively changing every clock he encounters to Paris time, or his mother presenting offerings of food to her dead husband. They constantly rediscover the world, just as Vladimir and Estragon keep rediscovering the reasons behind their situation (that they are, in fact, waiting for Godot). Hsiao, his mother, and Shiang-chyi are forever in state of stasis – “the end product of transcendental style” (Schrader, 1972, p. 49) – reflected in the stillness of the frame in What Time and the action that takes place within it. Again, Tsai’s particular form of the transcendental style is expressive not of stasis in the Zen tradition – the frozen view of life – as Ozu was, but of the kind that permeates the plays of Samuel Becket; the absurdity and meaninglessness of human existence.

What Time also defies conventions of perspective in film. The static framing and lack of transitional effects (such as tracking shots) makes the camera apparatus undetectable in the film, creating realism through stillness. Environments in What Time possess no functional narrative purpose to speak of, serving primarily as a vessel in which the body – the central metaphor, and “most compelling element in his [Tsai’s] films” (Joyard, Rehm & Rivière, 1999, p. 70) – lives and moves. Furthermore, Tsai’s soundtrack could be classified as binaural – the viewer hears sounds as the characters would perceive, as with the up-close sound of Hsiao Kang urinating in a bottle, or the throaty sounds of Shiang-chyi drinking water and eating. Sound effects are non-reverberant, because Tsai doesn’t strive to create acoustic realism in What Time. Instead, we are subjected to the characters’ physical experience of the world through sound – the audience is not only compelled to pay attention to bodily actions that would normally escape our attention, but also sounds that we filter out. We are put in a position of heightened awareness, much like the characters themselves. Tsai doesn’t use non-diegetic music (as was mentioned earlier) – to do so would destroy the auditory perspective that is so meticulously constructed. Even the music that plays as the end credits roll, while emotionally appropriate in its sombreness, seems jarring and out of place. Ultimately, What Time’s soundtrack is ‘overwhelming physical’ because it consists of sound mediated through the human body and unaffected by spatial considerations; when

Hsiao is drying his hands under the automatic hand dryer during the cinema sequence, the 'depth' of the hand dryer in the frame would necessitate a distant, quieter, more reverberant sound in the classical Hollywood film for the sake of spatial continuity. Yet we hear the sound as if perceiving the world through Hsiao's ears. When Shiang-chyi is drinking water, the sound makes it more than just an object with an absolute meaning – it becomes a liquid with physical characteristics. This effect is constant throughout the film, and helps give the mundane actions on screen their sense of hyper-realism. It was mentioned before that the important sounds in Tsai's film have no reverberation. To strip a sound of its acoustics is to reduce it to its fundamental physical characteristics, giving it an existence independent of the space in which it takes place. Like the objects in What Time, the sheer physicality of sounds is emphasised in each scene, and is another factor that certainly contributed to Rapfogel's impression of Tsai's films as being 'overwhelmingly physical'.

What Time is it There?, and indeed Tsai Ming-liang's entire body of work, is complex, and open to many interpretations. Jarod Rapfogel's particular impression of Tsai's films – that they possess an 'overwhelming physicality' – might strike many viewers as being accurate, albeit in a vague way. The extremely lengthy shots, the gracefulness and beauty of the characters' actions within the frame, and the pervading stasis in What Time give an impression of physicality, and this essay focused on how this is expressed through form. A combination of two-dimensional compositional techniques and static framing have the effect of turning the images into spaces with mass, texture, colour and shape and, during the course of the lengthy shots, we consume these details as readily and with same vigour with which Shiang-chyi gulps down water. Furthermore, we are given a unique and unusual viewing perspective by way of the binaural soundtrack that places sounds as if we are hearing them ourselves; as though the water is trickling down our own throats. These techniques are the source of the physicality in What Time. Extending upon this, an alternative interpretation of Paul Schrader's transcendental style was proposed in order to shed light on the overwhelming nature of the film's physicality, based on the stylistic similarities between Tsai Ming-liang and Yasujiro Ozu – Schrader's quintessential exemplar of the transcendental style in the East. While these stylistic similarities (and differences) between Tsai and Ozu go much deeper than was relevant to

explore in this essay, analysing What Time through the framework of transcendental style is useful insofar as suggesting a possible purpose behind the overwhelming physicality. Here, it was suggested that Tsai is expressing a kind of existential transcendence; that he is expressing the human condition of not knowing. However, as Schrader states, “no definition of ‘transcendental’ or ‘style’ monopolizes the discussion of any work of art” (1972, p. 9). Indeed, an existential reading of What Time doesn’t explain some of the more joyful or even sombre aspects of the film. Analysing the physical dimension of the film is just one way to look at one of the most intriguing directors of the Taiwan New Cinema.

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