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Watching Cinema Disappear: Intermediality and Aesthetic Experience in Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (2003) and *Stray Dogs* (2013)

Whether we think of André Bazin's theorisation of 'the sequence shot' (2005: 35) or Bordwell's concept of 'cinematic staging' (2005), the intermedial property of the long take is often said to reside in the way it elicits the mobile mise-en-scène associated with theatre. In this essay, however, I would like to explore the intermediality of the long take not in relation to movement, but in connection with stillness. My aim is to examine how that stillness, which forges dialogue with static visual practices like photography and painting, translates into an aesthetic form that struggles to survive in the space of the film theatre and migrates into that of the museum. I propose that the work of Malaysian-born, Taiwan-based Tsai Ming-liang provides an especially productive avenue through which to reflect on these questions, for his is a cinema that has not only been increasingly exhibited in both spaces, but it has also blurred the aesthetic boundaries associated with such spaces within the conceptual space of his own films.

With 10 feature-length films to his credit, Tsai is a central figure in what is now broadly referred to as 'slow cinema', one of the main tenets of which is what I have elsewhere defined as the hyperbolic application of the long take (de Luca 2014a: 1).[1] Significantly, however, the long take adopted in slow cinema, premised as it is on silence, minimalism and duration, differs in considerable ways from the Bazinian sequence shot, which was conceptualised on the basis of narrative efficiency as connected with the orchestrated movement of characters within the frame (de Luca 2014a: 18-23). By contrast, the slowness of Tsai's cinema is often produced through a pronounced lack of movement: whether we are looking at the stillness of the camera, that of diegetic action, or both combined. Indeed, his work is especially fascinating because it has pursued a radicalisation of both forms of stillness over the course of 20 years, with his films becoming less attached to narrative structures and consequently crossing over into the realm of the museum.

In order to explore these questions, I will refer to a number of Tsai films and works in what follows, but my focus will be on two long takes from his oeuvre that lend themselves to a particularly meaningful comparison: one from his sixth film, *Goodbye Dragon Inn* (*Bu san*, 2003), which records an empty cinema auditorium; and another from his tenth (and allegedly last) feature *Stray Dogs* (*Jiao you*, 2013), which depicts two standing characters contemplating a painted mural in an empty ruinous site. In both cases, I will argue, the long take is exploited in terms of its ability to resonate with static, not mobile, media: photography in the former, painting in the latter. With 10 years separating one from the other, these long takes beg to be put side by side not only because they are among the most daring in Tsai's career in regards to immobility, but also because they forcefully effect an inscription of the spectator into the visual structure of the image, thus opening up a space for reflection on the question of aesthetic experience as distinctively crystallised in the cinema and in the gallery. In this respect, as I will hope to show, if *Goodbye Dragon Inn* gives evidence of Tsai's initial disengagement from the cinema, *Stray Dogs* can be seen as the completion of such a disengagement, one in which the cinema merges into the museum on an institutional, aesthetic and conceptual level.

Goodbye Dragon Inn

Filmed entirely in a film theatre that had just closed its doors in Yonghe (Taipei County), *Goodbye Dragon Inn* gestured towards a subtle though significant shift in Tsai's auteurist cinema. While his films had always been elusive, as proved by the likes of *Vive l'amour* (1994), *The River* (*He liu*, 1997) and *What Time Is It There?* (*Ni na bian ji dian*, 2001), here it was the case of a film with a much more rarefied narrative and minimalist inflection, featuring practically no plotline or dialogue. As Jean Ma notes, '*Goodbye Dragon Inn* embodies one of Tsai's most meticulous exercises in the reduction and distillation of cinematic storytelling down to the sparest and most minor units of actions' (2010: 99). Focused on the last day of a dilapidated cinema, the Fuhe Grand Theatre, the film proceeds episodically and takes its time to show the furtive, often surreal, activities going on within the theatre as the *wuxia* film of the title, *Dragon Gate Inn* (*King Hu*, 1966), unfolds on the big screen. In the auditorium, a meagre audience: a male Japanese tourist (Kiyonobu Mitamura) gay-cruising; random, possibly spectral, characters engaged in absurdist situations; and a

hobbled ticket vendor (Chen Shiang-chyi) limping around in search of the film projectionist, played by the director's unfailing alter-ego Lee Kang-sheng (who has to this date appeared in all Tsai films).

Goodbye Dragon Inn also pushed Tsai's application of the long take into a more radical direction in terms of slowness and stasis. Compared with the 5 films Tsai had made up until that point, the film is outperformed only by *What Time Is It There?* in terms of lack of camera movement: while the latter film features none, *Goodbye Dragon Inn* has only 10 shots taken on a moving camera, an 11.6 percentage of the film's overall number of shots, 86 (Lim 2014: 87). Yet, of course, cinematic slowness cannot be analysed solely in quantitative terms in relation to camera movement, this being only one feature to be considered qualitatively alongside many others. In this respect, as Song Hwee Lim notes, the fact that one of the film's main characters is a physically disabled woman who wears a leg brace and has walking difficulties, contributes to a heightened sense of slowness in the scenes she appears, since 'she walks slowly and the sound of her footsteps is heavy', with the result that the 'static long take arguably feels longer than the actual duration of the shot' (2014: 97). More remarkably, the film's most commented-on long take, which lasts five minutes and 20 seconds, not only offers the image of the ticket vendor woman crossing the enormous empty auditorium while unhurriedly sweeping the floor for over 3 minutes, but continues filming the space devoid of human presence for over 2 minutes after she leaves the frame (Fig 1).

As Lim observes, 'it is not difficult to understand why this long take has come to symbolize the death of cinema in some cinephilic discourses' (2014: 70): featuring an empty auditorium in its second half, this shot visualizes the decline of cinema-going as a social activity. From a phenomenological standpoint, this long take also elicits a heightened awareness of the spectatorial process, both because of its lack of action, which foregrounds the literality of the image, and in terms of how the empty seats remind the viewer of her own viewing position. In fact, this long take is preceded by a number of scenes where the viewer is offered her mirroring image as reflected in spectators within the diegesis. While characters in the film are busily engaged in other activities in the auditorium's adjoining facilities – such as cruising in lavatories and dark corridors – the film is littered with images of solitary patrons watching *Dragon Gate Inn* in the near-empty theatre: the Japanese tourist mentioned above, a little boy eating popcorn, a couple noisily eating, a woman cracking

watermelon seeds in her mouth. These shots, in turn, sit in contrast with the series of images of a crowded auditorium that open the film (including a cameo appearance from Tsai in a medium shot from behind) and which are presumably set in the heyday of the movie palace (Fig 2). The long take of the vacant auditorium, which takes place towards the film's end, thus gains in significance when set against the packed theatre of its opening. In contrast to images that depict the embodied viewing activity, the rows and rows of empty seats inscribe the spectator into the image through absence

By evacuating the screen of humanity, the image begins to oscillate between two different registers, the cinematic and the photographic, its status as a motion picture thrown into disarray by its imperturbable immobility. Indeed, the relationship between the still photograph and the long take, and the limits and distinctions that separate the one from the other, are governed by tenuous links. As David Campany argues, photographic stillness is ultimately what lies at the end of two seemingly diametrically opposed filmic techniques, montage and the long take:

> Montage sees the photograph as a partial fragment … The long take sees the photograph as a unified whole. The shorter a film's shot the more like a photograph it gets, until one ends up with a single frame. The longer the shot the more like a photograph it gets too, the continuous 'stare' of the lens giving us a moving picture. (Campany 2008: 36)

While Campany does not consider completely static long takes, the immobility of the camera coupled with that of the visual field would seem to connect film and photography even further. As Justin Remes has noted in relation to what he terms the avant-garde 'cinema of stasis' of Larry Gottheim, Andy Warhol, Michael Snow and others, films that foreground diegetic inaction through stationary long takes necessarily blur 'the lines between traditional visual art and motion pictures' in spectatorial terms (2014: 3). Speaking of Gottheim's *Fog Line* (1970), which opens with 'a still shot of a landscape covered dense in fog', Remes recounts the film as one in which its 'prolonged inertia had tricked my mind into thinking I was looking at a still' (1-2).

In the case of *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, the viewer knows this to be a long take rather than a still since the first half of the shot shows the ticket vendor sweeping the floor, not to mention the ambient sound which features throughout.[2] That said, the

second half of the shot, in which no movement is discernible and sounds hardly audible, certainly plunges the image into a more uncertain register – if not phenomenologically, in the sense that the viewer may momentarily question whether the film has stilled itself and the moving image become a freeze-frame *de facto*, then at least conceptually, in the sense that the stillness of the shot evokes a photograph and consequently calls to mind the photograms at the celluloid base on which the film was shot. This is further underscored in the two immediately following scenes. In the first, *Dragon Gate Inn*'s two leading actors, Shih Chun and Miao Tien lament that 'no one goes to the movies anymore' while framed against the film's promotional still photographs in the background. This is followed by the scene of Lee Kang-sheng, appearing for the first time in the film as the projectionist, smoking against the backdrop of filmstrips rolling through a projector (Fig 3).

The visibility of stills and filmstrips in *Goodbye Dragon Inn* confirms, then, that Tsai's lament on the 'death of cinema' was not restricted to mourning its waning as a social activity housed in old movie palaces; it was also extended to the growing obsolescence of celluloid film. Worthy of note is that the very duration of the long take of the empty cinema was determined by its being photochemically captured, as Tsai recalls that 'I couldn't bring myself to say "cut"… so, when finally my cinematographer said that there was no more film left … I said "OK, fine, I guess we have to stop now'" (quoted in Rapfogel 2004: 28). Equally important is the fact that the director openly resisted digital technology until the very last moment in his filmmaking career, only utilising it to shoot his final film *Stray Dogs*, which came to feature the longest take (13 minutes) in Tsai's cinematic oeuvre as a result, as will be shortly discussed.

Between *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *Stray Dogs*, Tsai's farewell to cinema continued to evolve in the form of other projects. An example is his 3-minute short *It's a Dream* (*Shi meng*, 2006), which was filmed in another disused film theatre, this time in the director's native Malaysia. Commissioned for the Cannes film festival upon its 60th anniversary for the portmanteau *Chacun son cinéma* in 2006, the film was subsequently turned into a 23-minute moving-image installation and showcased at the Venice Biennale for the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (TFAM) in 2007. Using exactly the same images featured in the short, but held on screen for longer, Tsai collected 54 chairs before the theatre was demolished and relocated them into the installation, which became part of the museum's permanent collection in 2010.

Together, *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *It's a Dream* signalled Tsai's growing disconnection from traditional cinema and his concomitant self-refashioning as a moving-image gallery artist. Further evidence of the latter was an installation he produced in 2010 for the Xue Xue Institute in Taipei, which combined his own short feature *Moonlight on The River* (2004) and Lee Kang Sheng's *Remembrance* (2009), as well as 'a series of 49 chairs and seats gathered from all corners of Taiwan, in-progress oil paintings of these same chairs and some prose and poetry' written by Tsai's long-time actress collaborator Lu Yi Ching (Bordeleau 2013: 182).

However, Tsai continued to make feature films in the interim, such as *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (*Hei yan quan*, 2007) and *Face* (*Visage*, 2009), even though, as the latter illustrated, the boundaries between cinema and museum became increasingly more porous in his work (*Face* was entirely set in the Louvre as part of 'The Louvre Invites Filmmakers' project). Yet if *Face* was made possible thanks to museum funding, it was still a film made for the cinemas and shot on celluloid, which is in contrast with the shorter pieces that Tsai went on to shoot on the digital medium in the 4 years that followed.[3] After a 4-year break, Tsai then released his first digitally shot feature, *Stray Dogs*, at the 2013 Venice Film Festival, where it scooped the Grand Jury Prize and at which point the director announced this to be his last film, as he would now make short films for the art gallery (de Luca 2014). In this light, as I will now hope to show, *Stray Dogs* can be seen as the aesthetic culmination in Tsai's work in which cinema – understood as a medium, a practice and an institution – finally dissolve into new forms and migrate into new spaces.

Stray Dogs

Like all Tsai films, *Stray Dogs* features Tsai's muse Lee Kang-sheng, here playing the role of an alcoholic homeless father who, perversely, makes a living by holding up luxury property advertising placards. The film also features three female characters, all played by Tsai's regulars: Chen Shiang-chyi, Lu Yi-ching and Yang Kuei-mei. They are seen with the father's two children at different points and, according to the film's press notes, meant to be the same character in a Buñuelesque fashion. However, the fact remains that the viewer is unlikely to arrive at this conclusion on her own terms. While the social grounding of Tsai's cinema is here stronger than ever, as evidenced by the film's unflinching focus on urban destitution, there is hardly

a storyline to be followed in *Stray Dogs*, with the film stitching together curious events that often appear as stand-alone audiovisual tableaus. In particular, the film is punctuated by the cryptic apparition of a painted rectangular mural before which characters become transfixed, thus opening up a space for spectatorial reflection on questions of aesthetic experience and intermediality.

This panoramic mural, which depicts a mountainous region surrounded by lake and rocks, first appears halfway through the film as it is chanced upon by Lu Yi-ching. This static shot shows the character, entirely motionless, holding a pink fluorescent bag with one hand and pointing a torch at the painting with the other for nearly 3 minutes before squatting down to urinate while still facing the painted landscape. The second time the mural appears is in the film's final shot, which lasts nearly 7 minutes and is preceded by the astonishing 13-minute take of Lee and Chen staring at an undisclosed sight. Lee stands behind Chen in a profile medium close-up and occasionally drinks an alcoholic beverage from a bottle, while Chen, shedding tears, is visibly spellbound by what she sees.[4] There is no dialogue or soundtrack, expect the ambient sound of cars and the occasional train in the background. As Lee embraces Chen, the film then cuts to a high-angle long shot of both actors from behind and the viewer is finally able to confirm that the characters' object of fixation is the same mural that had had Lu Yi-ching mesmerised, and that Chen also carries a torch that illuminates the painting (Fig 4). After 1 minute and 10 seconds, Chen then disengages from Lee and starts making her way out of the room towards a door on the right of the frame. She is not followed by Lee, who continues staring at the mural for approximately 4 minutes before smashing the bottle on the floor and making his exit to the right (Fig 5). The mural remains on show for 1 minute and 42 seconds, the last 30 of which without ambient sound, before the screen fades into black and the credits start rolling.

Significantly, this enigmatic mural is an installation by the Taiwanese artist Kao Jun-hohn. While researching the photographic archives of the region of Taoyuan for a project on the remnants of the coal industry in southern Taipei, Kao stumbled upon a series of images of the Liugiu village in Kaohsiung City, taken in 1871 by a Scottish traveller named John Thomson. Seeing this image as a 'historical fragment' of that particular era as immortalised by a Eurocentric gaze, Kao decided to alter these photographs by turning them into enlarged drawings painted with charcoal on the

walls of abandoned spaces, one of which was accidentally chanced upon by Tsai when location scouting for *Stray Dogs* (Young 2013).

What is fascinating here is how the trajectory of these two practitioners, working with different materials and mediums, converged in an industrial ruinous site, which is a recurrent motif in their work and a place of hybridisation par excellence. As Tim Ederson argues, 'the space of the ruin is characterized … by their unusual situations, the juxtapositions which occur between things, and the hybridities which evolve' (2005: 122-124). In *Stray Dogs*'s final high-angle long take, these juxtapositions and hybridities are on full display: the floor is littered with smithereens and rubbish; the walls are covered with mould and the ceiling dilapidating; and what were once windows are now rectangular holes through which green vegetation protrudes. Devoid of its functional status, this is a site thus undergoing all kinds of material and organic transformations, a site in which decay also means new forms of life, and thus a site in which old and new co-exist in symbiotic fashion. For Ederson, ruins are thus places 'in which the becomings of new forms, orderings and aesthetics can emerge': for, while 'they perform a physical remembering of the past which has vanished, they also gesture towards the present and the future as temporal frames which can be read as both utopian and dystopian' (2005: 15).

In Tsai's case, a ruinous aesthetic is often exploited for its ability to oscillate between dystopian and utopian frames as connected with the disappearance and transformation of cinema. This is proved by *Goodbye Dragoon Inn* and *It's a Dream*, both of which, as we have seen, took place in dilapidated theatres, with Tsai further transplanting the cinema seats that appeared in the latter into an ensuing museum installation prior to the cinema's demolition. By contrast, Kao's transformation of the photograph into a painted intervention and its relocation to the walls of a building in ruins arguably calls to mind an abandoned museum that also carries associations with the cinema, if only because of the mural's gigantic size and rectangular format, which evokes a widescreen.

Stray Dogs capitalises on these associations by placing characters contemplating this image in darkness and carrying a torch whose light beam brings to mind that of a projector. Further, the mural is seen as being seen by characters whose very immobility brings to the fore the question of spectatorial activity. They are seen standing for minutes on end and much of the scene's anticipation relates to whether and/or when they will perform any gesture or movement. Their performative stillness,

in turn, resonates with the stillness of the painting, which results in a kind of short-circuit that heightens the staged inaction of the filmed scene as a whole. This mise-en-abime is visually compounded by the high-angle perspectival framing, as seen in Figure 4. The centrally positioned mural in the background offers a receding mirror of smaller proportions of the film's own frame, thus reinforcing its cinematic associations and the fact that these characters mirror the spectators watching the film.

In many ways, then, this long take brings about an enhanced cognizance of the viewing process in a manner not dissimilar to that elicited by the empty cinema auditorium in *Goodbye Dragon Inn*, a cognizance that is directly related with the fact that these two shots give the spectator plenty of time to study images in all their protracted immobility. Yet *Stray Dogs* more overtly foregrounds the question of aesthetic experience by forging a correspondence between painting appreciation and film spectatorship while introducing the figure of the spectator back into the image. Here it is worth recalling how spectatorial inscription has taken different forms as associated with the blurring of exhibition spaces in Tsai's work. For, if *Goodbye Dragon Inn* reveals a disused cinema materialised in the stark barrenness of empty seats, and if the spectatorial process associated with cinema would be transposed into a museum through the relocation of actual disused cinema seats in *It's a Dream*, then the final image of *Stray Dogs*, which features only a still image on the wall, no seats at all and standing observers, smuggles something of the mode of aesthetic apprehension associated with the museum into the cinema.

This idea appears to gain in significance when we consider that this long take anticipates its own ensuing mode of experience, since, like *It's a Dream*, the film was transformed in early 2015 into the multi-channel installation *Stray Dogs at the Museum* for the Times Museum in Guangzhou, China (Fig 6). Composed of 'floors covered in foam pieces, and large fabric lily pads', and with aleatory scenes from the film 'projected onto sloping walls and layered fabrics' (Bolwell 2015), the installation confirms that, for Tsai, cinema has now become fully interchangeable with the museum.

Concluding Remarks

Placed side by side, the long takes from *Goodbye Dragon Inn* and *Stray Dogs* establish a fascinating dialogue in terms of how they reveal the way Tsai's cinema has

evolved and come to define itself aesthetically across a spectrum of 10 years. The former is a nostalgic farewell to the cinema as a collective experience and as a photochemical medium, both of which are evoked through the stillness of an empty film theatre. Erased from the cinema, spectators reappear in *Stray Dogs*, yet they are no longer seated and part of a collectivity, but they stand alone in an empty space contemplating an image that, while evoking what cinema was in its shape and format, has become something else, the stillness of a painted image over which the spectator – or the visitor? – controls the time spent watching. As such, this is an image that directly prefigures the film's own mode of appreciation in the museum.

Charged with symbolism, the act of relocating *Stray Dogs* into the gallery suggests that, if this is indeed Tsai's last feature film, that his cinema nevertheless lives on, if only in new forms and formats, settings and contexts. Yet important questions remain as to whether Tsai's aesthetic project, which proposes a different relationship with time based on the spectator's protracted *experience* of duration, can be entirely fulfilled in gallery settings, as I have discussed elsewhere (de Luca 2016). As the transposition of *Stray Dogs* illustrates, the temporal elongation of shots may no longer be experienced by the spectator in the gallery which, as Laura U. Marks notes, entails a primarily 'cognitive' spectatorial mode: 'duration tends to get reduced to an idea of duration … centrally because people don't stay for the whole experience, just long enough to "get an idea of it"'. (2012: 21).

In the case of the two long takes (and films) I have examined, the experience of duration is fundamental since it is duration that enables intermedial relations to come to the fore and be experienced aesthetically by the spectator. As Lutz Koepnick notes, '[t]o experience objects aesthetically … involves our ability to actively register a partial loss or a rapturous expansion of sensory perception as much as to investigate the feel of pushing against the ways in which works of art pull us into seeing the world through different eyes' (2014: 51). Koepnick associates this mode of experience with audiovisual forms that stretch 'artistic representation toward or beyond the limits once associated with a specific medium' (49), focusing specifically on the technique of slow motion. As Tsai's case demonstrates, however, the long take can also be stretched towards or beyond the limits associated with cinema through silence and stillness, thereby forging intermedial links with photography and painting, and consequently interrogating medium specificity in relation to its aesthetic appreciation in traditional as well as new viewing sites. In this respect, if

intermediality is more profitably understood as the site of a 'crisis of the medium which requires another for its completion', as Lúcia Nagib (2014: 37) has suggested, then I would argue that what is in crisis in *Stray Dogs*'s final image is the very idea of cinema itself and its traditional mode of spectatorship, an idea being stretched along different temporal vectors: the nostalgic cinema of the past, the changing cinema of the present and the uncertain cinema of the future, all interlacing around the figure of a spectator who is simultaneously reminded of the here and now of aesthetic experience.

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[1] For more on 'slow cinema', see my *Slow Cinema* (2016, with Nuno Barradas Jorge).
[2] Yet here it must be noted that sound can be used for deceptive ends in terms of adding a non-existent temporal duration to still photographs. A germane example are the landscape shots at the beginning of *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), stills that appear to be motion pictures thanks to the sound that was added at post-production. I thank Justin Remes for bringing this to my attention.
[3] Most notable among these is the ongoing part-documentary/part-experimental/part-performance-art 'Slow Walk, Long March' series – or simply 'Walker' series as it has been nicknamed – that comprise autonomous short films starring Lee Kang-sheng as a Buddhist monk walking in real time at an exceedingly slow pace in real settings across the world, including Taipei, Hong Kong, Marseille and Kuching.
[4] The visual trope of characters crying is recurrent across Tsai's body of films, most memorably seen in his *Vive l'amour*, which ends with a 5-minute long take of Mei-mei (Yang Kue-mei) in convulsive tears.

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