

# A director treading water

## What Time is it There? Directed by Tsai Ming-liang Screened at the Edinburgh Film Festival

By Steve James  
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A feature of some independent cinema in the late 20th and early 21st century is its examination of the alienation of marginalised ordinary people, scratching a living in the giant cities of the planet.

A number of studies have emerged that focus on the intimate details of the day to day life of street traders, petty criminals, estate agents, waitresses, security guards, while they are subsumed in urban isolation. Gary Oldman's *Nil by Mouth* and Michael Winterbottom's *Wonderland*, both set in London, sprung to my mind after watching *What Time is it There?*—a new film by Taiwanese director Tsai Ming-liang set in Taipei and Paris.

Very differing works, all three nevertheless consider the lives of somewhat helpless people, adrift, maintaining tense, uncommunicative, sometimes violent and easily disrupted relations with a very small number of people. All three contrast the immediate fraught or comic misunderstandings of stressed and dysfunctional families with the terrifying indifference of the surrounding cities. Much as 1980s American directors felt compelled with greater or lesser intelligence to deal with the Vietnam war, or German directors of the 70s had to deal with the legacy of fascism, so many of the more thinking directors today, for all their very differing histories, have had to confront the calamity of ordinary urban life—a state conditioned by the contemporary absence of broad intellectual insight into the workings of society, still less of any political movements in the working class seeking to alter them.

Tsai Ming-liang has built his film career on investigating this urban condition. From the 1993 *Rebels of the Neon God*, through *Vive l'Amour*, *The*

*River*, *The Hole* and now *What Time is it There?* his characters, usually played by the same actors, are misfits. They are not great rebels, they live ordinary—that is rather disturbed—lives.

His latest film is an interesting work, characterised by an aesthetically considered, often comic treatment of urban loneliness, alienation, and the myths and fantasies spun by people to put up with the unbearable. Compared to his previous work, however, (see reviews of *Vive l'Amour*, *the Hole*, and an interview with David Walsh) it seems, as if there has been a certain petrification of his humane insight into the restricted lives of isolated people in contemporary Taipei.

*What Time is it There?* feels like the work of a director whose artistic skills are, on their own, not able to take him forward. The opening shots are in a dingy, awkwardly shaped Taipei flat. The furnishings are bare and look as if they should be in a rural cottage. We view an old man smoking a cigarette before an unappetising meal. Everything is slow. He is old and there is a natural rhythm to his few actions. He dies, his wife and son are mourning at his funeral. The priests are cynics. The son, Hsiao Kang, sells watches on the street for a living, speaking only in monosyllables to his customers. A girl, Shiang-Chyi wants a watch, but the only one she is interested in is his own. He won't sell it. She insists, and eventually they agree. She is leaving for Paris in the morning.

Hsiao Kang's grieving mother believes the father's spirit has to be appeased. She lights incense, leaves a cup of water for his spirit to drink, cooks a meal for him. She doesn't like her son, they do not communicate at all. He wakes up one night and phones an enquiry line to discover the time in Paris, thinking of

Shiang-Chyi. It is seven hours behind Taipei. He sets all his watches to Paris time. This isn't enough. Every clock he sees has to be changed, including all the public clocks in Taipei that he can reach. He changes his mother's clock. She interprets this as a sign that her dead husband's spirit has returned. She takes to living on Paris time—the father's spirit will only come to visit her at night, when there is no light. She cuts the electricity, blocks the cracks where light can get in. She is deranged. Hsiao Kang gives up and walks out.

Meanwhile, Shiang-Chyi, painfully lonely in Paris, trudges around the Metro. We suppose she sees the tourist attractions, but we only see the Metro, the lifts, the restaurant and her sore feet. She lives in a cheap hotel and thinks of the watch trader. She meets a Hong Kong girl. Shiang-Chyi makes a pass at her, which is rebuffed. She struggles out of the hotel in the early morning, walks to a park where exhausted and miserable, she cries before falling asleep. The camera, apparently referring to an earlier Tsai Ming-liang film, tracks her tears and a trail of snot down her face. Some children find her suitcase and throw it in a pond.

Most peculiarly, and in an apparent contrast to the rationalist spirit that infuses much of the film, the dead father makes an appearance in the final scene, benignly fishing the suitcase out of the pond before smoking a cigarette and walking towards a fairground Big Wheel.

In the production notes, Tsai Ming-liang states that he worked on the script for three years, and only the first and the last scene did not change. There is nothing unconsidered, so what is this appearance meant to signify? Is he saying that the Hsiao Kang's time altering, his mother's religion, and Shiang-Chyi's pining all are failed efforts to create an imaginary world... a grander imagination is needed? Or does it reflect a search of Tsai Ming-liang himself, either for mysticism or a more overt political quest for a social father figure that will care for the lonely figures that inhabit his films?

A lot of commentary on Tsai Ming-liang focuses on his view of Taiwan, and his native Malaysia, as societies which have changed too quickly, which were ripped out of rural dozing too violently. This is embodied in his vision of Taipei, which is an empty, roaring and grey place, populated by the friendless and dislocated. His vision of Paris is the same, excepting that the buildings and graveyards are older. People

have been propelled into giant cities and left to flounder alone, with no understanding of the society they inhabit. There is a sense of a rural attitude and pace of life uncomfortably transposed to alien urban lands where everything and everybody—priests, fathers, mothers, lovers, sons, family pets, and a few possessions—are losing the historically accumulated values that were once invested in them.

This reflects the ferocious and uncontrolled pace of capitalist development in countries that are still described as the “Tiger” economies. Prior to the 1997 slump, both the Malaysian and Taiwanese economies exploded onto the world markets, briefly sustaining dramatic rates of growth. The psychic consequences for much of the up until recently rural population are hinted at in Tsai Ming-liang's films. There is a sense of a society at sea. Watching *What Time is it There?* one also feels that Tsai Ming-liang considers that these developments, which objectively have created powerful new sections of the world working class, have no progressive characteristics.

His views to some extent embody a broader crisis in contemporary filmmaking. Tsai Ming-liang is a concerned and humane director, possessed of a subtle capacity for observation, saturated in the traditions of the best of recent filmmaking. Yet this tradition is one in which there is no conception of social improvement at all. Filmmakers and their art do not stand aloof from the political crisis in society. The general lack of social understanding and the political absence of the working class conditions both the society they observe and their own observations—the limited character of their insights, their tools of analysis, their critique of society and history.

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