

## **Re-enchanting the Everyday Banal in the Age of Globalization: Alienation, Desire, and Critique of Capitalist Temporality in Tsai Ming-Liang's *The Hole* and *What Time Is It There?***

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### **ABSTRACT**

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The focus of this paper is to examine Tsai Ming-Liang's cinematic creation of different kinds of time/space that challenges the capitalist model of time-space compression and global homogenization. By analyzing *The Hole* and *What Time Is It There*, I aim to show that Tsai is concerned with amplifying the presence of the "now" and making the present "habitable" by re-imagining what counts as past and future, here and there. Recalling Michel de Certeau's discussion of the everyday, we see that the everyday is not simply an unproblematic and self-evident grounding for experience; instead, it is haunted by implicit "others." This entails seeing the subject of everyday life as a volatile becoming, the subject who is not self-present. This paper argues that Tsai Ming-Liang still looks for myth in today's disequilibrium, that his alternative cinematic narrative gestures toward an impulse to "re-enchant" the everyday banal in the age of globalization. By redistributing the existing space or by inserting a certain play (which usually entails temporality) into the order of the everyday, Tsai, particularly in *The Hole* and *What Time Is It There*, creates a space for maneuvers and for utopian points of reference.

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**Keywords :** Tsai Ming-Liang, globalization, space, time, *The Hole*, *What Time Is It There?*

# 全球化日常庸腐時代裡的再返魅：蔡明亮的《洞》及 《你那邊幾點》裡的異化心理、欲望 與對資本主義時間的批判

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## 摘 要

本論文探討蔡明亮電影裡所呈現出的流動多元的時／空間是如何挑戰資本主義模式主導下的時空壓縮及全球均質化現象。藉由分析《洞》及《你那邊幾點》，論文指出蔡明亮經由重新想像過去與未來、「此」與「彼」的辯證關係，豐富化原本扁平及記憶架空的全球化「當下」，讓「當下」變得較適於居住。從迪瑟鐸對「日常性」的討論，我們得知所謂的「日常生活」並不是不證自明地提供透明無疑的經驗；事實上，「日常生活」裡充盈著許多鬼影幢幢的「他者」。這意味著日常生活的主體必須被視為處於一種活絡流動的狀態，這種主體是魅影盤旋、幽邃層疊的。在已去魅了的日常陳腐與資本主義同質時／空間的霸權下，蔡明亮藉由異質時間的嵌入，重新組構既有的空間，提供給我們批判性的想像及一種烏托邦的指涉。

關鍵詞：蔡明亮、全球化、時間、空間、《洞》、《你那邊幾點》

## Re-enchanting the Everyday Banal in the Age of Globalization: Alienation, Desire, and Critique of Capitalist Temporality in Tsai Ming-Liang's *The Hole* and *What Time Is It There?*

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Born in Kuching, a small town in Malaysia in 1957 and having come to Taiwan at the age of twenty to study drama at Chinese Culture University, Tsai Ming-Liang has ever since made Taipei the source of his inspiration. His diasporic background makes him particularly sensitive to the enormous speed of change in recent Taiwan society in terms of political climate, cultural ambience, and urban mentality. His films are filled with urban *flâneurs* who saunters the city and picks up residual traces left by the sweep of development along their way of exploring the city's dark corners, back alleys, decrepit theater, and so forth. His films, as many critics note, reflect on the velocity of transformation of Taiwan society in these recent years under the pressure of globalization. The gradual neutralization of the local or Taiwanese flavor is due to the more tightened integration of Taiwan into the global network. Images of nature, countryside, or community are still present in the films of Hou Hsiao-Hsien, one of the leading figures in the emergence of the Taiwanese New Wave Cinema in the 1980s; however, they are barely visible in Tsai's cinematic portrayal of Taipei city, which is intensively more postmodernized. The spatiality in which Tsai's *flâneurs* saunter is purely urban and highly commodified; if nature occasionally appears, it is represented in the most devastated, catastrophic form, symbolizing the havoc wreaked by rapid urbanization and development: such as the polluted Tanshui River, on which a cadaver floats in *The River* (1996); the barren, dusty park appearing in *Vive l'Amour* (1994); and the unstoppable deluge of rain in *The Hole* (1998). In Hou's early films, the diminution of traditional values brought about by Taiwan's economic takeoff during the whole process of modernization is lamentably and poetically portrayed. Village life, the countryside, childhood, youth..., these traditional sources of identity stand in his films as signs for what has been lost during the massive transformation of Taiwan society from the agricultural to the

highly urbanized metropolis. As a “second wave” New Cinema director who captured international attention in the mid-1990s, Tsai’s social material—mainly drawn from the disenchanting urban which has now become a society without community—is quite different from that of Hou Hsiao-Hsien. In this postmodern new era, “spatiality” has replaced the old obsession with “historicity.” The waning of historicity<sup>1</sup> has become a symptom of the postmodern; the failure of our lived possibility of being a historical agent has rendered any utopian speculation boring and antiquated. Space, not time, becomes the epistemological dominant of the postmodern. As Fredric Jameson points out, postmodernism’s “crisis in historicity” comes about because of a contemporary culture that has been “increasingly dominated by space and spatial logic.”<sup>2</sup>

Generally speaking, historicity is the biggest concern both for the pre-New Cinema era’s propaganda films and the New Cinema in the 80s. The era dominated by the KMT was eager to construct an imaginary China upon which the emigrant regime’s nostalgia for the lost land can be projected. By contrast, for the New Cinema filmmakers, the historical concern is switched away from the pan-Chinese imagination to Taiwanese history, memory or stories of *bildung*, nativist resistance and the pre-industrialized rural innocence. Although in the 80s there were also films dealing with urban problems (such as Edward Yang’s *Terrorizer* or Hou’s *Daughter of the Nile*), the mostly recognized signature of the New Taiwan Cinema is Hou’s style—namely, his poetic portrayal of the rural landscape and local customs. It is not until the 90s that the urban becomes the foremost theme of most films in Taiwan; Taipei is ubiquitous in the films of the 90s such as Xu Xiaoming’s *Dust of Angels* (1992), Chen Guofu’s *Treasure Island* (1993), Stan Lai’s *The Red Lotus Society* (1994), Yi Zhiyan’s *Lonely Hearts Club* (1995), Edward Yang’s *Mahjong* (1996), and others. Taipei in the 90s becomes a global city that is gradually emptied of its local traits, and this urban strand is notably taken up by Malaysian-born Tsai Ming-Liang.

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<sup>1</sup> Historicity here means the “how” time that still strives to find the remnants of histories in the ruins of History. This striving, or the painful struggle to find a resolution, now gets lost in the postmodern justification of the established form of existence. Therefore, the waning of historicity has much to do with the neutralization of impulses to change society dominated by capitalist values.

<sup>2</sup> Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, 25.

In Tsai's films, spatiality is his biggest obsession. His films are like an anthology of enclosed dwellings in which different types of enclosure—bathrooms, elevators, closets, hallways, apartments, cheap hotels, sauna bathhouses, theatres, etc. are meticulously filmed. Most of the time, the spatial enclosure is used to reflect the character's existential condition. Nevertheless, rather than offering everyday life and places as self-contained activities, Tsai always plays tricks on the seemingly self-present spaces by including some **virtual** elements to suggest that the existing space always contains other possibilities. When the grandeur of historicity or deep memory (as presented in Hou's earlier films) is irrevocably gone in the postmodern age, in which "thinking too much" becomes a term of derision and, instead, "having a good time" becomes the dominant mentality, what once was melancholy now seems foolish. Yet if evoking history becomes anachronistic or obsolete now when the end of history becomes an ontology,<sup>3</sup> what can we do to break through this ideology that claims itself as the ultimate stage of human history?

Tsai's films offer us some answers to the question of what happens when commodity reigns supreme and has already invaded every corner of Taiwanese society. When Taiwan is gradually becoming globalized, and the past and history as portrayed in Hou's early films are like a foreign country viewed through today's lenses, how to find an exit outside this urban landscape that is gradually being homogenized, an urban landscape which is in fact no different from any other global city full of Starbucks, McDonald's, mega department stores, and shopping centers? In the following sections, I plan to examine Tsai's two films *The Hole* (1998) and *What Time Is It There?* (2001) to see how his representation of urbanism destabilizes the dominance of the almost fairy-tale-like belief touted by the proponents of globalization. I aim to prove that in these films, although the individuals seem helplessly caught and imprisoned within the web of urban life, there is a strong subtext that hints of alternatives or redemption. In this globalized temporality that is already universalized and therefore "disenchanted," how does Tsai "re-enchant" the banal everyday and create a space for maneuvers and for utopian points of reference? These are questions that will be addressed when we analyze these two films by Tsai Ming-Liang.

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<sup>3</sup> In *The End of History and the Last Man*, Francis Fukuyama proposes that the liberal democracy operating a capitalist system is the end point of human history and mankind.

### **Kitsch, Aura, and Redemption in *The Hole***

As his fourth feature film following his Taipei Trilogy—*Rebels of the Neon God*, *Vive L'Amour*, and *The River*—*The Hole* was partially funded by France to be the Asian representative addressing the issue of the millennium. Unlike his previous films, in which shots are conducted in the bleak cityscapes in which characters roam around aimlessly, *The Hole* is primarily staged in the enclosed space of an apartment compound which a man and a woman refuse to evacuate even though the government has declared that residents must leave the area. It is seven days before the end of the millennium, and the city, sodden with the dystopia of rain, is besieged by a mysterious virus. Initially, victims infected with the virus will develop fever-like symptoms, and then they will adopt roach-like behavior, crawling into dark corners and holes, afraid of the light. In this disease-ridden city, policy is impotent and science ineffective. The State imposes quarantine regulations, demanding the residents to evacuate, yet providing no alternative housing. The water supply will be cut off; garbage pickups will be suspended. Naming the virus “Taiwan Virus” or “Taiwan Fever,” a virologist from a French medical institute offers no ways of solving the problem except speculating that the cockroach may be the source of this epidemic. Disinfectors appear with their masks and chemical hoses, setting off the fumigatory smoke and the sanitizing process. This is indeed a doomsday vision of a city approaching the second millennium.

In the crumbling apartment, a man and a woman ignore the government’s warning and remain in this quarantine zone, even though the essential services will be cut off in the near future. The man lives upstairs, and the woman lives directly below his flat. In order to fix a leak in the woman’s apartment, a plumber accidentally knocks a hole in the man’s floor and the woman’s ceiling. The hole that now connects the two apartments was left there without further repair; ironically, this new proximity brought about by the digging of the hole becomes a channel to develop an ambivalent relationship between the woman and the man, who used to be indifferent to each other—a typical alienated relationship among residents of box-like apartments in almost every global city.

As the leaking continues, the hole also takes on a life of its own. The plumber never comes, yet the man and the woman start getting interested in each other. Now he can see light below and hear the woman moving

around, while she can peer up into his apartment as well. Although the hole occasionally becomes an orifice for them to pester each other (her upstairs neighbor uses the hole as a receptacle to deposit his vomit or water, while the woman sprays the insecticide as revenge), it is also the vehicle of their growing intimacy and dependency. The woman begins to dream about the man, having an imaginary phone-sex conversation with him that expresses her longing and desire. The final scene comes when the woman catches a cold and succumbs to the deadly virus. She begins to develop the roach-like habit of crawling around in her flooded apartment, hiding in piles of Kleenex. The man listens through the hole, pounding the floor and crying. A miracle happens when the man extends his arm through the hole to offer his downstairs neighbor a glass of water. She is later lifted up by this helping hand through the hole into the dreamy space of the man's apartment, in which the pair now embraces each other in a waltz.

The film can be said to be a sci-fi depiction of a future world in which the human condition is anything but optimistic. It resonates with a Kafkaesque world in which human beings, facing different diabolical machines, are constantly running the risk of being annihilated, destroyed, or regressing back to an animal-like status. These existential questions and issues have now become so common in the era of late capitalism as to attain a generic universalism, plaguing people across the globe. This also explains the generic nature of this film, which is denuded of any distinct "local" color. It is not the local but rather the time period which is generalized. In other words, the film can be read as an allegory of the global triumph of capitalism, in which the "Second Coming" brings about catastrophe instead of salvation. Millennial capitalism, understood by Jean and John L. Comaroff, means "*both* capitalism at the millennium and capitalism in its messianic, salvific, even magical manifestations."<sup>4</sup> It is differentiated from the First Coming of Industrial Capitalism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries by its increasingly "spectral" nature. By this, Jean and John L. Comaroff mean that in the era of multinational (postmodern) capitalism, the immaterial idea of "market" or "consumption" has replaced the old and more concrete concepts such as "production" or "labor," which in the past used to determine definitions of value. As such, the increasing importance of consumption in shaping "selfhood, society,

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<sup>4</sup> In *Millennial Capitalism and the Culture of Neoliberalism*, 293.

identity, even epistemic reality”<sup>5</sup> brings about the demise of modernist categories such as social class, politics, memory and history. In the post-Fordist era, there is a growing contradiction between lived experience and structure. This is due to the changing mechanism of new markets and monetary instruments; with its gradual autonomy from “real production,” millennial capitalism accumulates wealth purely through exchange and abstract transactions. The “virtualism” inherent in the working of the global financial network enables ontological perplexities among people living in the contemporary moment. The disembodied tendency in the trend of globalization (dominated mostly by telecom corporatism, information technology, and hypermobile capital) has contributed to a sense of powerlessness among local actors, for whom the enigmatic nature of globalization makes any cognitive mapping unimaginable and impossible.

Taiwan, being part of the global economic network, also participates in this millennial trend, in which consumption becomes the privileged site for the fabrication of self and identity. As the economy thrives, authentic experiences—like the nature of the self, culture, and community—have been eclipsed. Once-concrete relationships between people have disintegrated, and the meaning of politics and personal belonging have evaporated in the sheer frenzy of consumption. The organic solidarity represented in Hou’s earlier films thins out; the boundary of the nation is blurred; people on this island, with their amazing consumption power, are always eager to be in the same time-zone as other fashionable global cities such as London, Paris, or New York.

Capital’s colonization of hitherto uncommodified areas is also made palpable in Tsai Ming-Liang’s films. For instance, in his 1994 *Vive L’Amour*, Lee Kang-Sheng (Tsai’s lead actor who appears in all of his films) plays a man selling urn-space in a columbarium. In a place like Taiwan, where urbanization is highly intensified, everybody is fighting for a space to live. There is no exception even for the dead, for whom finding a decent place to rest is also a problem. This spawns the curious phenomenon of investing money in the columbarium business and the selling of cremation containers; the degree of privilege you can enjoy in the world of the dead depends upon the placement, size and material of the container. Elements such as ritual, and people’s connection with their ancestors and their past

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<sup>5</sup> Ibid., 293.

used to be auratic; now, thanks to capitalism, these elements can be recycled into a salable package. Of course, money is the primary source of value to guarantee you a good life in the underworld. Apparently, the relentless logic of reification and commodification has also invaded and penetrated the world of the dead.

In *The Hole*, commodity's invasion of everyday life is also made manifest. Instant noodles and canned food are the main staples for both the man and the woman. News coverage of instant noodle recipes boast the immense freedom given to the consumer to pick and choose; the range of choices is wide and the possibilities of new experience seem infinite—whether you want the spicy Korean flavor, Taiwanese local flavor, herbs, ribs, pork, or Chinese style pickles. Whether this “freedom,” translated as the plenitude of consumer choice, is true is indeed debatable. Besides, the idea of foods and the process of preparing them, once a communal activity, have now undergone a fateful change in the course of their mass-produced processing, which valorizes convenience and the cult of instantaneousness. Food as merchandized commodity is devoid of “aura,” if aura means the organic sense of collective memory. In Tsai's film, however, there is one scene in which an old man (played by Miao Tien), or more like a ghost, appears in a grocery store inquiring about an old brand of chili bean sauce which has been discontinued long time ago. Lagging behind current fashion and the consumer's boundless appetite for change, this old brand is doomed to be obsolescent and is no longer desirable. The young clerk asks if the same thing in a different brand will do, but the old man turns away in silence. For him, this old brand of bean sauce is auratic, saturated with either nostalgic sentiment or the memory of the happy days of the past. Watching his figure disappearing from the scene, we cannot help but lament that all that was once treasurable cannot defeat the rapid aging in this consumer society, which worships change and constantly renewed stimuli.

The customer's resourcefulness and his/ her freedom to choose, for the proponents of millennial capitalism, are the vehicles of emancipation and a warrant of happiness. Technological advances are also eulogized by dedicated neo-liberalists as fulfilling the gospel of salvation. However, technology also has a dehumanizing effect, changing the old form of human contact—face-to-face—into the sheer interface of the monitor. In *The Hole*, the insipid dialogues of TV-talk have supplanted authentic experience.

Living in this postmodern space, corporeal contact becomes obsolete. The man and the woman barely exchange words; the unstoppable TV dialogues suggest that the contemporary world is the scene of communication without community, saturated with “hypervisible” information. We suffer today from data-sickness, from the becoming-disease of information. Epidemics of signification propagated by the media are described by Jean Baudrillard in “The Ecstasy of Communication” as noxious to human agency. He writes that such hypervisible order is governed by a principle of simulation rather than reality: “the more-visible-than-visible; it is the obscenity of that which no longer contains a secret and is entirely soluble in information and communication.”<sup>6</sup> Clearly, this facile transparency, “the too visible” produced by the surfeit of information, both limits and exceeds our capacity of understanding.

Using a viral metaphor to describe today’s ailments, Baudrillard argues that our world has been invaded by an invisible evil: “AIDS, terrorism, crack cocaine, or computer viruses...contain within them the whole logic of our system.”<sup>7</sup> This viral invasion, another figuration of the postmodern phenomenon of hypervisibility, engages in an all-encompassing act of universal contamination, leveling depth and perspective. Remarking on this postmodern process of confusion and contagion and its impact upon the aesthetic, he argues that today’s “transaesthetic” world is controlled by simulacra: “art has been dissolved with a general aestheticization of everyday life, giving way to a pure circulation of images, a transaesthetics of banality, or market art, designed to sell, to ‘perform’.”<sup>8</sup> Besides, this trend of global flattening also effaces Otherness, which once played an essential role in the formation of subjectivity (or intersubjectivity), as detailed in Lacan’s mirror stage. As Baudrillard writes: “Childhood, lunacy, death, primitive societies—all have been categorized, integrated and absorbed as parts of a universal harmony.”<sup>9</sup>

There seems to be an invisible hand manipulating this global plot of ineluctable flattening and structural abstraction. Jameson calls this the failure of cognitive mapping, which means that individuals living in the

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<sup>6</sup> Baudrillard, “The Ecstasy of Communication,” 22.

<sup>7</sup> Baudrillard, *The Transparency of Evil*, 67.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 127.

current moment are unable to grasp the totality of global processes.<sup>10</sup> Under such circumstances, individuals are unsure of the ground on which they stand, or which direction they are going. The ennui of the everyday, as portrayed in Tsai's films, is symptomatic of the postmodern era, in which the subject is proclaimed dead and the agent of history no more. However, this tragic view, as envisioned in Baudrillard's paranoid discourse of the epidemic of "trans-parency," is a defeatist vision that bypasses the question of the resisting subject. Such is the implication of the critique which many Marxists have leveled at poststructuralists, for whom the problem of resistance is bypassed as a result of their hesitation to define the subject. Jameson has no such inhibition, however. For him, the idea of totality cannot afford to be dispensed with or deconstructed. This explains why the concept of utopia is one of the persistent key ideas in Jameson's thought.<sup>11</sup> In fact, there are two sides of the idea of totality: the totalitarian and the utopian. However, for the poststructuralists, the totalizing concept and the totalitarian project are usually undifferentiatedly lumped together, "without realizing that they were reproducing or reinventing the hoariest American ideological slogans of the Cold War: totalizing thought is totalitarian thought; a direct line runs from Hegel's Absolute Spirit to Stalin's Gulag."<sup>12</sup>

The stigmatization of the concept of totality precludes the possibility of the resisting subject, and thereby no properly collective politics is possible. Categories such as Utopia, hope, or ethics—elements integral to the condition of being human—are never discussed in poststructuralist discourse, because such ideas are too "totalizing." However, Jameson's appeal, writes Perry Anderson, lies in his attempt "to conjure into being what might be thought impossible—a lucid enchantment of the world."<sup>13</sup> Utopian longings, for Jameson, are still possible to be rekindled in a thoroughly reified society, and "in the least predictable of guises." This "subterranean persistence of the will to change"<sup>14</sup> and the refusal of total despondency can also be detected in Tsai Ming-Liang's *The Hole*, in which the unexpected eruptions of the musical sequences offer moments of wonder and pleasure. These

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<sup>10</sup> See "Cognitive Mapping" in *The Jameson Reader*, 277-87.

<sup>11</sup> His defense of the idea of utopia can also be seen in his latest book, *Archaeologies of the Future* (2005).

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 283-4.

<sup>13</sup> Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 76.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 77.

musical sequences become a balm for the misery engendered by capitalist society, in which everything is measured by the capacity to transact and consume. The film's song-and-dance sequences are reenactments of Grace Chang's Hollywood-style musicals of the 1950s. These 1950s Asian pops sung by Chang were immensely popular in Hong Kong, Taiwan and across Southeast Asia—including with Tsai himself, who grew up listening to these Hong Kong Hollywood-style musicals issuing from the loud radios all over the neighborhood streets.

Tinged with intensive nostalgic sentiment, these saccharine songs have now become old-fashioned, and are like sentimental relics from the better world of our grandfathers. In the film, the sweet kitsch and visual excess stand in startling contrast with the drab everydayness of reality. They create a fantasy world through which the woman can find an escape, even if illusory, from the banal and stifling reality—which is constituted by the constant rain, peeling wallpaper, mold, garbage, and sogginess. The heroine wears colorful glam costumes, lip-syncs her singing scenes, and dances with a robust crew of male dancers and sexy chorus girls. Her performance style is campy, exaggerated, sexual and seductive—in songs like “Calypso,” “I Want Your Love,” and “Vixen.” She cavorts with the singers and dancers in the stairwells and elevators, spaces that used to be dull and confined but are now glittering with colorful light and glitzy beauty.

Kitsch, as a form of commodity, can be said to be a false aesthetic consciousness. However, if we adopt a more dialectical approach to this commodity form, instead of 1) totally embracing it, as demonstrated in the capitalist scenario of commodity fetishism; or 2) defiantly refusing the subject's agency in the tightly knit web of global commodity, an alternative line of thinking may be imaginable. As Matei Calinescu points out, kitsch is a recent phenomenon tied to the rise of modernity and the technology of mechanical reproduction. To say that kitsch is essentially “modern” means that, as a term and a concept, it does not exist before the late eighteenth century or the early nineteenth century. For the modernist elites, its pompous beauty suggests corruption of taste, “pseudoart,” and always implies the idea of “aesthetic inadequacy.” However, if we examine this modern rise of kitsch from a more dialectical viewpoint, we can argue that the appearance of kitsch betrays the essence of modernity; it can also explain why a society increasingly dependent upon globalized hyperspace and

commodity exchange is also a society awash in nostalgia. There must be something missing in the benign and deceptive appearance of globalized modernity that claims to be the end of history. As Calinescu makes clear: “the desire to escape from adverse or simply dull reality is perhaps the main reason for the wide appeal of kitsch.”<sup>15</sup>

Kitsch clearly thrives on some emotional needs that cannot be fulfilled even though the society of spectacle keeps hypnotizing consumers that we’ve all arrived in the promised land of paradise. Instead of dismissing it as illusory or spurious, we should read kitsch as a response to the mechanism of capitalism, as disclosing the necessary failures that inscribe the particular postmodern project back into its context. Kitsch contains some “residual” zones of the older, the utopian, that still haunt the increasingly millennial homogeneity of the late capitalist world. If nostalgia can be defined as a libidinal investment of multiple utopian impulses, such residual traces defy total rationalization or reductionism. They result from the “tension” or possible “noncommensurability” caused by the translation of use value (or intimate life-worlds) into exchange value (or a mechanical, homogeneous history of globalization). If capitalistic mechanization is constituted by reducing the heterogeneity of real labor to abstract labor, this translation cannot be total. As Dipesh Chakrabarty writes:

If real labor...belongs to a world of heterogeneity whose various temporalities...cannot be enclosed in the sign *History*, then it can find a place in a historical narrative of capitalist transition (or commodity production) only as a Derridean trace of something that cannot be enclosed, an element that constantly challenges from within capital’s and commodity’s—and, by implication, History’s—claims to unity and universality.<sup>16</sup>

There are still some layers of temporality, Chakrabarty claims, that are situated at the heart of the idea of commodity, which, as Marx explains, “will always carry as parts of its internal structure certain universal

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<sup>15</sup> Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 237.

<sup>16</sup> Chakrabarty, “The Time of History and the Times of God,” 55.

emancipatory narratives.”<sup>17</sup> In *The Hole*, Tsai’s dialectical engagement with the kitsch/commodity form and its residual memory is best demonstrated in his use of the musical sequences. Obviously representations of commodity or consumer fetishism, they nevertheless counter the passivity of the characters with a subterranean utopian activism. The residual memory lying dormant in the kitsch conjures a sense of future possibilities out of nothingness simply by blowing open the seemingly homogenous commodity form from which to tease out the hidden layers of temporality—variously named as desire, hope, nostalgia, haunting memory, or utopian longings. Tsai still retains a respect for the hopes and dreams hidden in a tarnished object-world. And hope is a form of memory that desires. Therefore, under certain circumstances, kitsch may be “auratic”; it really depends on how it is used. In the film’s final scenes, the woman attains some sort of redemption when, struck down by the epidemic, she is offered a glass of water and a hand to lift her up to the man’s apartment.<sup>18</sup> Following this, they slowly dance to Chang’s sweet romantic melody in the man’s apartment, with plenty of sunlight streaming in.

At the core of the modern malaise is the problem of existence, which is gradually devoid of spirituality, mysterious otherness, or layers of alternative temporalities due to the mechanism of abstraction implicit in the ideology of global capitalism. In *The Hole*, the enigmatic assault of the millennial disease is highly allegorical; as I have argued, it is indexical to the “plagues of the ‘new world order.’”<sup>19</sup> The protagonists’ powerlessness facing the deteriorated living condition bespeaks the ontological helplessness of a postmodern existential status in front of the global triumph of capitalism at the millennium, which is endowed by Tsai with a bleak, apocalyptic imagery. However, in a time that is “out of joint,” Tsai never renounces the possibility of emancipation, but rather by trying to allow us to get glimpses of those “auratic” moments, if only in a fragmentary, transient state.<sup>20</sup> Therefore, *The Hole* can be read in this way—as the grimmer “reality” disclosed behind

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<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 54.

<sup>18</sup> The hand descending from the sky, in the medieval Christian context, also has a religious connotation of redemption.

<sup>19</sup> Derrida, *Specters of Marx*, 81.

<sup>20</sup> In Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*, Hamlet declares: “The time is out of joint.” In *Specters of Marx*, Derrida’s proposal of a “hauntology” as a counter discourse against the “ontology” of global capitalism starts with his meditation on Shakespeare’s *Hamlet*.

the glamour and deceptive appearance of millennial capitalism; yet, utopian longings can never be extinguished in the face of impossible realities. This apocalyptic film still allows glimpses of hope and the possibility of human connection, as the wonderful and fantastic musical sequences attest.

### **Dialectic of “here” and “there” in *What Time Is It There?***

Like *The Hole*, in which the seeds of temporality nestled in the nostalgic songs are spelled out as a vehicle for overcoming fragmentation, temporality in *What Time Is It There?* (2001) is also an essential element to de-reify the standardized time or the eternal present defined by the Western modernization paradigm on a global scale. The film’s central thesis is encapsulated in its title, that is to say, that “time” is not universal or homogenous, but is different, contingent, suggesting an intersubjective relationship between the self and the other, here and there, separation and reconnection. Questions of discrepant temporalities and differently paced lifeworlds are contemplated in the film, suggesting that the seemingly flat and disenchanted world still contains some unrationalizable residues or forces. This time the characters step out of the soggy apartment and again wander in the city; some of them even travel to the remote Paris, which seems to have some sort of unnamable tie to another city on the other side of the globe—Taipei. The dysfunctional family that we first met in *Rebels of a Neon God* and then in *The River* reappears here. In *The River*, the attempts to connect between a son and a father culminate in a nightmare-like encounter in a local gay bathhouse. *What Time* is like a sequel to *The River*. In *What Time*, the son seems to establish a certain connection with his father (though the father is now dead). His equally problematic relationship with his mother, as the film progresses, is suggestive of amelioration or reconciliation. In this film, “time” becomes the biggest obsession and is seen as creating heterogeneity in this seemingly complete standardization of the lifeworld. The dialectic of the global present and the haunting pasts, of “here” and “there,” of the Time of history and the times of ghosts become the recurring leitmotif of this film.

The film starts with a long shot in which an old man (played by Miao Tien), his face sagging with sadness, walks into a dining room prepared to have a meal. Calling his son’s name with a vain attempt to ask him to

come to lunch, the old man slumps into a chair. Lighting up a cigarette, he lapses into a mood of brooding despondency, a doleful plume of white smoke curling up to the ceiling. The following scene is the son (Hsiao Kang), sitting in a car holding his father's funerary urn on the way to a private columbarium, invoking his father's name to make sure the spirit is following him through the tunnel. After the death of the father, the household is never the same. Hsiao Kang becomes afraid of darkness, while his distraught mother is looking for signs of her husband's reincarnation. She prays for her husband's return, reserves a seat for him at dinner table and fills up his rice bowl with his favorite roast duck. Thinking the ghost might be afraid of light, she cuts off power and uses blankets and paper to cover up the windows, hoping he will reappear in the dark. Her obsession with the dead turns the whole house upside down. Chiding her son for killing a cockroach which she fears to be her husband reincarnated, the mother goes to an absurd extreme in her version of mourning. Though she is hysterical and easy to caricature, her superstition nonetheless evokes in the audience a pang of compassion for her grief. In one scene, she presses her tearful face up against the glass of the aquarium, talking to a grotesque fish which seems to possess some kind of empathetic soul: "Is that you?" It's hard not to feel the enormity of her sadness, even though her process of mourning is not entirely free of a comic dimension.

As for the son, Hsiao Kang, he never reaches out to console his grieving mother; instead, he chooses to dwell in his silent world of mourning. Mother and son, their incommunicability always manages to skirt the edges of their loneliness. As a street vendor, Hsiao Kang sells watches on the famous skywalk in front of Taipei Railway Station (and the disappearance of this pedestrian skywalk will become a major theme in Tsai's later short feature, *The Skywalk is Gone*). One day a young woman (played by Chen Shiang-Chyi) comes to him wanting to buy a watch. She is on her way to Paris and needs a watch with dual time zones. Setting eyes on the watch Hsiao Kang's wearing, she insists on buying it. He declines, saying that his watch will bring her bad luck since he's in mourning. Ultimately she convinces him (saying she's after all a Christian and won't be affected by it) and, with the watch, goes off on her trip. After her departure, Hsiao Kang becomes obsessed with Paris time, beginning to reset every watch and clock around him backward seven hours to match Paris time. Wandering in the

city, he is obsessed with changing every clock he can find—from the clocks in stores, to the ones in the theatre and inside the railway station, and finally culminating in a giant public clock on the side of a high-rise commercial building. Why is he so obsessed with Paris time? Is it a way of establishing a tenuous connection with the woman, with whom he seems to fall in love? Or, can this fetish for Paris time be an enabling form of imaginary “retreat” from the unbearable Taipei time (at this point the imaginary retreat happens to be Paris), which is becoming homogeneous, empty, and hostile to imagination and memory?

Besides, it must be noted that Paris time and the time of the ghost are coincidentally conflated. When the living-room clock has mysteriously been switched (the film never clarifies whether it was done by Hsiao Kang or it was really the spirit of his father changing the clock to accord with “his time” in the after life), the change of time is interpreted by the superstitious mother as the ghostly manifestation of the father’s visit. She says to her son: “Look at the clock. It’s strange. It must be him coming back.... It must be your father. He wants me to cook for him. I wonder if he wants more duck.” From that moment on, the mother demands a reorganization of daily routine in order to live by her dead husband’s time. The time (or times) of the past or of the spirit thus begins to infiltrate the present, suggesting the differentiation of “times” out of the unified Time. Temporality in such a dialectical form ushers in heterogeneity, disrupting the formal and quantitative space under capitalism, which is dictated by the standardization and quantifiability of time. The characters in the film are preoccupied with other temporalities. The global drive for simultaneity now confronts the challenge of a variety of cultural “times.” Wandering in the city, in which space seems to be dictated by a globalized monolithic Time, the *flâneurs*, with a mind pining for other many-layered temporalities, now turn the space into a folded, dialogic, and haunted one, saturated with longings, memories, and the flow of time.

In fact, the standardization of time, now considered a fact, its constructed nature unquestioned, is a recent phenomenon related to the re-structuring of time in capitalist modernity. In 1903 Georg Simmel linked the precision “brought about through the general diffusion of pocket watches” to the need of precision demanded by money economy. Capitalist modernity should be viewed as a temporal demand for “punctuality,

calculability, and exactness” in order to organize various activities and relationships into a depersonalized time schedule which facilitates the functioning of an economy based on monetary exchange.

The rise of standard time annihilates the uniqueness of the local and integrates multiple times into an inexorable and irreversible linearity. If the enforcement of the modern international standard-time zone system can be said to be the first round of David Harvey’s so-called “time-space compression,” the second great round of time-space homogenization is undoubtedly manifested in globalization. Globalization makes us experience a temporal connectedness and a shrinking of geophysical space. Living both now and then at once, the global village is governed by what Paul Virilio calls “the law of proximity,” which owes everything to the speed of light and the “real-time” perspective of telecommunications. The tyranny of real-time instantaneousness is disembodied, because such an idea implies forgetting the classical notion of interval and opting exclusively for a real instant which destructively eliminates the distance between the object and the subject.

This kind of disembodied rhetoric is becoming increasingly familiar today in our fast globalizing world in which policy making is controlled exclusively by members of the globally influential and globetrotting elite who are rich enough to manage their mobility. As Saskia Sassen tells us, these global “elites” also have a profound influence upon the morphology of the urban space we live in. Under the sway of economic globalization, the city becomes a transnational space in which the major economic actors who are entitled to use the city are international businesspeople.<sup>21</sup> It is also important to point out the inner “contradictions” inherent in the rhetoric of globalization, for it is only the globally connected elite who can leave out of account the place in which they live and work, while the disparities “lived” by the local actors are visible and hard to do away with. Henri Lefebvre’s idea of capitalist space as contradictory space is eloquent here.<sup>22</sup> And we

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<sup>21</sup> Sassen, *Globalization and Its Discontents*, XXXIII.

<sup>22</sup> In *The Production of Space*, Lefebvre argues that the space dominated by the commodity logic is not only an abstract space, but also a contradictory space. The space is “abstract” in the sense that it embraces the “hypertrophied analytic intellect; the state and bureaucratic *raison d’état*; ‘pure’ knowledge; and the discourse of power” (308). It is a contradictory space because this (mis)representation of space controlled by the one-sided account and logic masks the contradictions inherent in it.

can find that Tsai Ming-Liang, in most of his oeuvre, is desperate to dig out these inner contradictions. As discussed earlier, in *What Time*, Hsiao Kang's obsession with Paris time (which is also uncannily collapsed into the figure of the ghost and its temporality) can be understood as a reaction against the bleaching abstraction of globalization, which levels out heterogeneity. As a discontentment with the dominant discourse, Hsiao Kang's series of deviant activities can be understood as a persistent attempt to search for the remainders of history beyond or within a society dominated by commodity culture.

Throughout the film, clocks constitute a prominent presence which keeps reminding us how horrible it is that our life has been organized around the clock and, by extension, its metaphysical implication of standardization, mechanization and reification. Not only the urban landscape is dominated by a profusion of clocks, the film's soundscape is surfeited with clock-linked noises: the noisy tick of the digital clocks in the mechanical room underneath the Taipei Train Station, the hysterical beeping of alarm clocks in the clock store, and the mechanical clack of various watches in a retailer's shop. In Tsai's film, his character's bizarre behavior confounds all attempts to explain it. Hsiao Kang's compulsion to reset every clock and watch he can reach to Paris time drives him to go out and about the whole Taipei city. He sneaks into a theater and removes a public clock from the wall to meddle with its time. Later he prowls around a clock repair room which seems to be a mechanical nerve-center of the Taipei Railway Station. His combined acts of eccentric stealing, manipulating, and meddling culminate in his determined attempt to use a long pole to switch a giant clock's hands on the exterior of a tall commercial building in the West-Gate District.

As for the young woman wandering in Paris, she is also haunted by something unexplainable. Mysterious footsteps upstairs keep bothering her when she lies on her bed in a hostel, eyes wide open. Tormented by some unnamable sorrow, she is like a ghost wandering around Paris being jolted and hectored by impudent French people. In one scene she stands forlornly by a tomb, gazing at the human figure carved upon the slab of the tombstone. The camera then shifts to another shot with she and an old French man sitting on a bench. Looking at Shiang-Chyi rummaging desperately through her backpack, the old man asks: "Are you looking for something? What are you looking for?" "A telephone number," she answers. She is

later offered his phone number, along with a name “Jean-Pierre,” a seemingly absurd gesture which, however, speaks volumes. In fact, this rather seedy-looking man turns out to be the Jean-Pierre Léaud who appears throughout Truffaut’s Antoine series. The Paris scene is juxtaposed with the Taipei scene in which Hsiao Kang is shown fascinatedly watching Truffaut’s Parisian films, especially his *400 Blows*. His playing of Truffaut’s film is simply another way of establishing a connection with Paris time. Uncannily, the little Antoine appearing on the black-and-white TV screen of *The 400 Blows* is now a sleazy old man. The place where Shiang-Chyi bumps into Léaud, the cemetery, is also suggestive—a cemetery is the other space replete with alternative rhythms and temporalities; it explains the “spectral” nature of such an encounter.

The past gnaws into the present. *What Time* defies the tyranny of the globalized eternal presence by ushering in the experience of “not-me” within me. This “not-me” implies the paranormal, the unexplainable, or the utopian longing, hence involving different orders of temporality or experience which cannot be enclosed by the sign “commodity” or “capital” itself. In Michel de Certeau’s *The Practice of Everyday Life*, the seeming transparency of the idea of the everyday is questioned when de Certeau foregrounds the contested zone in which conformity is evaded and the haunting of different “others” palpable (as manifested by his demonstration of the everyday practices of walking, speaking, or even cooking). This sustained concern with the “private,” everyday, or hidden side of the Cartesian subject informs much contemporary post-Saussurianian criticism. The primacy, instead of being given to consciousness and pragmatic experience, is switched to the repressed, the unconscious drives, and others who “dwell” in me. As *What Time* demonstrates, the seemingly homogeneous and unproblematic space actually contains other non-present spaces; the otherwise vigilantly defined boundaries of sacred/profane, visible/invisible, modern/antique are constantly transgressed.

Derrida once said that hegemony both installs repression and guarantees a “revenant” (coming back).<sup>23</sup> The capitalist, hegemonic model of the cogito is like the Cartesian self-enclosure of the cogito who conceives of itself as universal center and exists independently of the objects around it. This sovereign subject lives in a self-contained, transparent, disenchanted

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<sup>23</sup> In *Specters of Marx*, he writes: “Haunting belongs to the structure of every hegemony” (37).

world and jubilantly follows a universal temporality that dispels ghosts and valorizes separation and the erasure of (m)other.<sup>24</sup> However, *What Time* allows us to discern the certainty of the symbolic as dupery. As we have seen, the film reminds us that other forms of worlding (in the sense of Chakrabarty's supernatural forces, de Certeau's "virtual" within the everydayness, or Derrida's "revenant") are possible. "Here" cannot be separated from its relation to "there," since as Paul Klee reminds us: "To define the present in isolation is to kill it."<sup>25</sup> *What Time* helps us to see how the self must acknowledge its intersubjective relation with the other in order to surmount the abstraction and alienation of our modern condition.

The film reaches the climax in which the collapse of the three "time zones" (Taipei, Paris, ghost) is shot by cross-cutting. And this synchronicity of three temporalities is worked through sex and sexuality: Hsiao Kang has sex with a prostitute in a car; Shiang-Chyi has a lesbian encounter with a woman in Paris; the mother masturbates with the dead father's pillow. In an era of fragmentation and disequilibrium, corporeal contact through sexual intercourse seems to be the only way to conquer disconnection, to establish intimacy, and to soothe the trauma of (post) modernity. Although this kind of "intimacy" is transient and momentary, it bespeaks an agony of the characters in their desire to reach for something beyond the alienation and abstraction of the modern world. In fact, the theme of (homo)sexuality is palpably present in Tsai's oeuvre—Shiao Kang's nascent homoeroticism in *Vive L'Amour*, the devastating sex scene of a father and a son in *The River*, the Japanese man's homosexual adventure in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, and the recent controversy surrounding his latest film *The Wayward Cloud* in which a porn star's body becomes a major prop—to name just a few. Sometimes sex can bring salvation, sometimes not. Sometimes the issue of homosexuality is treated as the question of otherness, together with other "delinquent" topics and peripheral characters explored by Tsai. However, female or lesbian sexuality seems underdeveloped in Tsai's works. In *The Wayward Cloud*, while the film itself can be read as an anti-porn, female

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<sup>24</sup> The erasure of (m)other is what Julia Kristeva's idea of the cause of the abject or the uncanny. The (m)other was once familiar to the Self, who needs to alienate itself from its former attachment to the (m)other in order to constitute itself as an autonomous subject. Our modern condition as alienation and the sense of being in the world which is "unhomely" can be said to be linked to the separation from the (m)other.

<sup>25</sup> Cited in Virilio's *Open Sky*, 10.

sexuality and its agency are denied when the whole film is centered upon viewing the female body as sexualized spectacle. In *What Time*, Tsai seems to be skittish about portraying lesbian sex (Shiang-Chyi merely exchanges a timid kiss with a woman from Hong Kong in a Parisian hotel), while the sex between Shiao Kang and a prostitute is unrestrained and steamy. Nevertheless, this collapse of the three time zones indicates that we live a now and then all at once, that we experience a temporal connectedness with other realms, though the “now” time seems to be purged of alien temporalities according to the grand narrative of capitalism.

The film concludes with an enigmatic shot: we watch Shiang-Chyi sit on a chair and later fall asleep by a lake in a park. A swarm of mischievous kids steals her suitcase and later dumps it in the lake. The camera then leaves the sleeping Shiang-Chyi and follows the suitcase. Suddenly, we watch as Hsiao Kang’s father hook the floating suitcase with his umbrella and bring it ashore; this is a gesture that is fraught with meaning. He leaves the suitcase there and walks away toward a giant ferris wheel which begins to rotate. There the film ends. Is this elderly man Hsiao Kang’s departed father, whose spirit has relocated to Paris? Or is he just a stranger who looks uncannily like Hsiao Kang’s father? Tsai never gives us the answer. Suffice it to say that, by evoking ghosts and other times, Tsai attempts to highlight the dwelling of the “other” in “me,” the coexistence of heterogeneous temporalities in the seemingly homogenous and empty Time. Therefore, the obsessive-repetitive, necessary, and impossible search for alternative temporalities needs to be understood against the backdrop of aggressive acceleration and homogenization, which make the world more and more uniform, less and less exotic.

### **Amnesia and Recollection in a Global Age**

Taiwan New Cinema, from its emergence, which was made possible by the efforts of Avant-garde filmmakers such as Hou Hsiao-Hsien, to its current millennial contours, which were shaped by second generation filmmakers like Tsai Ming-Liang, has undergone changes which also bear witness to Taiwan’s economic, political and cultural transformation. The differences between the worlds conjured up in Hou’s early films such as *Boys from Fengkuei* (1983) and those depicted in Tsai’s millennial urban films are

indicative of the existential contrasts of two epochs and mindsets. The nostalgic style in Tsai's films is therefore different from that in Hou's films. While Hou's nostalgia is more rooted in the local place and tradition, in Tsai's films, nostalgia has more to do with our postmodern condition and is more a reaction against the choking pressure effectuated by globalization's implementation of a universal temporality which erases alternative imaginings and differently paced temporalities. Therefore, in *The Hole* and *What Time*, the preoccupation with an alternative realm of temporality can best be understood when regarded as intense reactions against globalization and the tightening grip of time-space compression. We can find in the colorful and nostalgic musical sequences in *The Hole* traces of collective fantasies that defy conscious expression. The haunting, recollecting mood in *What Time* also has a profound relation to some unsatisfied yearnings under globalization's homogenized temporality. Although Tsai's nostalgia is inevitably tinged with the ennui of the everyday and is incomparable with the historical intensity and emotional grandeur depicted in Hou's films, insofar as recollecting a different temporal horizon prevents us from eternalizing the status quo, it still connotes emancipatory potential. Endowed with critical force and utopian imagination, nostalgia can be seen as a protest against "the attack of the present on the rest of time,"<sup>26</sup> in Andreas Huyssen's phrase; it is also a precondition for an alternative future different from the blueprint drawn by the free-trade advocates, who announce the irreversibility of market liberation and the triumph of capitalism in the conditions of contemporaneity.

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<sup>26</sup> See his "Present Pasts: Media, Politics, Amnesia," 33.

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