

Csilla Markója

FROM CINEMA TO MUSEUM

A LONG WALK WITH TSAI MING-LIANG, 2.¹

JOURNEY TO THE WEST (2014)

Cinema and Spirituality. Slow cinema as a transcendental experience. I was already averse to these concepts. I grew up surrounded by mandalas, African statues and authentic Buso masks from Mohács, when I had asthma the great Azerbaijani bear Vagif cured me by laying his hands on me. Someone said to me, reassuringly, when I complained about this fraught contradiction between materialistic, critical thinking and esotericism, this tension, „I hear you” – but does the world hear, understand this all-consuming, fatal dichotomy? When someone recommended this film to me, it was only my deep love for it that made me sit through the first half hour. The very idea of Tsai Ming-liang, dressing his fetish actor Lee Kang-sheng in the sacred robes of Buddhist monks, handing him a begging bowl and sending him out into the streets of Hong Kong to move with artificial slowness seemed pathetic to me. What a simple happening, a cliché. What intellectual pleasure could lie in such a simple and didactic gesture. Lee with his three nipples – that caught my imagination. In Tsai’s films, he grew from a beautiful boy to a suffering, mature man before my eyes. And his sexuality has always remained so elusive, because I wouldn’t even call him genderfluid, there’s something asexual about him, while he mobilizes and uses all the senses except language. And just not sexuality. A mute, mysterious being, an object of desire in its own withdrawn gender identity. It is as if the material itself, the dark, the distant material, takes on the garb of service and spirituality: At the end of *Walker*, Lee in the red robe stuffs himself with a hamburger, like Miyazaki’s ghosts in *Spirited Away* – the insatiable hunger and gluttony of the West. How does this become a spiritual initiation and why should it happen in cinema? Films with long takes have been around for a very long time, the pedigree can be traced back to Bresson. The name Slow Cinema, which comes from Taiwanese director Hou Hsiao-hsien’s *Café Lumière* (2003), is a transnational experiment that has emerged in a globalized, postcolonial world of constant displacement, migration, and flux in opposition to the American notion that cinema is about movement, not time. When our eyes see 24 frames in 1 second, our brains perceive this as movement. In the days of silent film, 14–16 frames per second conveyed a choppy experience of motion, and today HFR films are shot at 48 frames per second or more. However, 24 frames per

¹ This text is based on online reviews of Tsai Ming-liang’s films by Csilla Markója (ELKH BTK MI). Csilla Markója’s previous academic paper on Tsai Ming-liang and the aesthetics of the spectral: <https://sciendo.com/article/10.2478/ausfm-2022-0012>

second is a common convention, a fiction. What happens between the 24 frames, what connects them, is an invisible, mental matrix that also has only a narrative, a fictional name, time. Why is there pleasure in movement and not in the perception of passing time? Is it because movement obscures time? Does the sense of progress obscure the experience of passing? The long shot is a stone thrown into the rush, into the flow, but what does Tsai Ming-liang's gesture of slowing down slow cinema mean, what does the deliberately slowed monk Lee mean as another stone thrown into the more natural flow of slow cinema? If slow cinema, unlike montage, does not dramatize but unfolds time, does it really mean to let reality in? Isn't the monk Lee another abstraction, at the other endpoint, unlike montage? Where time is not dramatized, but essentialized? I've already said that I cried at the end of the film, when Tsai suddenly turned the frame upside down. Because Tsai's and Lee's quiet rebellion to confront the accelerated time of consumption, production, materiality, to slow down, to calm down, to smooth out, is now considered a subversive gesture. To bring the world gently to its feet first requires a radically new perspective: if film is movement, it is necessary to work with the in-between, with its spiritual, ghostly matter, to stop what is rolling. We have to turn everything upside down – that was the lesson, no more, no less.

SAND (2018)

Now that the life-saving imperativus of „slowing down” is offered as a consumer product for mental health in the market, it is touching to see Tsai Ming-liang's silent asceticism – as he and his maturing and aging fetish actor Lee Kang-sheng, renouncing the tools that magnetically attract people with their deep emotionality and fantastically rich visuals, deepen the Walker project by making increasingly less viewer-friendly slow cinema, the 8., in the Ben Rivers/James Benning anthropocene/conceptual vein. For 16 long takes and about an hour and a half, Lee, ritually slowed down from his usual slow pace, walks in his usual red monk's robe through the grounds of Taiwan's Zhuangwei Sand Dune Visitor Center, which, despite its sonorous name, brings together Yilan's natural sand-dune landscape and architectural space designed by renowned architect Huang Sheng-yuan. The film subtly re-frames the aims of the connecting project, offering with honesty but without judgement the chaotic and confused traces of man's intrusion into the natural order, and at the end the monk plunges into the darkness of the constructed human void. The zen walk leads between the magnificent vegetation, the territory of Lintou trees, the waterfront with black sand, the mountains of garbage and the foundations of the new building through the beautifully composed, picturesque images for which Tsai is known, with an almost unbearable slowness that touches the very bottom of human tolerance. That landscape slow cinema should be enriched by such Buddhist symbolism, signified by easily deciphered pathos forms of figure and movement, is in itself a significant gesture – but Tsai's slow exit from the cinema and entry into the museum space, where interactivity and human intimacy are given greater scope in

his interpretation, adds another dimension of this exit. I love Tsai Ming-liang with his demons sitting on his left shoulder, but even more I love his loyalty to Lee and the generous, creative togetherness of the two of them, to go through the conflicts and insults that such a relationship can bring. I keep saying this, but it is inevitable. Tsai not only creates the character of the monk Xuanzang through Lee, but also becomes his interpreter – their skills are constantly exchanged, passed on. In a very wild and brave installation, Tsai set up small booths in the museum for visitors, with only a couch, a monitor and a roll of toilet paper. The monitor showed a film of his and Lee's conversation. I didn't see the installation live, but this intensity of self-reflection, with its full range of potentially elicited bodily fluids, including tears, but also everything else, says everything about the critical depth and wry, ironic humour with which Tsai approaches his own work and art in general.

DAYS (2020)

Lee has a headache. He broke his neck, Tsai Ming-liang said in an interview, perhaps on the set of *The River*. It's not clear what he meant by that. Perhaps it was a fracture, perhaps a severe hernia that has paralyzed the actor from time to time since his youth. I know this pain, an intense neuralgia. An indelible chronic pain, that of a friend, imprinted in landscapes, reflections, the noise of the city, like a tattoo on the body of the world. The charming young Lee Kang-sheng has grown old and is looking for a cure for his pain, and the director, who has grown old with his actor, is now making a film about this real and silent pain and the possibilities of healing, about how a ritual like the Thai massage, rewarded with money, can transform chance into something quite different. The „story,” consisting only of the movements of the body and the changes in the landscape, runs on two threads, the parallel threads of a young masseur living in a basement amid the colorful plastic garbage of the Western world and an older middle-class sufferer who end up meeting only to unravel. A surprisingly simple, slow cinema from Tsai Ming-liang that centers on a sexual act described in detail. This act is not dictated by sudden love, not by desire, not by instinct. It is a service, so to speak, since money is involved, but Tsai focuses on the subtle tipping point where the consumer's service turns into voluntary assistance. What happens when we want to help someone who is suffering, what is the basis of human compassion? What is the magic of what might be called one-sided pleasure-seeking, when someone suddenly decides that relieving a stranger's pain is more important than their own dignity? As if the attainment of true health is a process of repeating the mechanical gestures of the healing act until the sufferer finally believes in and surrenders to the uniqueness behind the repetition. And then it happens. Like the barely visible movement of the treetops that we watch for so long in the deepening blue landscape of dusk. Perhaps it is not the healing, but rather the hesitant, inner smile that appears on the face of the devoted boy at the lonely bus stop, as a subtle echo of the joy he has given to a stranger.

THE NIGHT (2021)

Because of the pandemic, I can't really leave the house and garden except at night. It has become a strange life for me. It was especially ghostly during the lockdown, walking under the highways and skywalks that even the breath of runners could not touch me, and my cat Shanti would follow me, emboldened, into the big, black-sighing park where the lovely chestnut trees would move towards each other at this time of year and pass on their secret messages about the tricks of survival. I love those who can withstand the accelerating tide of time, I love the gentle resisters. I like to go with Tsai's ascetic camera, which eventually pays homage to a collage of torn advertisements with quiet joy. Lately, he said, he's been wanting to feel more like a visual artist, giving images instead of film to people who are genuinely interested and willing to curl up on his cushions in the safe but illusory space of a museum, sealed off from the world by membranes, to look at the streets that are left outside, empty without them.

WHERE DO YOU STAND, TSAI MING-LIANG? (2022)

„I want to spend my whole life filming Lee's face” – said Tsai Ming-liang at the premiere of *Faces* in 2009. For those who have seen almost all of Tsai's films, this also means „all my life I want to watch Tsai Ming-liang filming Lee's face”, so I share the filmmaker's commitment to following Lee Kang-sheng, through the motifs that wander from film to film, to the sensual stasis that transforms ‚androgynous impassivity’ into vivid suffering. The boy was discovered by Tsai in the Taipei night; it was on the set of *The River* that his neck problems began, leading to his severe occipital neuralgia, in *Days* we see Tsai's camera accompanying the now fifty-year-old Lee, in hellish pain, from doctor to doctor. He and Tsai moved to the hills outside Taipei seven years ago, to a completely deserted street of empty, dilapidated concrete buildings, in search of a cure for Lee's neuralgia and Tsai's increasing panic attacks. I'm going to make all my films here now, Tsai says, and indeed, in one of the ruined rooms overlooking the picturesque, lush green jungle, *Afternoon* and *The Deserted* was shot, and some sequences of *Days* – now lonely empty chairs appear in the rain-soaked corners of the ruined rooms, followed by Tsai's white-backed acrylic paintings of the same chairs, and then, in an unexpected twist, paintings of Lee's face – the images slowly reveal themselves to be photographs of scenes from *Days* shot here, as they show Anong Hounghuangsy, a young Laotian immigrant whom Tsai met in a Thai food bar and who in *Days* gives the suffering Lee a 20-minute erotic Thai massage. Who stands where, at what stage of reality? In *Where do you stand...*, Tsai Ming-liang, his flip-flops clattering in puddles, walks between the pictures he painted of his actors as a visitor to his own exhibition. *Faces* was a step in the slow march that brought Tsai's films into the museum. While it might be more accurate to call this transformation a transition, in which the films not only thematize queerness but become queer

artworks themselves: *Where do you stand...* is a film, an installation and a series of paintings all in one, without being able to define exactly which of these would be the museum object. Healing, health, illness, desire, attention, and care have always existed as autonomous entities in his films, anticipating the phenomenological turn in contemporary cinema that emphasises perception over plot. *Where do you stand...* can be understood as covid cinema, but empty chairs are a recurring motif in Tsai's museum installations, and for Venice Biennale (2007, *It's a Dream*) he had the chairs from his favourite Taiwanese cinema moved to Venice, and in complete, one might say motivic, harmony with Apichatpong's move into the museum, he has anticipated Apichatpong's *SleepCinemaHotel* by installing cushions and beds in the exhibition spaces where his films are shown. These gestures of invitation and interactive participation in *Where do you stand...*, which accompanies his retrospective at the Pompidou in 2022-23 as part of the museum's series,² are directed at potential visitors to the exhibition: Come and see the faces that I appropriated, mastered, and possessed as a director in my films, now copied with monastic humility as a kind of restitution: these relationships are in fact reciprocal in all their forms. In 2018, Tsai put an end to indiscreet speculations, describing their relationship with Lee in terms of family togetherness – when he pauses in front of the somehow 'naïve' but suggestive painting (accompanied by the ASMR symphony of his own recorded footsteps thundering in puddles) that he himself painted of Lee and Anong's on-screen lovemaking, reality and the multitude of images become inextricably intertwined, making the power of inspiration visible that connects a face to the one who looks at it, enchanted by the possibility of recreation. The question of where you are with your work, or with love, with the world, with your ever-busy, ever-confused mind, well, the best answer may be really an empty chair. The invitation prolonged.

² The Pompidou-series has been running since 2015, asking different artists where they are now in life and in their art.

