NECSUS

The care for opacity
On Tsai Ming-Liang's conservative filmic gesture

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A thin veneer of immediate reality is spread over natural and artificial matter, and whoever wishes to remain in the now, with the now, on the now, should please not break its tension film.
– Vladimir Nabokov, *Transparent Things*

Transparent things

The opening generic of Tsai Ming-Liang's *Face* (2009) has just ended. In the background, we hear the hum of a café. On a white screen, calligraphy of the Chinese character for face, 脸 (*lian*), fades-in. It is full and well-proportioned, yet it seems to irresistibly flee toward the right, as if drawn in a fury – or better, furiously drawn forth. This transient and animated calligraphic gesture already prefigures the general movement of the movie to come: faces moving through and passing away; faces in time, *trans-appearing* faces.

Simultaneously, we hear a short dialogue between the café waiter and some visitors. 'Bonjour. We're looking for Antoine. – You just missed him.' Through the café's window, we see a flock of pigeons rapidly vanishing. We are left with an empty cup of coffee on a table, a view on the café's descending street, and some pale, shadow-like reflections on the window of the movement of the people inside the café. Antoine was here. His cup is still there. The film production crew had an appointment with him at 10h. Too late – he is at the dentist now. Xiao Kang's reflection appears where Antoine

stood, in a kind of ghostly rapprochement of the two main characters of the movie. Xiao Kang gazes at the coffee cup, then bends under the table and picks up a feather. He examines it and then leaves it on the table, beside the cup. The opening sequence ends on a close shot of a metal wire covered with pigeon feathers, hovering over a quiet alley. No doubt: Antoine was here. He just flew away.

Although it does not necessarily appear as such for the first-time viewer, this opening sequence constitutes a paradigmatic element to understand the cinematic proposition of *Face*, acting simultaneously as a condensed expression of its subtle visual poetry and a sort of propaedeutic to Tsai Ming-Liang's uncompromising conception of cinema. Tsai's films are characterised by a unique and somewhat paradoxical blend of transparency and opacity. On the one hand, his unabashed and uncompromising radical temporal realism has led him to create a crystalline visual apparatus that makes us attentive to the most minute details of what appears on screen. In an interview published in the French newspaper *L'humanité* after the release of *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), Tsai asserts his aesthetic fundamentals in the following manner:

> I try to stay as close as possible to reality, to develop a reflection that proceeds from observation. It is essential that our gaze corresponds to what is captured by the camera lens. It is better to create conditions for the gaze similar to that offered by an opened window.[1]

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 transparaît] where the paths of my various experiences intersect, and also where my own and other people's intersect and engage each others like gears.'[2] 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.

Nowhere is this more the case than in *Face*. To give but one example: the opening scene is a direct cinematic translation of Tsai's missed encounter with Jean-Pierre Léaud at the time of the shooting of *What Time is it There?* (2001). As Tsai recalls,

> [t]hat's how our first encounter happened, in 2000. I went to the café, he had left already. On the table where he was seated, there was a cup of coffee and a feather. Jean-Pierre often has bird feathers on him.[3]

On the other hand, Tsai's steady refusal of conventional narrative or drama also produces a lasting impression of opacity. Following Aristotle's paradigmatic definition, drama is indeed an *elucidation* of a situation, a way to make it intelligible. However, Tsai certainly does not want to enlighten all things; in a typically Beckettian way, he rather reminds us that when things get real or realistic, they appear absurd. Here we find the abrasive and somewhat nihilist Tsai, the one that is fully immersed in the violence and turmoil of our global era, always ready to abrade the spectator on the thread of chronological time and make him/her suffer some excruciating temporal exfoliations – just think of the interminable eight-minute fade-out at the end of *It's a Dream* (2007), or the five-minute sequence shot in the empty movie theatre of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003). In a way, Tsai's desire to faithfully reflect reality in its crudest possible (temporal) terms has led him to create his own brand of *cinema of cruelty*:

> [w]e often conceive of cinema as a comfortable shelter protecting us from reality. However, the cinema that moves me is the one which aims at revealing the truth of the real...I want my cinema to be cruel, even though no matter how cruel my cinema is, it will never be crueler than reality.[4]

Tsai's cinema is also inhabited by an extreme and sometimes quite unsettling tenderness, exemplified among other things by his unrestrained passion for Grace Chang and other 1950s and 1960s romantic singers – and most importantly perhaps, by his unconditional love for his fetish actor, Lee Kang-Sheng. *Face* is not about just any face: at the core of the movie, we find Tsai's repeatedly expressed desire to shoot Lee Kang-Sheng's and Jean-Pierre Léaud's beloved faces. This might sound like a quite feeble justification to make a film and, as a matter of fact, it might indeed explain some lengthy, gratuitous, or even complacent moments of this cinematic homage to Truffaut and his favourite actors. Be that as it is, at the very core of *Face* there is a deep and passionate *act of love*, and arguably the best way to read it is as a declaration of love for cinema in general and the *nouvelle vague* in particular.

In this regard, *Face* is certainly Tsai's most cryptic film to date, as it is also the one for which he has enjoyed the greatest artistic freedom. This is due in no small part to the fact that it has been commissioned and co-

produced by the Louvre Museum, who invited Tsai to create the first opus of the 'Le Louvre invites Filmmakers' collection – a series of works that are intended to renew our understanding of one of the world's greatest art collections. In a November 2009 interview with the French newspaper *Libération*, Tsai acknowledged these particularly favorable conditions of creation by presenting *Face* as an expression of his 'desire to go toward pure cinema', underlining the fact that 'the museum partly protects [him] against the immediacy that crushes films' consumption'.[5] The museum for Tsai is both the occasion for a freer artistic expression and a unique shelter against oblivion. Or, as he nicely puts it: '[g]radually my movies find a home, and that is the museum.'[6]

Over the years, Tsai has in fact consistently denounced the commodification of cinema, its reduction to a pure commercial artefact. 'Cinema is not a commercial object', he says. If it would be, then 'the actors face in the movie could not be preserved. It is true creation that matters to me and it is through true creation that the actor's face can be preserved.'[7] But what does it mean for Tsai to cinematographically preserve a cherished world, a beloved face? In what way does this imply to 'protect the obscurity of characters, relations and things'[8], as he states elsewhere?

In this article, I wish to explore this complex process of *cinematic transappearance* at stake in *Face*. More specifically, I will try to characterise Tsai's 'conservative' filmic gesture as an attempt at producing dense, affective, and deeply localised *chiaroscuri* in the age of global commercial (over)exposition. In other words, I want to explore the film's radical and provocative poetic meditation on the themes of media exposure and vulnerability through a special care for its affective, political, and socio-ecological conditions of emergence. The un-dramatic slowness that characterises Tsai Ming-Liang's cinema radically questions our constituent relationship both with images and with the disappearing spaces of global capitalism. In his movies, the spectator is often taken into a kind of pre-apocalyptic idleness, as if the world had suddenly stopped and remained suspended. [9] What is at stake here is his cinema's imaginal power of interruption – that is, how it is able to deactivate the dominant conception of a homogeneous and empty time to make us, literally, *entrer en matière* ('to enter in matter', or a material *intro-duction*). In the wake of Agamben's meditation about the immanent opacity of the forms-of-life, the ultimate aim of this article is thus to present Tsai's cinema (and *Face* in particular) as a potential media figure of inoperativeness or *désoeuvrement*.

Nowhere more than in *Face* does Tsai Ming-Liang's life and practice of cinema coincide more closely. Indeed, *Face* presents a sort of *mise en abyme*

of his own practice of cinema as Lee Kang-Sheng, Tsai's beloved avatar, plays the role of a director who shoots a movie at the Louvre museum and who must interrupt the shooting because of his mother's death. This process of cinematic self-reflection is rather blunt and, at times, plainly boring: think for example of the rather superfluous scene of an improvised supper between some of Truffaut's muses (Jeanne Moreau, Nathalie Baye, and Fanny Ardant). This attempt at cinephilic homage feels deeply whimsical and complacent, museifying well-known actresses' faces and adding them to the other stuffed animal heads present in the movie. Or perhaps, is this not precisely what Tsai is pointing at, cinema's inherent and insidious fetishising power, its fatal tendency to disconnect appearances from life, producing (in)glorious stars and transnational idolatry? In any case, for most western critics at least, *Face* represents a premature museification of Tsai's cinematic universe and it has been poorly appreciated.

Face unfolds like a dream – a very strange and idiosyncratic dream about cinema. My intention is not to comment or criticise that dream. On the contrary, I want to understand who made that dream, and the world he lives in. My approach to *Face* is not that of an art critic but rather of an anthropologist of the cultural interstices.[10] I am not so much interested in glossing over the film's aesthetic merits and demerits; instead, I wish to approach it (at least for now) as a poetic and human attempt at affective and artistic territory formation.

Face is an intimidating movie composed of loosely-connected poetic tableaux, and it is as easy to get lost in this cinematic labyrinth as it is in the Louvre (that 'great dragon', as Tsai used to call it). By trying to reveal the particular situation of the autobiographical in his work, I hope to offer not only interpretive keys to the potential viewer but above all, to emphasise the *sedentary component of Tsai's filmic gesture*, this vulnerable and utterly practical dimension where the distinction between life and art vanishes. Methodologically speaking, in the perspective of the ecology of media practices, I believe that, following Stengers,

> such things must be expressed in the language of the practitioner who experiences them, whose obligations force her to experience them. The idiom and the factish affirm the territory. We can never fully understand another's dreams, hopes, doubts, and fears, in the sense that an exact translation could be provided, but we are still transformed as they pass into our experience. The experience is one of a deterritorialization that is ignored by the byways of criticism, a 'transductive' experience without which all criticism is a judgment and a disqualification.[11]

The sedentary component of Tsai's art practice

I have already suggested that *Face* is arguably Tsai's most intimate and autobiographical film to date. For my part, the discovery of this rich cinematic oeuvre has coincided with a profound transformation of my global understanding of his work. I first saw *Face* during my two-month stay in Taiwan in spring 2010 as an invited researcher at the National Central University (NCU). This prolonged sojourn has allowed me to meet Tsai Ming-Liang and Lee Kang-Sheng on a number of occasions, as they were touring Taiwan university campuses with their last film and generously participating in discussions with the public after the projections. As the saying goes, this has been the occasion to discover the man behind the work. Naively, I used to think of Tsai as a minimalist and provocative director – one who can equally express the fundamental joy of anonymous desiring through improbable romantic situations, such as the final scene of *The Hole* (1998), where the two newlywed neighbours dance together to a song entitled 'I don't care who you are' (我不管你是谁，*wo bu guan ni shi shei*); or one who can stage an irresistible final cum shot by Xiao Kang and an anonymous Japanese actress reduced to the state of mere porno flesh (*The Wayward Cloud*, 2004). This is the Tsai that I used to imagine: artsy, deeply original, and cruel – a purely *nomadic* Tsai.

In return, what I discovered is a compassionate, locally-rooted, and surprisingly talkative Tsai, who prides himself on offering me his home-baked cookies when I unexpectedly met him for the first time in his café, or to cook lunch for the post-production team during the editing of *Face* (as his editor, Jacques Comets, stated); who, in his video-installation *It's a Dream* exhibited at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum (2010), carefully arranges the seats so that people pay attention to the fact that they are together as they watch the movie; who constantly reiterates how he loves to film Xiao Kang's face and rear end, and how he will never make a film without him; who wants to know if you believe in spirits, and who dares to let the time of an all-too real mourning follow its own inescapable course all the way through his films (*What Time is it There?* [2001], and of course, *Face*). In short, I became more attentive to what, following Isabelle Stengers, I will call the *sedentary component* of Tsai's cinematic practice.

What is at stake here is certainly not drawing a definite line between the 'good' traditional sedentary and the 'bad' modern nomad – all the more so within Tsai's own work. As Stengers carefully points out, it is not about identifying nomads and sedentaries, but rather, in each given interaction, 'a contrast whose scope does not exceed that interaction'.[12] The question here

is to what extent a film can be morphed into a deterritorialising figure of thought, and inversely, where we should be content to simply dwell in its proximity as it lays in the disclosure of its own being, between rising and sheltering, as Martin Heidegger, a well-known apologist of the truth of a work of art, would say.

The concept of a sedentary component is a 'technical' specification for the experience of *désoeuvrement* at the core of Tsai's art. In Stengers' *The Curse of Tolerance*, this concept refers to an essential dimension of the mode of existence and enjoyment of one's own practice: in short, the sedentary component concerns what literally *im-ports*. In Stengers' constructivist optic, it is what comes closer to what others (like Foucault or Agamben) would call, after Hegel, an ethical substance. In the perspective of ecology of practices that promotes transductive experiences of deterritorialisation, the sedentary component refers to the interiority of a fold, a minima of belonging, a threshold of territoriality, a differential vulnerability – that is, a soul – that constitutes itself as a practical limit against the destructiveness of generalised equivalence.[13] The affirmation of the sedentary component of a vital practice opposes the modernist and hegemonic understanding of economics: all things – all practices – are *not* equal.

> Whoever is engaged in an activity such that 'all ways of doing are not equivalent' is, in this sense, a practitioner. This means of course that an economic order in which it is normal to 'sell one's own workforce' is an order dedicated to destroy practices.[14]

Arguably, Tsai Ming-Liang would defend a similar position, as he fiercely defends freedom of creation against the film industry: '[f]or me, filmmaking is very personal…I never consider myself part of the film industry. I treat my work as exquisite craftsmanship…art is about individual person.'[15]

One of the main interests of Stengers' discussion of the sedentary principle is that it is grounded in a cosmopolitical reflection oriented by what she calls the 'eventuality of peace' – that is, not a regulation or pacification of practices, but their harmonious convergence as a speculative possibility. Of particular interest is her concern for the fragile singularity of practices and how it might be compromised if they are forced to 'expose' themselves in improper conditions. Discussing the conditions of representation in a hypothetical Parliament of things, the main challenge of the cosmopolitical proposal thus becomes to acknowledge the 'presence of the sedentary as such'[16], which is usually left in the shadows and does not appear on the political scene. If, for Stengers, politics is a contingent practice that neces-

sarily involves a certain degree of exposure or representation, it is only in the cosmopolitical horizon that we can imagine a world in which each and every singular (shadowy) sedentarity would be peacefully *saved* as such.

A similar challenge appears in relation to Tsai Ming-Liang's work: how to give an account of the strong autobiographical (and vulnerable) dimension of his art without falling in the trap of the merely personal and idiotic, and also how not to overtly politicise it? In other words: *how to remain in the now, with the now, on the now of Tsai's practice of cinematic transappearance?* As for Stengers' practical sedentaries, the main danger here would be to force Tsai Ming-Liang into a politics of imaginal interruption and *désoeuvrement* without giving the affective sedentary component the due attention. For in fact, the power of imaginal interruption and *désoeuvrement* lies precisely in the specific relation to the autobiographical sedentary component. In Agamben's terms, the situation of Tsai's sedentary component within his work amounts perhaps to 'a potentiality that conserves itself and saves itself as such in actuality'.[17] It is this conservative and/or sedentary aspect of Tsai's cinematic practice that I would now like to discuss in detail, through Agamben's idea of love.

Shadows of a love

It is one of the most beautiful love scenes of recent cinema, a living tableau, a contemporary masterpiece of chiaroscuro. In pitch dark, we hear the crackling sound of somebody eating chips, followed by a woman's heartfelt laughter. A small and blurry dot of red incandescence appears: it is the burning tip of a cigarette, exchanged between the partners. The light gets stronger as the smoker takes a puff, and then comes back to its mild ember state. Suddenly, a lighter sparks: two faces appear for a short moment. She feeds him chips and laughs again. We are back in the dark. The cigarette moves slowly between the two lovers, a firefly in the night. Light, faces, laughter, dark. Lovers in the dark. Light. She does not laugh anymore. They gaze at each other in the glow of the lighter, quietly fascinated. Dark again. Breath. The breathing of the night. Light. She explores his body with her mouth, kissing him gently on his forehead, on his nose, on his mouth, on his chin, on his neck, on his shoulder. Two faces in the dark, gazing at each other. The infinite mystery of a lover's face. Incipient, anonymous. An idea of love:

> [t]o live in intimacy with a stranger, not in order to draw him closer, or to make him known, but rather to keep him strange, remote: unapparent – so

unapparent that his name contains him entirely. And, even in discomfort, to be nothing else, day after day, than the ever open place, the unwaning light in which that one being, that thing, remains forever exposed and sealed off.[18]

The trailer for *Face* starts silently with an excerpt from this exquisite and slow-paced intimate scene, followed by a sensual Spanish version of Dalida's song 'History of a Love' – a title that tells us just what this movie is meant to be. It is indeed the story of *a* love, part of the challenge being to properly address the very singular (or sedentary) nature of this cinematic act of love. Love and its irresistible chiaroscuri could very well be the famous Northwest passage of the geography of the true life ardently looked for by the Situationists, this 'point of indifference between life and art, where *both* undergo a decisive metamorphosis *simultaneously*'[19] – the point where Tsai's life and his oeuvre become thoroughly indiscernible. Tsai's cinema would then be a sort of poetic *camera obscura*, in which love's fabulatory power slowly reveals itself, bringing life to images and images to life.

In Tsai's film, love is often depicted as an irresistible flood: water creeping in the most private and desolate lives, breaking into the most watertight interiors. To keep up with the most recent examples: water flowing out of cracked concrete in the affectively desertified world of *The Wayward Cloud*; water becoming an inner sea of tranquility on which the characters dreamily navigate while lying on a mattress in the final sequence of *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, etc. In *Face*, the poetic conflation of love and water is revived once again, this time through a spectacular outbreak in the kitchen pipes of Xiao Kang's apartment. The violent eruption of water is actively fought by Xiao Kang in vain; the apartment soon becomes entirely flooded, allowing for an amazingly peaceful yet unexpectedly transgressive scene, where Xiao Kang kneels at his mother's bedside massaging her aching belly, as she pushes his hand toward her private parts. As dystopic and delusional as Tsai's films can be, we cannot but acknowledge the fact that they are also systematically permeated with irresistible drives bringing people together: *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*, as the title states, or, quite literally: *Vive l'amour!* (1994).

Raw life/bare life

It is often said that Lee Kang-Sheng is Tsai's fetish actor. By this, it is generally meant that Lee Kang-Sheng is the object of a scrupulous and quasi-obsessive attention, with some people often speculating over the exact nature of Tsai's

desire for his own personal cinematic Adonis. In the numerous interviews that they have given since the release of *Face*, Tsai has constantly reasserted the vital importance of Lee's presence in his filmmaking process:

> [i]t's because of this actor Lee Kang-Sheng that I gradually discovered the meaning of filmmaking. I finally have the opportunity to look at a face and its minute changes, the minute changes over time. These changes are irreversible. They reveal the truth of life ceaselessly. I feel very fortunate to capture Lee Kang-Sheng. *Without his face, I don't want to make film anymore.*[20]

One cannot help but note a certain contradiction between the radical objectification with the radical passivity Lee is subjected to in Tsai's films and, at the same time, this moving and deep-felt remark about the temporal singularity of Lee's beloved face. In *Face*, this tension is made sensible through the omnipresence of raw meat. Raw meat plays different poetic functions in the movie: in the winter cold, harshly-lit Parisian context of the Louvre, it is mostly identified with Laetitia Casta, who plays the role of an actress playing the role of Salomé, and who is quietly suffering from her condition of overexposed filmic flesh. The reenactment of Salomé's dance in the meat freezer with Lee Kang-Sheng coldly confirms her crude/cruel destiny: if the Louvre museum is a great freezer of beauty, Casta is its finest prey – a great predatory *femme fatale*.

In the intimate, dimly-lit context of Lee Kang-Sheng's Taiwanese morning, raw meat plays an equally crucial role, being closely associated with his mother's presence. Right after the first scene of the missing Jean-Pierre at the café, we see Lee Kang-Sheng's mother rhythmically chopping meat in her kitchen. After her death, her two daughters cannot seem to figure out what to do with all of the chopped meat they find in the freezer. In a scene that beautifully expresses the state of confusion and distress following the death of a close relative, the first daughter decides to put some order into her mother's freezer and throws away all the small packs of frozen meat, struggling with the ones that seem to have been there for a little too long. 'All is rotten' she says, reading determination and imperativeness on her face. Shortly after, in the same sequence, her cleaning attempt is reversed by her sister who, in an equally obsessive move, puts all of the meat and food plates back in the refrigerator; she even caresses it as if to say that everything is now back in order, as she tenderly sheds tears over her mother's death.

Here, consumable raw meat serves as an effective image of the temporal and ephemeral aspect of human corporality. Raw meat's transitional sig-

nificance is further enhanced when, a little later on, Xiao Kang repeats his mother's cooking gesture of chopping meat, producing yet again the same typical beat. Incidentally, this moment coincides with her mother's spirit finally leaving the house after haunting the place for several days. Chopping meat thus appears as a sort of ritual gesture that enables her spirit to finally rest in peace, a banal daily act that becomes a way of connecting the realm of the living and the realm of the dead.

In a quite unexpected comment about this scene, Tsai extends the fabulatory power of the image of raw meat and the quasi-archetypal chopping gesture to the cinematic realm of the actors' corporality proper. 'Everybody can recognize the sound of hand-chopping meat, humans and spirits alike… I think that the hand-chopped meat texture and that of actors is the same.'[21] Tsai's poetic levelling of the actors' corporality through the image of raw meat exemplifies his will to blur the distinction between reality and fiction, revealing a quite disturbing way of conceiving corporality as cinematic raw material. Here, one cannot help but think of Robert Bresson's naturalist or functionalist conception of the actor as model; for example, when he states that 'to film [cinématographier] somebody does not endow her with life. It is because they are alive that actors give life to a work.'[22] But what does it mean to conceive of an actor as being first and foremost *alive*? What is obtained in this artistic reduction to bare life? Conceived from a formal perspective, Tsai's artistic search for a point of indetermination between art and life culminates in an exploration of the expressive potential of *radical passivity*.

Tsai shares with Bresson a naturalist concern for bare life and corporality, although he does not 'denude' his filmic flesh in quite the same way as the French master (the main difference residing probably in Tsai's long-lasting hostility toward narrative). In what constitutes arguably the best article written on the work of Tsai Ming-Liang, Jean-Pierre Rehm suggests that as the narrative dimension of Tsai's grows ever more rarefied, the weight of the movie is 'abandoned to the actors' bodies. *To their opaqueness.*'[23] In a subchapter insightfully called 'Where are the Corpses?', Rehm further amplifies Tsai's proximity with Bresson: '[t]hese bodies are just figures consecrated to movement, silent gestures that could take the place of puppets.'[24] Nowhere is Xiao Kang's body more opaque and radically passive, closer to that of a malleable doll or marionette, than in the uncanny scene of *The River* (1997) in which he plays a mannequin floating on the Danshui river. As Rehm suggests, this scene works as a perfect *mise en abyme* of Xiao Kang's acting:

[w]hen he is offered a role in a film, within a film, his role requires the most passive acting possible. In a highly programmatic sense, in fact, he is less

called to act the modest role of a drowning victim than to be a stunt double of a pale, stiff, clumsy mannequin that represents a dead man. His performance, bordering on complete inconsistency, only allows him to display one talent: the ability to be a body holding its breath while floating.[25]

Published in 1999, Rehm's essay anticipates some of the essential features of Xiao Kang's future cinematic adventures. The 'willing gigolo' of *The River* (1997) indeed becomes the impassible porno star of *The Wayward Cloud*, and Xiao Kang's radical passivity is further explored through such figures as the paraplegic in *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*; or in *Face*, as the filmmaker is dumbfounded by Laetitia Casta's breathtaking beauty during the shooting of her sensuous dance, later becoming the actual victim of her erotic reenactment of the beheading of St John the Baptist.

Returning to the question of singular love, or Tsai's love of Lee Kang-Sheng's face, we are confronted with a peculiar paradox, one that we could perhaps call the paradox of the spiritual automaton – a paradox that Bresson has beautifully expressed in what constitutes his most condensed formula about actors' corporality: '[m]odel. All face.'[26] The formula refers to an anecdote reported by Montaigne: a man asks a beggar how he can endure such winter cold in a simple shirt while he is muffled to the ears. 'And you, Monsieur, he replied, you do have your face discovered: now, *I am all face.*'[27] In the context of Bresson's meditation, with wit and humor this anecdote forwards something like a *degree zéro* of visageity: face lowered to an unqualified openness, a pure inscription surface. The beggar's sally crudely strips away the (human) visage out of the (corporal) face – a more politically-oriented comment on this scene would suggest that the beggar was ironically displaying where he stood in the particular 'distribution of the sensible' of his time; its strangeness forcefully reflects the very *imaginal* effort required to artistically turn human presence and corporality into raw filmic material in order to abstract new expressive properties from it.

In the wake of Bresson's technical dequalification of the visage toward pure corporal availability, Tsai's oeuvre is equally traversed by a strong tendency to 'undo the face', as Deleuze and Guattari would put it. His films regularly plunge into a becoming imperceptible or clandestine, like the homeless Xiao Kang wandering in the streets of a foreign country (Malaysia, for that matter) of which he does not speak the language, or like the anonymous Xiao Kang abandoning his street vendor job by showing up to an interview to become a porno actor (at the very end of the short feature *The Skywalk is Gone*). Xiao Kang is Tsai's spiritual automaton, a pure model ready to comply with any request, a whatever singularity in a state of permanent

availability. Like Musil's man without qualities, 'his place and function are determined by everyone else, in other words, by the world', and his 'faculty for desire remains innocent, in waiting, potential, so free from itself that it could never decide to initiate an action of its own'.[28] It is this formal process of radical passivity's abstraction that Tsai exemplifies through the image of raw meat – radical passivity as a dire but necessary consequence of a will to flatten out all things toward pure cinematic transparency. This aesthetic of *désoeuvrement*, or literal emptying out of lives and things, brings us to the threshold of a life deprived of any 'higher' purposes – bodies abandoned to their daily opacity, bare lives.

A passion for facticity

Tsai's love for Lee Kang-Sheng runs through all his films, but it is in *Face* that it is most directly revealed, the movie being essentially motivated by the desire to preserve Xiao Kang's (and Jean-Pierre Léaud's) beloved faces. In echo with Agamben's idea of love, *Face* is a film by means of and in which Tsai's unique, incomparable objects of love will be forever exposed *and immured*. However, is this not the first and foremost mission of a museum, to expose *and* seal off an object from the world? Love, like a museum, tends to appropriate an object by literally putting it out of circulation – that is, out of commerce. It is therefore through the museum's potential to extract an object out of its worldly use and exchange that Tsai's cinematic act of love can reach its higher artistic expression and, perhaps, reveal its deeply *fetishist* nature – that is, its passionate *facticity* (the two words are etymologically related).[29]

    In *The Passion of Facticity*, Agamben proposes an inspired close reading of a quite marginal concept in Heidegger's work: namely, love. In *Sein und Zeit*, the analysis of the Dasein's *stimmung* (or affective tonality, fear, and anxiety) is given much importance – but love only figures indirectly in an endnote to section 29, through quotes of Augustine and Pascal. Agamben sustains that love is crucial to understand Heidegger's concept of facticity, which is essentially defined by a dialectics of latency and non-latency: '[f]acticity is the condition of what remains concealed in its opening, of what is exposed by its very retreat.'[30] As it is well-known, Heidegger conceives of this paradoxical movement of opening and withdrawal as the experience of the truth of being, and it is along these lines that Agamben proposes a definition of love as expositional paradox:

> [w]hat man introduces into the world, his 'proper', is not simply the light and opening of knowledge but above all the opening to concealment and opacity …. Love is the passion of facticity in which man bears this nonbelonging and darkness, appropriating (*adsuefacit*) them while guarding them as such.[31]

As understood in the wake of Heidegger's thought, love withholds an essentially *conservative* component, in the sense that it tends to highlight and preserve the object of love *as such*, in its singular, opaque, shadowy facticity. It is along the lines of this 'suchness' that love's expositional paradox allows for a literal *entrée en matière*; and indeed, in a Heideggerian perspective, paradoxes seem inevitable when one wishes to plunge into what I would call here, failing a better word, the living singularity of *a* world. In this regard, the passion for facticity can be understood as a passionate materialist inclination – passionate here referring as much to resoluteness as to an intrinsic passivity inherent to the experience of love. Ultimately, Agamben's description of love's paradoxical conservatism is essential to what I have defined earlier as the sedentary component of Tsai's artistic practice. It constitutes the burning heart of a cinematic practice that, in many regards, works as an imaginal interruption and affective slowing down in the era of global mobilisation. In a recent conference given at National Central University in Taiwan, Tsai shared his rather pessimistic view on our contemporary world that reveals his concerns for ecological (and spiritual) conservation:

> [l]ife is business, life is competition. We see how the directors squeeze themselves only to produce box-office success. We see how the politicians intend to persuade people that economic development should come first, regardless of the fact that the ozone layer is getting thinner and thinner as global warming becomes more and more serious, and that the earth cannot withstand more exploitation. In this weakened environment, an era of recycling is coming. *I think everything should be stopped*, including my lecture here, my movie production, everything.[32]

By centering our attention on the question of love, we leave aside some formal and dystopic aspects of Tsai's aesthetic of désoeuvrement and its 'expropriating' effects, to move toward the ethical and sedentary component of his art practice. One must understand ethics here in its most literal sense, that is, as relative to *ethos*, a way of being by way of which one *in-habits* and produces her existential territory – 'the ethos is also the Abode'.[33] Without proper consideration of love's sensuous play of appearances, one runs the

risk of missing the passage from the opacity of a form-of-life and its constitutive desires to the transparency of its cinematic expression – or, in other words: how cinema is, for Tsai, the imaginal and poetic practice without which there would be no *appropriation* of his object of love in the first place.

<center>***</center>

In *The Open*, the idea of désoeuvrement is exemplified through a discussion of Tiziano's painting *Shepherd and Nymph* (c. 1570), which depicts a shepherd and a nymph just after they consummate their love. Agamben suggests that in their inoperative, post-coital state, they find themselves 'no longer either concealed or unconcealed – but rather, inapparent'.[34] In the last instance, in the state of désoeuvrement, one is somehow 'de-void' or emptied out, becoming concomitantly opaque and transparent. Let this paradox transappear and shine forth, as it does all through Tsai Ming-Liang's oeuvre – and life.

Notes

1. Tsai 2007.
2. Merleau-Ponty 2003, p. xxii (emphasis added).
3. Tsai 2009a.
4. Tsai 2010a, p. 169.
5. Tsai 2009a.
6. Interview with Noah Buchan, 'Film's death and resurrection', *Taipei Times*, 25 March 2010.
7. Tsai 2009b.
8. Tsai 2004.
9. See Bordeleau 2009.
10. This is the first of a series of article on Tsai's recent works. See also 'Lee Kang-Sheng and Tsai Ming-Liang: une relation idiorythmique?', *Hors-champ*, 2011, http://www.horschamp.qc.ca/spip.php?article454, and 'Tsai Ming-Liang at Home/at the Museum', to be published soon in a special issue of *Studies in European Cinema*.
11. Stengers 2011, p. 371.
12. Ibid., p. 364.
13. In François Jullien's terminology, it amounts to what he calls the integrative power of 'connivance' – that is, a tacit mode of relation to the world that aims to fold things inside a situation instead of extracting or *abstracting* general knowledge from it. See Jullien 2010.
14. Stengers 2006, p. 160.
15. Tsai 2010b.
16. Stengers 2011, p. 395.
17. Agamben 2000a, p. 184.
18. Agamben 1995, p. 61.
19. Agamben 2000b, p. 78.

20. Tsai 2010.
21. Tsai 2010a, p. 170.
22. Bresson 1988, p. 25.
23. Rehm 1999, p. 11 (emphasis added).
24. Ibid.
25. Ibid., p. 14.
26. Bresson 1988, p. 42.
27. Montaigne, « De l'usage de se vestir », quoted in Bresson 1988, p. 42 (emphasis added).
28. Rehm 1999, p. 11.
29. '*Faitis*, like its German counterpart, *feit*, simply means "beautiful, pretty". In particular, it is used in conformity with its etymological origin to designate that which, in a human body, seems made by design, fashioned with skill, made-for, and which thereby attracts desire and love.' (Agamben 2000a, p. 196.)
30. Agamben 2000a, p. 190.
31. Ibid., p. 204.
32. Tsai 2011.
33. Deleuze and Guattari 1987.
34. Agamben 2004, p. 87.

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