Song Hwee Lim


Song Hwee Lim notes in the opening acknowledgements of his remarkable book, *Tsai Ming-Liang and a Cinema of Slowness,* that the project is itself the product of a very slow gestation process. He describes the initial “visceral reaction” he felt upon viewing the Malaysian-born and Taiwan-based director’s first film, *Rebels of the Neon God,* when it was first released in 1992, and how this initial reaction developed into “a half-a-life-long obsession” with Tsai Ming-liang’s films. The result, published a full twenty-two years after his first viewing of Tsai’s *Rebels,* is this magisterial study of the techniques and thematics of slowness in Tsai’s oeuvre, together with their broader implications.

Lim’s book is (un)timely for other reasons as well. As Lim notes, around the turn of the twenty-first century interest began to develop in the notion of “slow food” and even “slow knowledge,” as a way of challenging and resisting the frenetic pacing of contemporary life. A notion of “slow cinema” or a “cinema of slowness” emerged at around the same time, reflecting an interest not only in documenting and representing an alternative sense of temporality, but also in generating different temporal sensibilities on the part of the films’ viewers. In addition, over roughly the same period, there has been a sharp spike in interest — in Western and international forums — in contemporary Taiwan cinema, and particularly in works by New Taiwan Cinema directors such as Hou Hsiao-hsien, Edward Yang, Ang Lee, and Tsai Ming-liang. There is a general perception that New Taiwan Cinema is characterized by a deliberate, methodical pacing that is compounded by a heavy reliance on long takes and long shots. Tsai’s work is emblematic of this trend, though — as Lim demonstrates in methodical and convincing detail — the specific characteristics of Tsai’s cinematography differ significantly from those of his compatriots.

From an interpretive perspective, Tsai Ming-liang’s cinema presents a distinct challenge. One of East Asia’s most recognizable auteurs, Tsai returns repeatedly in his films to a common set of actors, themes, and cinematic techniques, such that they may be more productively considered as part of a larger oeuvre rather than as a series of discrete individual works. In *Cinema of Slowness,* Lim addresses this challenge by eschewing a more conventional approach wherein the films are discussed one after another, instead adopting a more holistic approach in which he traces a set of thematic concerns that run through Tsai’s oeuvre. As Lim explains, he treats Tsai’s body of work “as one single text rather than as multiple texts,” and proposes that the “interconnection of diegetic and extra-diegetic elements among Tsai’s films” may be treated
as a form of “intratextuality,” rather than a more conventional form of intertextuality (49). In his analysis, he jumps back and forth between Tsai’s various works, including not only his feature-length films but also some of his early theatrical work as well as some of his shorts. In an appendix Lim provides a filmography of Tsai’s major films (his feature-length films, starting with Rebels to Visage, together with the short film The Skywalk is Gone), which includes short synopses of each. In the main body of his study, however, Lim offers only the bare minimum of narrative context necessary to make sense of the discussion at hand.

The result is refreshingly bold, since it approaches Tsai’s work as though assuming that the reader is already quite familiar with it (in the same way that someone working in an English-language context might approach, say, the work of Hitchcock or Tarantino). This approach works well for this reader, who happens to be quite familiar with Tsai’s work, and presumably many of the book’s readers will be coming to it from a similar background. Furthermore, in addition to presuming the same sort of familiarity with the Taiwan-based Tsai as one might with a canonical Western director, Lim’s approach is innovative in that it gives minimal attention to issues of plot, and instead focuses primarily on thematic and structural concerns — including “slowness,” “signature,” “stillness,” and “silence” — as they are developed across an array of different works.

In Chapter 2, on “Slowness,” Lim draws on the work of a variety of theorists and critics to sketch out a theoretical model of a cinema of slowness. Although this chapter barely refers to Tsai’s own work, it lays out the conceptual and methodological framework within which the following analysis of Tsai’s works is situated. The following chapter, on “Signature,” takes as its starting point Tsai’s practice, beginning with his third film, The River, of including at the end of the work a blank screen with his handwritten signature. Lim uses this figure of the signature to reflect on Tsai’s status as an auteur, and, more broadly, on the relationship between a cinema of slowness and a culture of cinephilia. In the next chapter, on “Stillness,” Lim examines the cinematic strategies that Tsai employs to generate a feeling of stillness in his films. This includes a detailed analysis of Tsai’s distinctive use of the long take (with abundant quantitative analysis of how Tsai’s use of the long take differs from that of other directors, particularly his compatriot Hou Hsiao-hsien). Finally, in the last chapter of the book, Lim turns from visual concerns to aural ones, and looks specifically at Tsai’s use of silence in his films. Lim notes that aural elements in cinema typically receive considerable less attention than do visual elements, and that even within cinematic sound studies, the study of silence (or virtual silence, since Lim notes that a film with a soundtrack can never have absolute silence). Lim concludes with a short epilogue on “Getting Lost,” in which he returns to Song’s