

TSAI MING-LIANG'S

THE WAYWARD CLOUD

## Solitary Particles:

The Taiwanese director's most risqué film uses pornography to explore the impossibility of meaningful romantic connections in modern life.

BY ELENA GORFINKEL

TSAI MING-LIANG'S *THE WAYWARD CLOUD* (2005) is a difficult film but it is also sublime. It is difficult because in its textures and images, it resists expected frames – whether in terms of the legibility of genre, narrative or character. At once realist and modernist, alienated and ecstatically kitschy, it represents a great triumph of Tsai's formalist perversity. It is also a continuation and expansion of the themes and figures that have provided the relational architecture of his cinema: affect-less characters in sparsely furnished urban locations (usually Taipei), a preference for long takes, stationary cameras, wide angles and a manipulation of cinematic duration, and the use of temporal and spatial disjunction to signal characters' strangeness to each other. These are often the same characters: Lee Kang-sheng as the disconsolate Taiwanese 'lonely young man', and Chen Shiang-chyi as the ingénue who serves as his love interest. *The Wayward Cloud* thus takes up his oft-trod motifs of urban alienation and human disconnection, but links them to a new economy of value. The repertoire of repetition – the everyday interchangeable palette of quotidian motions – eating, drinking, working, walking, sleeping – gains another component: fucking. And what could be more repetitive, more boringly modern, than pornography?

Lee Kang-sheng, here continuing his role as Hsiao-kang from Tsai's *What Time Is It There?* (2001), is now employed as a porn actor, living in the same building where Shiang-chyi, his designated intimate stranger, is hoarding water bottles in the apartment below. In the humidity of deep summer, there is a drought – water is scarce, taps have run dry. The city of Taipei has resorted to drinking watermelon juice. Watermelons, a cheap currency, both useful and useless, have transformed the fabric of the everyday. Water, often at the centre of other kinds of elemental crises in Tsai's films, has here been entirely ►

► deracinated – its absence marking the strange viscosity of other fluids that provide its creative substitute. Here is where the brilliance of the scene directly following the opening shot is viscerally felt. We see a woman in a nurse's outfit lying on a white bed – between her legs is a halved red watermelon, both concealing and transforming (into) her genitalia. Tsai's iconic style works to both embody and eviscerate the metaphoric. Literal and figurative collapse onto each other – as the watermelon gets fingered, licked and juiced by Hsiao-kang, and as his partner, Japanese porn star Sumomo Yozakura, performs her pleasure vocally in concert to the rhythms of the slapping rind against her inner thighs. (If this description reads too disconcertingly fecund, it only evokes the corporeal effect that Tsai's film produces in his viewer.) The watermelon functions as a perverse mediation – it is the very thing that facilitates human contact, an artificial and allegorical boundary that must be worked through. This scene establishes another form of symmetrical mediation: as the sex act ensues, shots of the young porn starlet's legs cradling the watermelon are matched graphically with cross-cut inserts, in which Shiang-chyi lies watching her television, her legs similarly cradling a round leatherette flower pillow. The rote boredom of sexual repetition – the ennui of erotics – is here linked visually to the everyday conditions of corporeal banality – the erotics of ennui.

*The Wayward Cloud* is full of iconic moments such as this, floating, much like the watermelons we see bobbing in the murky river that Shiang-chyi passes, like loosened, yet perfectly contained, self-sufficient particles. In this opening we already see the architectonics of *The Wayward Cloud's* conditions of romantic impossibility. Heterosexual relations cannot exist or reproduce themselves, but can only be produced through a mediating form, a third term, an act of projection or displacement – be it the watermelon, the Japanese porn actress, the architecture of walls and enclosures, or representation itself.

The poignancy of Tsai's cinema is in his systematic rigour, his extraction from a set of aesthetic principles, images and techniques, of a consistent crisis of modernity – one that hinges on distance. The irony is that this mediation, this impossibility, is the very thing that produces genuine feeling. Witness the image of the bubble escaping out of Shiang-chyi's faucet, caused by Hsiao-kang's covert bathing in the water reservoir tank at the top of the building. It's a moment of ephemeral contact and mediated transmission between the distant, not-yet lovers, of temporal transience meeting emotional and visual fullness.

The crab-eating scene between Hsiao-kang and Shiang-chyi is but another example of such redirection, in which an act of incredible intimacy (a rare occurrence in Tsai's cinema) is eroticised and displaced through shadow play, a culinary soft-core magic lantern show. The couple crunch and suck on the carapaces of the shellfish in silhouette against a wall, their flat, dark shadows rendering ingestion and enjoyment through excessively loud sounds. Eating and erotics become coextensive, but even this form of embodied pleasure is deferred, its experience redirected onto the aural as well as onto the two-dimensional silhouettes on the wall. The spectacle of eating, like that of sex, is a physical activity that the camera can record and approach as documentary fact. It is interesting that Tsai links these processes, digestion and penetration, as ones that trouble the boundary between cinematic reality and fiction, through the nature of filmic performance and the limits, visible and abstracted, of actors' bodies. What is love ultimately, but the possession, the ingestion, the incorporation of the loved one? And what is the boundary of the self, that is, love's limit?

In *A Lover's Discourse*, Roland Barthes wrote, 'amorous obscenity is extreme: nothing can redeem it, bestow upon it the positive value of a transgression'. There is something in Tsai's film that perfectly suits this statement – how can a film be so

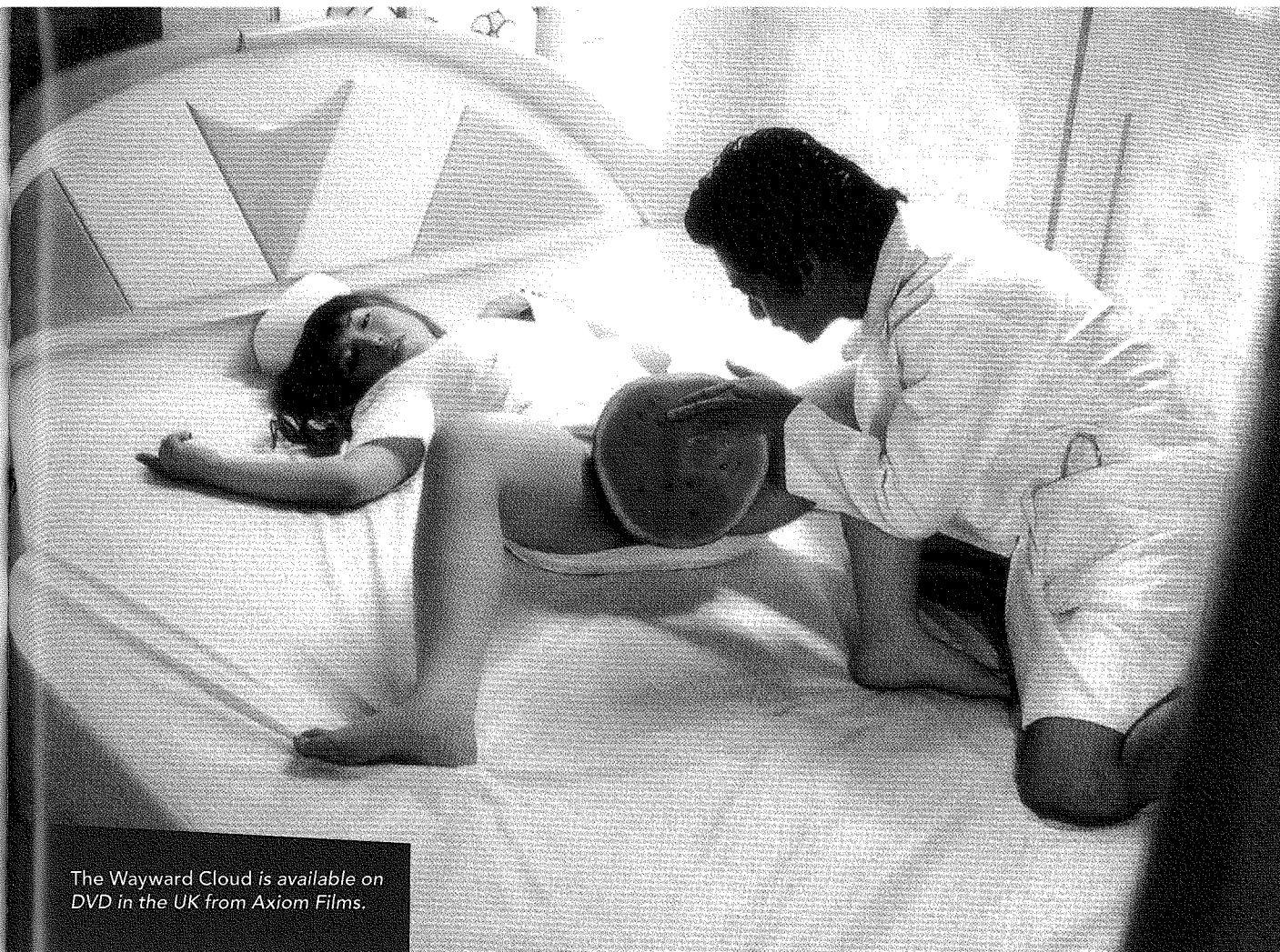
obscene in explicitness of content and yet so sentimental? *The Wayward Cloud* is at once detached and flooded with affective force. It veers from sparse formal compositions to ebulliently kitschy musical numbers – these are equal parts MGM musical, Hong Kong pop, Jacques Demy, and scrappy, campy artisanal labour as in the Kuchar brothers' films and James Bidgood's *Pink Narcissus* (1971). Following on Barthes, we might consider *The Wayward Cloud* a film about love's obscenity, in which the impossibility of hetero romantic coupling produces, through the ecstatic symmetries of the film's mise en scène and its drought-ridden universe, a queer space of perverse attachments and displacements. The film's outré opening adroitly mirrors its controversial closing scene, in which Adrian Martin, Helen Bandis and Grant MacDonald have rigorously examined in their aptly titled essay 'The 400 Blow Jobs' in *Rouge*. The scene imagines a threesome, the three bodies who will by the end of the film intersect even more literally, across the borders of filmic space rather than montaged time, in a scenario of impossible, if absurdly mediated, contact. To suggest that the extended final scene, in which Shiang-chyi finds a narcoleptic, unconscious, or perhaps dead Yozakura, and brings her to the scene of a scheduled porno shoot with Hsiao-kang, is somehow misogynistic, is to entirely miss the point of the film's queer formalist allegory. Each of the figures in this predestined threesome takes on characteristics of 'deadness' or disabled agency, of non-particulate matter. All are in *absentia*, bereft of themselves, in one way or another. They are each pieces of the machine of Tsai's abstraction, and would be meaningless without each other.

What occurs, as Shiang-chyi begins to watch through a round porthole window as Hsiao-kang ruts with the insensate 'dead' body of Yozakura, with the vigorous assistance of the film crew, is a scenario that recalls for me, strangely enough, one of the most erotic films ever made,

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The *Wayward Cloud* is available on DVD in the UK from Axiom Films.

Jean Genet's *Un chant d'amour* (1950). The impermeable boundary of the wall in Genet's classic, which can only diffuse the immaterial particles of cigarette smoke – the hottest form of erotic displacement this side of the 20th century – is in Tsai's film made a more open surface, but no more penetrable allegorically. As Hsiao-kang dutifully, robotically, fucks the body of a woman who has become seemingly lifeless matter propped up literally by the crew, Shiang-chyi begins to move closer to the porthole watching in rapt, if blank, fascination. As she moves in, and as their gazes lock in matching reverse shots, Shiang-chyi begins to moan on behalf of, in lieu of, Yozakura's affect-less, slack body. Embodying and vocalising the absent (presumably

'inauthentic') orgasmic performance of the porn actress, Shiang-chyi can be read inversely in terms of her affective sincerity. Hsiao-kang, reaching an exhausted orgasm, jumps up to the window and stuffs his penis into Shiang-chyi's mouth. They are still and silent. As Martin, Bandis and MacDonald note, Hsiao-kang's ass, seen in close-up, drips sweat, natural water, and Chen releases a streaming tear as her mouth remains stuffed. This is the logical, economical 'climax' of the film, in which the two solitary particles, like watermelons bobbing against each other in a loose tide, or two cirrus clouds overlapping in the horizon, remain simultaneously present to each other, yet distinctly separate. This moment of contact/separation is itself an impossible

kind of penetration as cohabitation, as Hsiao-kang occupies one image and Shiang-chyi another, on either side of the wall. The final shot, as the camera tracks out, positioned from behind Shiang-chyi to picture them in one coherent space, while still divided, imagines the superimposition of two flat figures as a form of consummation. Like two paper doll cut-outs laid atop of each other (recalling the cut-out of the China Airlines flight attendants that stands next to Shiang-chyi in this penultimate scene) – the 'clouds' meet in visual perspective, but at different altitudes. ■

Elena Gorfinkel has written on erotic film culture, cult film and cinephilia in *Framework*, *Cineaste* and in the anthologies *Cinephilia: Movies, Love & Memory*, and *Underground USA: Filmmaking beyond the Hollywood Canon*.

Still from: *The Wayward Cloud* (Axiom Films)