

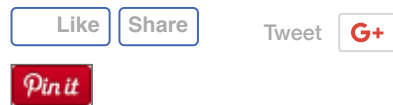


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WHAT TIME IS IT THERE?

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By *Erica Abeel* ([Http://Www.Filmjournal.Com/Taxonomy/Term/93](http://www.filmjournal.com/Taxonomy/Term/93)) Nov 1, 2004



Reviews

Much admired for its dry style and deadpan tone, the work of Taiwanese auteur Tsai Ming-Liang was recently the subject of a retrospective at New York's Walter Reade Theater. Yet, even with this imprimatur, it has to be said: His new *What Time Is It There?* proceeds with all the speed of paint drying, and may incite a longing for the likes of *Exit Wounds*. <http://www.pinterest.com/pin/create/button>

Tsai tends to use the same actors in his films, as well as recurring characters, creating, in effect, a self-contained world that captures the loneliness and anomie of contemporary urban life. The young actor Lee Kang-Sheng is once again stage center, playing Hsiao Kang, a street vendor of watches in Taipei. A few days after his father's death, he meets Shiang-Chyi (Chen Shiang-Chyi), a young woman who's about to leave for Paris and buys a watch with two faces that tells dual time. Hsiao's mother (Lu Yi-Ching) immures herself in her darkened home in an effort to communicate with her departed husband's spirit, ignoring or irritated by the presence of her son. Hsiao takes refuge in the memory of his brief encounter with Shiang-Chyi, and the bulk of the film records his project of resetting all the clocks and watches in Taipei to Paris time. The story also follows Shiang-Chyi to Paris through lonely hotel rooms, an encounter in a graveyard with a louche stranger (the shockingly aged Jean-Pierre Laud), and an abortive sexual episode with a woman she's met in a caf. An enigmatic conclusion set in Paris forces us to revise our perception of all that's come before.

On its own terms, the film succeeds, communicating the very texture and taste of loneliness. The fixed camera watches the characters perform solitary acts (in what feels like real time)--business that's usually hidden from public view, like going to the bathroom or masturbating. Hsiao's efforts to reset Taipei's clocks are less comical than disturbing as an extravagantly hopeless attempt to

connect with a girl he's barely met. For her part, Shiang-Chyi seems adrift in Paris and mainly inhabits, semi-paralyzed, her faceless hotel room, listening fixedly to mysterious, never identified knocking noises from the floor above. Tsai's cinema famously eschews dialogue--Hsaio and his mother may share an apartment, but they pass each other like ships in the night. At times, a giant white fish in a tank in the dining room seems more communicative than the humans.

Beno--t Delhomme, the superb cinematographer of *The Scent of Green Papaya*, has intentionally shot Taipei and Paris as if they were interchangeable; they're less geographical places than states of mind, the light leached of color and evoking alienation. Dispensing with traditional narrative, the film manages cohesion through repetition, as when all three characters engage in sequence in sexual experiences that seem only to reinforce their solitude--Hsaio's real-time encounter with a prostitute has all the allure of pumping air into a bicycle tire. Oblique links are forged as well when Hsaio, desperate to conjure Shiang-Chyi, watches a pirated tape of Truffaut's *The 400 Blows*; then cut to Paris, where Shiang-Chyi actually encounters its now middle-aged star.

Finally, though, the film is too hard to follow--you're ten minutes in before you realize the fellow who disappeared from the first scene is the father who died; and the snail's pace can be excruciating. Taken as a whole, Tsai's oeuvre presents a bleak vision with purity and integrity--never did a filmmaker pander so little!--but his latest demands too much of most viewers.

--Erica Abeel

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