

Article

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21 Minutes of Tsai Ming Liang And the Spectacle



“We’re continually shaped by the forces of coincidence”, asseverated by the well-known American writer-director Paul Auster.

A few days ago, after finishing Tsai Ming Liang’s supercalifragilistic film, *Stray Dogs* (2013), I wished to search for some write-ups on the film. When I had opened the browser, it offered me to restore the last session. I had clicked on ‘OK’, and bobbed up Guy Debord’s – a French Marxist philosopher, filmmaker, member of the Letterist International, founder of a Letterist faction, and founding member of the Situationist International – monumental work – *The Society of The Spectacle* (1967). It was indeed a mere coincidence. My reading of the film was shaped anew by the forces of coincidence, and a want has crept up on me to write on Debord’s imprint

on my reading of the film’s two special scenes, throwing caution to the wind.

Tsai Ming Liang is the name of that very prodigious talent who deliberately abstains from engaging with anything that resembles the conventional approach to the narrative. He husbands his resources well and dares to stretch the limits of the most approachable instruments for feats of exquisiteness at the same time. Film every now and then tempts the viewers to celebrate what people, places, and situations represent instead of recognizing the quality, significance, or magnitude of their essence. The auteur, who is not at all filled with hauteur, always pushes against that disposition. *Stray Dogs* deals with the sheer nothingness that has surrounded a homeless and impecunious man, the protagonist who earns his living by holding up

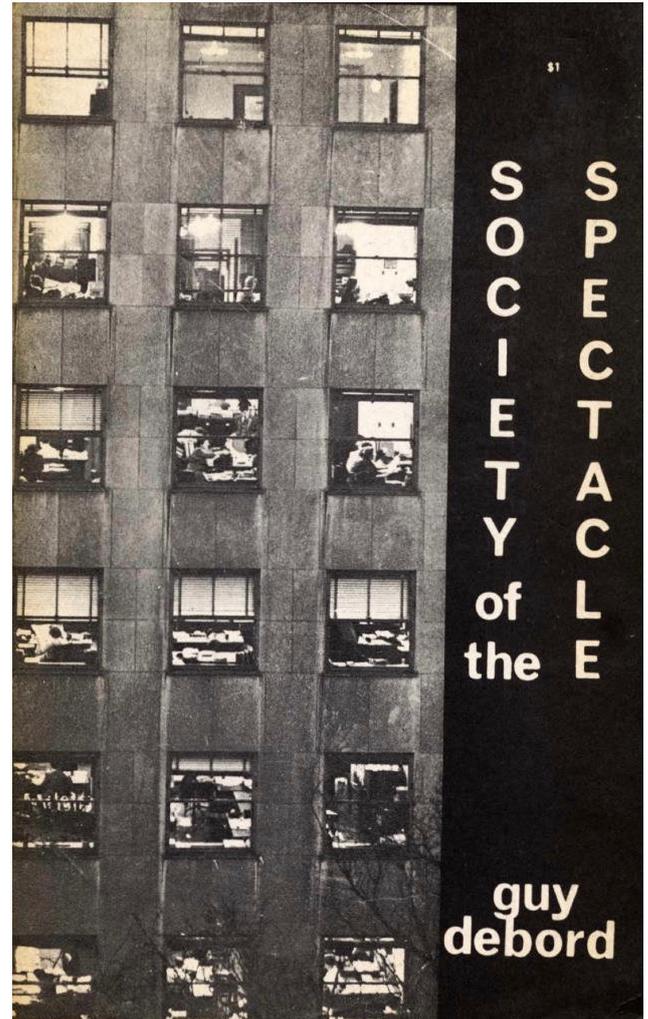
advertising signage at a busy crossroads, and his two kids. All his work seems for naught. There is no plot as such; through some discontinuous images, portraying the isolation and marginalization of life in a metropolis, Tsai takes us to a different island where we are left out alone and forced to ponder upon the morbid reality that not only is valid within the protagonist's space-time milieu but also has its global relevance and presence. However, the main intention here is not to discuss Tsai Ming Liang or the film itself, as I suppose beforehand that the readers have seen the film, but the last two scenes – one is nearly 14 minutes long, where the two characters – the protagonist and a woman whose actual identity is remained clouded throughout the film – are looking at something, which is not shown, standing inside an abandoned building, followed by another, which shows that they are staring at a mural, splashed with blue light, that lasts for almost seven minutes after which the credit starts rolling.

These two consecutive long takes did arrest me and throw me into a spin at the same time, since no denouement was provided. The viewers need to dwell on every single screen second of this scene, as no significant action or movement occurs. Anyway, my banal interpretation of those two scenes – a simple meditation on postmodernist consternation – failed to justify the efficacy of the composition. Of course, it is a meditation on the way time flows unwitnessed through our lives, and when a second could be stretched into several hours, but this flat explanation gave in to a new realization after I had gone through 'The Society of Spectacle' again.

"The spectacle is the moment when the commodity has attained the total occupation of social life".

Film is definitely an important element of the society of the spectacle, however one

ought not to think that Debord's spectacle and the spectacularity of the cinematic medium are



one and the same. Debord's theoretical understanding of spectacle intended to expostulate a critique on socio-economic conditions. The spectacle continuously reduces the social and historical factuality to commodifiable fragments, enticing us to focus on appearances fraught with the false ideas of contentment. According to Debord, this constitutes an unprecedented "degradation" of our lives. The spectacle is not a mere assemblage of images, but "a social relation among people mediated by images". Tsai's images invite us to acknowledge that reality. We're forced to fix our eyes on the couple(?) who is alienated (please note that in their broad interpretation of the Marxist theories, the situationists conclude that in the age of

advanced capitalism and industrialization, e.g., ‘Taiwan Miracle’ – an apt example as we’re discussing on a Taiwanese film – the woe of ‘Social Alienation’ and ‘Commodity Fetishism’ has spread across every aspect of life and culture) from the product of their own labour and has no other option but to get stuck in a quagmire from which there is no easy way out. Although the deserted building, the tiles, and the long empty space are shown previously, in this scene those are made to face the wrath of the spectacle – the overturned representation of society in which the relations between commodities have supervened upon the relations between the individuals. The unnamed man is sipping liquor from a bottle, and then he moves to lurch into an ungainly cuddle with the woman. But it is the gaze, unperturbed by the sound of a passing train, of the woman, shedding tears, countering the spectacle with probity. It seems that the sense of being is hung on to an eonian present even as the time is on the move, leaving aside the phenomena – film, advertisement, television, over-the-top media service, etc. – operated by market economy.

In the final scene – a wide shot taken from the top – the depth of the space is formed by crossing off the camera’s gaze with the two characters’ and the viewer’s line of vision, and the ‘one-sidedness’ depicted in the scene marks the dimensions of spectacle that demands obedience. The poor man, stripped of emotion, has succumbed to the mystery, which is opaque: “the decline of being into having, and having into merely appearing”. The present is not a mere present anymore, but a series of references to the past that has ceased to exist in the stream of sensations. "All that once was directly lived has become mere representation": this particular scene works as an imperative in enforcing us to think of the accumulation of spectacle in the modern age of bold and brazen media, as mentioned before. Every minute of

this scene reminds us that we, knowingly or unknowingly, attribute the meaning of our own existence to something else which is beyond our immediate life and are enslaved to their representation (we may recall the scenes where the man stands motionless on the road, holding the advertising placard), and reality ceases to appear as a datum of experience because of the existing self-contradictions.



How do these two mortals, who are square pegs in a round hole, arrive at this cul-de-sac? In today’s world, emotion is easily converted, unknowingly, into a saleable package, extirpating the soul of it. The man and the woman are pushed to such an extent that they seize to feel their own existence and desire and start asking questions to the wall, without even saying a thing. Moreover, when he tries to hug the woman, we also remain unmoved like the latter. His touch fails to evoke any emotion as both of them have become the consumers of illusion where no physical reality stands true, and it looks like that the empty space, we see in the next scene, emerges in the visual plane of concrete characters as a consequence of the action. In the age of “work harder buy more”, these two successive scenes are the perfect manifestation of “false consciousness” from which people are suffering. Tsai dares to compel the viewers to concentrate on the images for almost 21 minutes when hardly anything happens physically, making it a dark melopeia that does not take an appearance of immediacy. And we are given the required screen-time to understand how spectacle

“builds its unity on the disjunction” and reigns supreme. The reality, which comes into being through the spatialization of time (which, in this case, I think Debord would not regard with aversion), we encounter here cannot be replaced by any other experience. In the final scene, Tsai brings forth a teleological voice-over by focusing the camera unwaveringly on the murals, multiplied by wheeze, that reasserts: “the spectacle is nothing other than the sense of the total practice of a social-economic formation, and it is the historical movement in which we are caught”. Like his other films, here also Tsai dares to question the capitalist’s notion of temporality, reminding us every moment that in a constantly changing world, “the true is a moment of the false”, but this kind of experiment seems eccentric in the extreme. And we must admit that it is not technology but the dialectical factuality that gives impetus to this kind of filmic escapade.

“But the critique which reaches the truth of the spectacle uncovers it as the visible negation of life; as a negation of life which has become visible”.

These two scenes exactly have done the same. It seems that the gruesome twosome confers with ennui in order to reach an agreement, and we are supposed to take the bull

by the horns and face diverse oppositions, reflections, and relations and expected to sustain our avidity to push ourselves on towards ‘the whole’. It cannot be gainsaid that Tsai’s art has endeavoured to go beyond art, and it does achieve a transcendent significance that mothers a novel picture of an expanse both in terms of geography and compassionateness. It is time now to remove our old spectacles to get a clearer vision.

References:

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