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Tsai Ming-Liang: from cineam of ghosts to the ghost of China

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Abstract: This article will analyze the representation of ghost in Taiwanese visual culture, focusing on the work of Tsai Ming-liang. In 2003, in a dialogue of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, he already declared the “death of cinema”—Tsai’s cinema is apparently becoming a ghost itself. But probably, the epitaph for cinema was enounced too early. In Taipei the venues for appreciation of cinema are more and more rich: museums, coffee shops, cinema festivals... After the presentation in Venice Mostra of his film *Stray Dogs*, which was announced as his last one, the director fused moving images with artistic installations, and worked on the memories of cinema by creating an art that is displayed in museums. Filmic ghost, insubstantial presence, Tsai’s cinema is disincarnated like a ghost, pervasive of Taiwanese culture, both scary (is it revengeful?) and reassuring (after death, something still lingers between the living). Analyzing his work helps us reflect on the future incarnations of the cinema medium and its interactions with new media.

Keywords: cinema, Tsai Ming-liang, installation, device

Tsai Ming-liang : d’un cinéma de fantômes au fantôme du cinéma

Résumé : Cet article analyse les figures fantomatiques de la culture visuelle taïwanaise à travers l’œuvre de Tsai Ming-liang. Tsai lui-même a déclaré la mort du cinéma dans le dialogue de Goodbye, Dragon Inn en 2003, comme si son propre cinéma devenait lui-même fantôme. Pourtant, il semble que l’épithète du cinéma ait été prononcé trop tôt. Ces dernières années, les possibilités cinéphiles à Taiwan se sont multipliées : musées, cafés, festivals de cinéma, Tsai lui-même, après la présentation de son travail le plus récent, Stray Dogs (2013), à la Mostra de Venise, annonce qu’il arrête le cinéma, mêlant images mouvantes et installations, et travaille pour la mémoire du cinéma en créant un art exposé dans les musées. Fantôme filmique, présence intangible, le cinéma de Tsai, désincarné comme un fantôme, imprègne la culture taïwanaise, à la fois effrayant (vengeur ?) et rassurant (après la mort, quelque chose subsiste entre les vivants). Analyser son œuvre nous aide à réfléchir aux futures incarnations du médium cinématographique et à ses interactions avec les nouveaux médias.

Mots-clés : cinéma, Tsai Ming-liang, installation, dispositif

蔡明亮：從鬼神的電影到電影的鬼神

摘要：這片文章通過蔡明亮導演的例子來詢問在臺灣視覺文化神鬼的形象。在2003拍《不散》，蔡明亮已經透過電影人物的對話說出《電影已死》。但是，那時為電影寫下墓志銘可能是一件太

早的事。其實，十多年後，在臺北享受的機會很繁榮富強：藝術和商業電影院，電影展覽，咖啡廳也會放映電影，還有網路上發行的... 蔡明亮郊游之後的作品，都在網路上放映/發行的，還是在博物館。這個轉變包括拍攝的方法，也包含觀看的地點或媒介多元... 還有，我們無法想象的可能性，只可以依靠科幻小說作家的想象力。蔡明亮展覽是一個很好例子，因為雖然是一個美術館的展覽，但沒有電影這個展覽就不成立。分析蔡明亮《電影鬼性》的作品會讓我們探索當代視覺文化的緊急問題：電影與裝置，視覺作品跟觀影者的互動的可能性，放映的平臺：電影院，網路，博物館... 甚至還沒發明的新銳媒介。

關鍵詞：蔡明亮，博物館，電影，《不散》

Presses de l'Inalco

TSAI MING-LIANG: FROM CINEMA OF GHOSTS TO THE GHOST OF CINEMA

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Malaysian-born, Taiwanese-based Tsai Ming-liang 蔡明亮's movies have always been obsessed with death and memory—and as a consequence, with ghosts. His highly intellectual, self-referential, auteur films are not a variation on popular genre movies, but present instead a representation of ghosts that is both abstract and realist. Realist because he uses minimal signs to let the public perceive, suspect or imagine the presence of supernatural beings infesting the screen. Abstract because these entities can be assimilated to memories, fragments of time past and *déjà vu* as well as to regrets, thoughts or hopes.

Tsai's cinema is apparently becoming a ghost itself: after winning the Venice Grand Jury Prize for *Stray Dogs* (*Jiaoyou* 郊游) (2013), he announced that he was not going to make any more feature films. Yet he probably won't stop working on the idea and incarnations of cinema, namely by presenting moving images in artistic installations, or working on the memories of cinema by creating art that is exhibited and displayed in museums—as he did in the long hiatus between *Stray Dogs* and *Visage* (*Lian* 臉) (2009).

One recent example is the Taiwan pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale (2012) where, in between a display of architectural projects, images of a short movie by Tsai were projected. A second relevant example that will be analyzed in the following pages is *The Theater in the Boiler Room* (*Guolu li de juchang* 鍋爐裡的劇場), an installation by Tsai himself where cinema is represented, evoked and dissected. In this work Tsai uses previously unreleased moving images that cannot fail to evoke his past narrative production, but which are completely dissolved in the apparatus of the installation. As though it were an echo of the forthcoming disappearance of 35-mm analog film, Tsai's cinema is slowly dying and singing its own requiem, while evoking the everlasting

presence of what we used to call cinema for the here and now, and for the next generations who perhaps will not know the magic of the cinema experience.

REAL GHOSTS IN REAL CINEMAS: *GOODBYE, DRAGON INN*

This subtitle is obviously provocative, since it is beyond the scope of this article to define “real” cinema, let alone “real” ghosts. Yet Tsai’s feature movie portfolio, though it consists in highly experimental and subversive films, remains inscribed in the context of what can be called “global art cinema”,¹ a form of art that circulates in international film festivals and has a specific pattern of distribution and exhibition (the cinema screen then DVD or VOD), a normative mode of consumption (being viewed from beginning to end in a quiet, darkened environment), and a narrative which, even if largely elliptical or evocative, can still be described as fiction.

Tsai Ming-liang’s movies have always been obsessed with love, death and memory—and, as a consequence, with ghosts. His highly intellectual, self-referential, auteur films are not a variation on popular genre movies—we won’t find Sadako-like scary girls with dirty long hair, as we do in the J-Horror fantasies of the 1990s. They display instead a representation of ghosts that is both abstract and realist. These three terms require a brief definition. In many interviews, Tsai speaks of *gui* 鬼 and *shén* 神, alternating the two terms. Without hiding his beliefs in the Buddhist religion, when dealing with ghosts the director does not refer to the horror genre in terms of menacing entities from the otherworld seeking revenge. Rather, he situates his representations of supernatural entities in the realm of allegory and religion, switching between the meaning of “spirit” and “presence”, “entity” and “divinity”: the presences that are perceptible in his movies are symbols or ideas of memories, legacies, souls and/or spirits, and they can be read in multiple, overlapping ways—namely, as something “really” lingering in this world after it dies, but also as the memories that our ancestors leave in this world. He is dealing both with “real” ancestors (mothers and fathers), and with artistic ones (films, books and songs that contribute to forming our identities).

As suggested above, these evocations are highly abstract, yet they are treated in a realist way. Tsai Ming-liang uses minimal signs to let the

1. GALT Rosalind and SCHOONOVER Karl, 2010, *Global Art Cinema*, New York: Oxford University Press.

public perceive the presence of supernatural beings haunting the screen. The viewer will not see any CGI effects or make-up of any kind. The spirits are made of the same texture as humans—or, maybe, humans are already made of the same material as ghosts.

I use the term “abstract” because these entities can be assimilated to memories, to recollections of reincarnation and fragments of time past (or films viewed, songs heard or books read), and to déjà vu, regrets, thoughts and hopes. We are in the same universe as that developed by Thai filmmaker Apitchapong Weerasethakul, winner of the 2010 Cannes Film Festival Palme d’Or for the dreamy *Uncle Boonmee Who Can Recall His Past Lives*, though perhaps the relationship is the other way around, for the Thai director has openly acknowledged Tsai’s influence on his work. As Erik Bordeleau has pointed out:

Tsai’s cinema aims at a conversion of our way to look at the world through the systematic use of long, immobile sequence shots. It operates as a phenomenological awakening of our sense of temporality, patiently focusing on the cinematic appearing (and disappearing) of the worlds it displays. The phenomenological world is not pure being, but *the sense which is revealed* [le sens qui transparait] where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people’s intersect and engage each other’s like gears. Following Merleau-Ponty’s observation, Tsai’s cinema could thus be dubbed a cinema of the *transparency of things*—that is, of how the past shines through them, and in the first place, his own, autobiographical past.²

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Not all of the long, immobile sequence shots in Tsai’s films evoke ghostly presences, but many do. One of the most memorable is to be found in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (*Bu san* 不散)(2003).

This film features a cinema theater that is to be closed down: this is the last night of trading. The characters we meet are the young, mute projectionist, the girl working at the ticket desk, and the old spectators looking for fugitive encounters in the corridors and toilets. The film screened is *Dragon Gate Inn* (*Long kezhan* 龍客棧) (1966) by King Hu [Hu Jinquan] 胡金銓. In a reference loop—that is, both a *homage cinéphile* and a display of mourning for the glory of time past—we see young bodies flung on the screen in a *wuxiapian* fantasy, and the same actors in the present-day cinema, now aged and sick, looking for flimsy pleasures, meeting their illusions and facing the unattainability of their desires.

2. BORDELEAU, Eric, 2003, “The care for opacity: On Tsai Ming-Liang’s conservative filmic gesture?” <http://www.necsus-ejms.org/the-care-for-opacity-on-tsai-ming-liangs-conservative-filmic-gesture/>(accessed 16/06/2013). Bordeleau quotes MERLEAU-PONTY Maurice, 2003, *Phenomenology of Perception*, New York: Routledge, p. XXII.

Many readings can and have been given for this vertiginous *mise en abîme* of desire, sex, regrets and meditation on the decay of flesh and soul. We can point out here that, if *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is undeniably a song that celebrates the illusory character of desire and the transient nature of human life, it is also a celebration of and farewell to a certain form of cinema—the golden age of Mandarin cinema of the 1960s, with its stars, magic and atmosphere, and an innocence that appears forever lost in the multiplication of depictions of contemporary, disillusioned life.

Towards the end of the movie we find an impressive long shot, taken from the point of view of the screen (the camera is facing the audience). The film (*Dragon Gate Inn*) has finished; the last spectators leave the cinema (literally the “last”—it is the last night of business for the old, decaying movie theater). The ticket girl turns on the light. She then starts to climb the stairs, her movement particularly slow since she is limping. She then goes down the stairs and, still at a very slow pace, leaves the room. For more than two minutes the camera stares at the empty cinema; only the sound of the rain fills the scene. The viewers have been exploring the mysterious movements of the audience and have been behind the scenes, in the toilets and down the corridors. Now, everybody has left the movie theater, the music and the dialogue of *Dragon Gate Inn* have stopped, and the (real) audience is left to stare at an emptied room, still echoing with the human passions that were igniting desires and frustrations, imagination and memories. Needless to say, this sequence is designed to be seen in a movie theater, where the audience is sitting in front of a ghostly reverse shot of itself: sitting in the cinema, the live audience stares at a room that is obviously haunted by invisible, yet perceptible, presences. There is a sense of something that has just disappeared and which is invisible yet weirdly palpable, lingering and haunting.

In this extremely long shot (six minutes), Tsai seems to follow André Bazin's injunction against montage.³ Staring closely at things—places, faces and bodies—the camera can let the reality hidden inside the apparent become visible, perceptible or discernible. This is a transcendental perspective in which the waiting, the patience and the hypnosis of the fixed gaze reveal the soul behind the flesh and the truth behind the illusion. When his cameramen told him to stop filming (nothing else was happening, the actress had left the frame), Tsai ordered them to stay put, because something was going on: the gazer (the audience, i.e. us) is facing an empty scene, like a distorted mirror, or like a vampire desperately trying to see a reflection where only emptiness is to be found. But this disappearance, if watched closely and patiently enough, conceals resilience: something invisible yet perceptible is lurking in the shadows, provided we have the patience to stare long enough.

3. BAZIN André, 1999 [1958–1962], *Qu'est-ce que le cinéma ?*, Paris: Éditions du Cerf.

IN THE INTERSTICE OF CINEMA AND INSTALLATION: *IT'S A DREAM*

Tsai's cinema is apparently becoming a ghost itself: after the cataclysmic reception of *Visage* (2009), he waited almost five years before releasing *Stray Dogs* and, after the screening of this last opus at the Venice Film Festival, he announced his retirement. Yet during this period (2009–2013) he did not stop working on the idea and incarnations of cinema, namely by presenting moving images in artistic installations or working on the memories of cinema by creating art that is exhibited and displayed in museums.

Let's start by evoking a hybrid project, which straddles the "traditional" film and an installation: *It's a Dream* (*Shi meng* 是夢) (2007). This project starts as a "classical" film, but then multiplies its "apparitions". It is a 20-minute short, edited to three minutes for the sixtieth anniversary of the Cannes Film Festival (2007). Finally, it appears in an art installation presented at the Venice Biennale by Tsai himself. It is a sort of cinema "resurrected", recycled, or brought back to life: a ghost of cinema. Tsai explains:

The short film is called *It's a Dream* (2007). It's about an old and deserted movie theatre of a small town in Malaysia. In this work, Lee Kang-sheng plays the role of my deceased father, along with my mother who played herself, and who was still alive at the time. The film is about twenty-two minutes long. After shooting it, I tore down a bunch of chairs in the theatre and shipped them to Venice as part of the installation. The movie theatre is an integral part of the work instead of being merely a backdrop. Although one may argue that these seats are just normal seats that can be seen all over the world, I think their appearance actually varies from one country to another. That is why I wanted to ship the remaining ones to Venice. They are all usable. As you sit on the seats and you watch the footage I made, you are *in* my work.⁴

It is, we might argue, a form of invocation. Cinema—how we used to know it, love it and make it something special—is dead; at the same time, cinema is everywhere—but apparently it has lost its soul. In this work, Tsai tries to achieve an invocation, a sort of *séance*—calling back to life the soul and the body of something that has been corrupted, and is decaying, and is gone. By simultaneously reconstructing the movie theater of his childhood in the museum and on the screen, he evokes its ghost.

4. TSAI Ming-liang, 2011, "On the Uses and Misuses of Cinema", in *Senses of Cinema*, <http://sensesofcinema.com/2011/feature-articles/on-the-uses-and-misuses-of-cinema> (accessed 17/06/2013).

The ghost of the movie theater is summoning the director and asking him to be remembered.⁵ Unlike other projects—which are discussed below—these images are not re-used (quoted, parodied, displaced, etc.) by other artists, nor filmed especially for the biennale. *It's a Dream* is a film that changed its nature, shifting from being a “proper”, traditional film to becoming part of an installation. If formerly it demanded to be seen from beginning to end in a movie theater, it then became something that could be enjoyed in a special/unique room—a reconstruction or a summoning of the “original” one (as seen on the screen) —where the spectator is immersed in the very fabric of the creation; spectators enter the very movie theater they will see on the screen, and sit on the same chairs where the actors sit in the movie they are watching. It's a very concrete *dream*. Paradoxically, by acquiring corporeality—the audience is actually sitting in a movie theater—the film itself loses its nature, or is transformed, becoming part of something else, fused with the decor, sewing a dialogue between past and present, becoming rarefied like a memory.

CINEMA TRANSFIGURING INTO GHOST: TSAI'S IMAGES IN ARCHITECTURE

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In a further transformation, we find images of Tsai's movies in installations not created by him. These images (suggestions, memories, echoes) have entered into another realm of representation; they are no longer used by their own creator, but quoted, projected, distorted and evoked by other artists.

The first installation I want to mention was presented at the Venice Architecture Biennale. I was visiting the Taiwanese pavilion, at the Prigioni near the Palazzo Ducale.⁶ I entered into a mesmerizing space, both futuristic (i.e. hyper-technologized) and vintage (in that “recycled” was the keyword and everything appeared to be made of eco-friendly material). All of a sudden, in between project models—immersive installations and displays of architectural projects—flickering moving images appear: images from a recent short movie by Tsai.

5. “Every day I visited the theatre with lighting setup [*sic*] for four scenes. Just shooting a short phrase like that. Go and see this film, and you will understand that it was shot out of a one-page manuscript. In this way, a scene with a lit cigarette could burn forever, as the spectators watch it burn... and burn.... It burns for so long; it is actually some sort of invocation. As time goes by, I realize this kind of summoning actually recurs. If you have a chance, you should also try to interpret your dream. It doesn't have to be about old movie theatres. Many things are waiting to be rediscovered” (TSAI Ming-liang, 2011, “On the Uses and Misuses of Cinema”).

6. See <http://www.archdaily.com/262504/venice-biennale-2012-the-collateral-event-architect-geographer-le-foyer-de-taiwan/> (accessed 15/02/13).

This film, or rather ghost of a film, is barely visible yet unmistakable: it is the 20-minute-long *The Walker* (*Xingzhe* 行者)(2013). This “once-a-film” shows Lee Kang-sheng 李康生, Tsai’s fetish actor, dressed as a monk, flaming red, slowly walking in the bustling commercial streets of Hong Kong. His rhythm is actually more reminiscent of slow motion than walking; his pace strikingly contrasts with the speed of the population.

Why do I call this “strange object” a ghost? Because this film was once visible in a proper “cinematic” manner (such as at the Hong Kong and Cannes Film Festivals, where it had been shown as part of the collective film *Beautiful 2012* (*Meihao 2012* 美好) (2012), or on the Internet⁷), with its frame and time and pace, its beginning and end. Later (at the Venice Architecture Biennale), the images were barely visible, projected on models and uneven surfaces, and deformed by the three-dimensional space created by the architects.

The ghost of narrative cinema, of what used to be narrative cinema, intervenes in an apparently non-narrative project, breaking its storytelling; the film cannot be seen or watched, yet it is present. It cannot be appreciated, grasped, criticized or understood. Yet there it is. Casting its lights and shadows on the project-model of a building, casting a shadow on “real life”. The medium is no longer a “film”, in that spectators do not expect to see a movie when visiting an architecture exhibition—and, as suggested above, they cannot actually see it. But it is present. It speaks. We can recognize it or not, we can be attentive to its voice or not, but it is unmistakably there. What’s more, it appears like moving graffiti, as if the architects, proposing a new way of creating an urban environment in Taiwan, wanted to inscribe the legacy of its cinema—a flickering, pulsing, barely visible legacy. Yet one that attracts the ear and the eye, if only one pays attention. It is, I would argue, a way of paying homage to Tsai’s cinema and to Taiwan’s new cinematic legacy in a possible future, as well as an invitation not to forget what made, for a brief moment, Taiwanese cinema so important on the international scene—and still does in the hearts of *cinéphiles*.

As though it were an echo of the forthcoming disappearance of 35-mm film, Tsai’s cinema is slowly dying, and singing its own requiem in the meantime. But this requiem also tells us that cinema can still linger and survive—perhaps in a life after death (since its very birth, cinema as an art form has been declared dead). The ghost of cinema is nostalgic and sad, but maybe necessary. What is at stake is the menace of losing one’s own identity.

7. See http://www.chinesemovies.com/fr/films_Tsai_Mingliang_Walker.htm (accessed 23/05/2013).

Furthermore, the ghost of cinema appears again and elsewhere, for Tsai has opened a café in Taipei—actually, a small chain of cafés. Even here, where the director says he wants to work with customers and do something different than cinema, he still manages to project moving images.

In these cafés, a short, experimental movie, *Moonlight on the River* (*He shang de yueguang* 河上的月光) (2012) is projected on a TV screen installed on the floor. Customers don't and can't watch the movie—other people are passing by, there's coffee to drink and small cakes to eat—but at the same time, the ghostly presence of cinema is there, lingering, appealing, calling for attention and announcing its barely perceptible presence. There are ghosts in the café ... and cinema in the café.

Besides the uncanny nature of the apparition of ghostly presence in the real world, we can sense that a contemporary preoccupation with the redefinition of cinema is urgent in the field of film studies. Jacques Aumont asks “What is left of cinema?”⁸ echoing a recent publication by Raymond Bellour, which asks “Where is cinema now?”⁹ In the movie theater? In the museum? In installations? On the Internet? On our tablets? On smartphones? On Google glasses? Is the answer “In all of these places”, or is it nowhere to be seen—diluted, passé and outdated?

What, indeed, is cinema now? Is it a ghost? What do we retain of the cinematic experience? In this age of multiple screens, what is still defined as “cinema”? Is cinema still alive, or can we declare it dead—and summon it with a séance?

Different forces are redefining the distribution, consumption and aesthetics of cinema: on the one hand, many voices announce its death, analyzing the decline of the classical cinema industry; on the other hand, we are daily witnessing the multiplication of screens—TV screens, tablets, phones—but also the omnipresence of video art in museums. Can these experiences be assimilated to cinema? Are these deformation, diversification, and drift, or a further reincarnation of cinema?

GHOSTS IN THE THEATER IN THE BOILING ROOM

Tsai Ming-liang—like other filmmakers (David Lynch, Abbas Kiarostami, Apitchapong Weerasethakul, Jean-Luc Godard)—works both in the traditional film circuit and in the art world. In 2012

8. AUMONT Jacques, 2013, *Que reste-t-il du cinéma?*, Paris : Vrin.

9. BELLOUR Raymond, 2013, *la Querelle des dispositifs: Cinéma – installations, expositions*, Paris : POL.

he created the installation *The Theater in the Boiler Room* (*Guolu li de juchang* 鍋爐裡的劇場), which redefines the categories of art space, installation, multi-screen, exhibition, and lastly, cinema.

Tsai created an installation displayed in the Songshan Cultural and Creative Center (originally built in 1937), used to “propel the operation of Songshan Tobacco Factory with the steam power machinery it contained”.¹⁰ The installation was later transferred to the Museum of Contemporary Art (MOCA) in Taipei, where it was selected for the tenth Taishin Arts Award (*Dishi jie Taixin yishu jiang* 第十屆台新藝術獎) (2012). The rooms are dimly lit, containing sofas and theater-like chairs, scattered and in apparent disorder; the walls and columns are covered with pearl-colored celluloid; there are piles of televisions towering in a corner, and fleeting images of old architecture without humans (a furnace, passages). On the uneven surfaces—walls, pillars, staircases, etc.—projected moving images enter into an uncanny dialogue with the flux of images from the TV screens. These images have been filmed by Tsai especially for this installation, unlike in *It’s a Dream*, where he recycled a previously existing film. These videos are screened in a loop in an environment where the viewing public is free to roam, walk, sit, talk or remain silent. The exhibition hall and the silver screen are merged together. The viewer cannot possibly enjoy the film—the museum space is not meant for that—nor is he or she supposed to; yet at the same time, cinema as an art, an institution, an industry and a daily social practice is omnipresent in *The Theater in the Boiler Room*. The dim light makes the viewer feel like he or she is immersed in a multi-layered film experience, in a boiler room of images, memories, ghosts and intangible presences. The moving images are absorbed in a chaotic, free, anarchic way, which is very far removed from the regulated experience of narrative cinema in a movie theater. Yet, in this immersion, it is hard not to feel the omnipresent references of Tsai Ming-liang’s filmic body of work: we can recognize, dancing in neon-lit underground passages, Lee Kang-sheng and Yang Kuei-mei 楊貴媚, Tsai’s favorite actors, who are a substantial part of his filmic creation. In the installation, the director-turned-artist Tsai Ming-liang reflects on the themes that have forged his cinematic practice since the beginning. Cinema is an immaterial support which, paradoxically, has its own specific texture. The walls of the installation site (the “boiler room”)—and, later, those of the Museum of Contemporary Art—are covered with a white membrane

10. The text goes on: “The building is 14 meters tall, with its 36-meter smokestack towering conspicuously over the factory grounds, making it the major landmark of the Park. Tsai Ming-liang’s installation artwork was exhibited right here in this boiler room, and therefore given the name *The Theater in the Boiler Room*” [tenth Taishin Arts Award (*Dishi jie Taixin yishu jiang* 第十屆台新藝術獎), 2012, p. 110].

of aluminum, recalling the silver screen of a movie theater. In this shady maze, immersed in the shadows and illuminated with irregular glimpses of milky light, the viewer/*flâneur* walks around seeing (rather than watching) flickering images projected onto irregular surfaces, hearing snippets of songs and echoes of footsteps or undefined industrial noises. The spectator sits on an old cinema armchair. It is not cinema, and if it is art, it is an art possessed by the memory of cinema. By the ghost of cinema.

Tsai is far from being the only artist dealing with and negotiating the dissemination of images that were once pertinent exclusively to the silver screen—see Apichatpong Weerasethakul's "Primitive" project, in parallel with his movie *Uncle Boonmee*; Yang Fudong's videos full of classic quotations of the Seven Sages, heavily utilizing cinematic moving images but installed in a multi-screen apparatus that cannot fail to dissipate the viewer's attention, thereby creating a very different experience from film-watching; or Abbas Kiarostami's cinematographic installations. However, I argue that Tsai can be considered one of the most consistent artist-directors, obsessively singing a swansong for an already lost art of filmmaking, disseminating its remains in a process of mourning that assumes ever-changing forms.

Filmic ghost, insubstantial presence, nostalgic flux of memory, multi-layered visual experience: Tsai's narrative cinema is today disincarnated, like a ghost, yet pervasive and ubiquitous in Taiwanese culture, both scary (is it revengeful?) and reassuring (after death something still lingers on). Even if cinema is almost dead, threatened by small screens and alternative exhibition spaces, and lost in the disappearing spaces of global capitalism, its ghost might still govern, determine and haunt new spaces and ideas.