

## FEATURES

THURSDAY, MARCH 25, 2010

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Top: Tsai Ming-liang gestures during an interview last Thursday.

PHOTOS: NOAH BUCHAN, TAIPEI TIMES

Above and right: Scenes from *It's a Dream*, a 23-minute video and installation that meditates on the space of movie theaters, directed by Tsai Ming-liang and currently on view at Taipei Fine Arts Museum.

PHOTOS COURTESY OF TFAM



# Film's death and resurrection

Taipei Fine Arts Museum recently added Tsai Ming-liang's 'It's a Dream' to its permanent collection. Noah Buchan asks the director why museums offer an ideal space to house and view his films

BY NOAH BUCHAN  
STAFF REPORTER

**F**ew film directors of Tsai Ming-liang's (蔡明亮) caliber would be willing to wait around while a reporter watches one of his movies. But such is his dedication to cinematography.

Unlike conventional Hollywood flicks, Tsai's films, which often perplex Taiwanese audiences, require considerable intellectual effort on behalf of the viewer, and have made him a hero for film students the world over.

A current installation of Tsai's work shows his oeuvre within a context that is, perhaps, more suited to his style of filmmaking: the museum.

The Taipei Fine Arts Museum recently added *It's a Dream* (是夢), a nostalgic and autobiographical meditation about cinema, to its permanent collection — the first museum in Taiwan to do so. It is currently on view as part of the group exhibit *Memory of a Journey* (旅人·記憶).

**Taipei Times:** How do audiences in Taiwan generally respond to your movies?

**Tsai Ming-liang:** Audiences in Taiwan see my movies and leave the cinema and say they are not touched by the movie because they didn't see a story. But I think it's because they lack the kind of training necessary to watch my movies. Why do they have to be touched by a movie? Why are movies only for entertainment purposes? If movies are solely for entertainment, it really is a waste of this art form.

Movies have at least 100 years of history, but few look at their function beyond entertainment. Today, movies are pretty much a business. My kind of film has little marketing value. When I first started making films there was a big concern that my viewing audience was limited — and not just in terms of box office receipts. In today's environment where Hollywood remains the mainstream, my movies remain marginalized.

**TT:** You first collaborated with a museum, the Louvre, to make *Face* (臉), which became part of its permanent collection. How did that, and your current installation at TFAM, come about?

**TM:** I think [the Louvre] wanted to work with me because of my movie *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (不散). And even before that, I made *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (黑眼圈), a movie commissioned for Vienna for their 250th anniversary of [Wolfgang Amadeus] Mozart. So I have all these opportunities that don't come from conventional movie studios. I think that's because these people look at my movies from the perspective of movies, rather than a marketing perspective. So gradually my movies find a home, and that is the museum.

I seriously believe that movies are on the decline. Every year I go to the Cannes Film Festival, I see that the films there aren't that powerful. People care more about the stars than the movies. Increasingly, I feel that my work is no longer fit for the cinema. But I don't know what to do [laughs].

About two months ago TFAM started to talk to me about the possibility of adding *It's a Dream* to its permanent collection. This is the first time that I sold a video installation to a museum and this is the first time for a Taiwanese museum to buy a film as part of its collection. The Louvre was the first in the world to collect film. These events signal that we are now looking at film as a form of art.

**TT:** You mentioned *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, which for me contains similar themes to *It's a Dream* in that it examines the nature of cinema.

**TM:** *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* was a very special milestone in my history of moviemaking. It was a very personal movie. It was filmed in a cinema in Yonghe (永和), which used to be popular but later declined and became an underground cinema for homosexuals. It declined further and eventually closed. I wanted to do a film there and I rented that cinema for one year and that was when I did *Goodbye Dragon Inn*.

The film was shown at the 2004 Venice Film Festival, and since then journalists and critics are no longer primarily concerned about Taiwan or the movie's storyline. The first question they ask is: What is a movie? I got quite excited by this question because no one had ever asked me it before.

So what is a movie? Is it about

your personal experience of your private world? Or must it be a genre film such as gangster film or love story. In Bollywood there is a different type of movie. They give the audience the same theme for three hours, or longer. But nobody asks, "What is a movie?" But that is a very important question, and since *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* I seem to have found my own language to answer this question using film as my tool. This is why I make movies.

**TT:** Why did you make *It's a Dream*?

**TM:** Cannes was celebrating its 60th anniversary and they invited 33 international directors to each produce a three-minute short.

I went back to a cinema in Malaysia that I was very familiar with ... This type of cinema was built in the 1950s, 1960s or even 1970s. Usually one cinema could accommodate 800 or even 1,000 people. That is what I call the golden age of cinema and I wanted to present the collective memory of the golden age of cinema in this work.

Movie houses at that time weren't attached to a mall. They usually stood alone like temples. In those days people were dependent on movies: It was like a ritual for them. I went there with my grandparents and it was like a daily activity. Today these cinemas are being demolished and that tells us that our lifestyles have changed. But very few people think about the changes of our lifestyles.

“It sounds like a contradiction, but movies need to leave today's theaters in order to be resurrected.”

— Tsai Ming-liang, director

**TT:** So it's not only about the nature of movies, but also the spaces they inhabit.

**TM:** I discovered that this kind of cinema existed in every corner of the world. But they declined beginning in the 1980s, becoming run-down cinemas, marginalized and frequented by those who live on the edge of society.

Originally, when I went back to Malaysia, I didn't intend to do this dream about my childhood memories. I was going to make a film about a run-down cinema and about bad guys who entrap little children in the cinema and later traffic them to other countries.

But when I went to Malaysia, I saw that [the theater] was covered with dust and I didn't want to change anything about the cinema. I had already found the children to work in this movie but I was afraid that with the dust and fleas, parents would be concerned and so I gave up on the idea of the child-trafficking movie and came up with *It's a Dream*. And that's what you see here: It's a dream about my parents and my grandmother. After watching the film I edited a three-minute version for Cannes and a 23-minute version for TFAM to be shown at the Venice Biennale.

**TT:** What's the difference in how the viewer experiences the three-minute version and the 23-minute version?

**TM:** I think the major difference between the two versions is the way they are viewed. The Cannes' version was shown along with the other movies. But with the other version, instead of giving just the video to the museum I actually gave them 30 chairs from the run-down cinema in Malaysia.

So it is an installation instead of just a movie ... I want the audience to sit in this type of chair and watch the video.

A Dutch curator invited the film to become part of an installation art exhibition at the Rotterdam Film Festival. He wrote in his critique that this movie announced the death of film and its resurrection. I totally agree with him. And he actually touched upon the key point of how I think about movies. It sounds like a contradiction, but movies need to leave today's theaters in order to be resurrected.

**TT:** And the museum can provide a

**space for that resurrection?**

**TM:** I think so. I'm very excited about that. In this installation there are two main elements. The first is the image on the screen. The second is the chairs. The chairs are taken from a dead cinema. So you can feel that these chairs are the remains of the cinema. And when you are sitting in these chairs watching the film, you are actually watching a space that no longer exists.

But the space is preserved in the movie. And I think that this is one of the functions of the movie. I arranged the seats in a particular way so you can look at your neighbors. I want the audience to be conscious of the existence of their neighbors. So the audience becomes an element in the composition.

**TT:** You mentioned two elements for this installation: image and chairs. Isn't there a third element? The installation space itself.

**TM:** The space is actually in the image because the image is about the cinema, which in reality has disappeared but is preserved in the film. It is like a memory: You cannot go into that space but you can see it. And as you sit on the chairs borrowed from that space, it becomes a very complex viewing experience that ties into your own memories of cinema.

**TT:** You seem to be very interested in memory — both the history of cinema and your own family. But don't audiences generally go to see a movie to forget?

**TM:** Bollywood produces 1,000 films a year, but they are all the same. And they cannot change it because if there is no laughter or the movie is not long enough, the audience will get angry and throw furniture [laughs]. Those movies are like opium. [The audience] needs this opium to forget. It is only a difference in degree as to how much they want to forget, and that is the difference among audiences in various Asian countries.

Most people in Asia don't know who the Lumiere Brothers are or about [Rainer Werner] Fassbinder. They just know the movie stars and they know movies as entertainment. They've already given up on the idea of exploring movies and how they might make you think. It's not that they don't want to be inspired to think when watching a movie, it's just that they don't have this kind of training.

In Taiwan we have me and Hou Hsiao-hsien (侯孝賢). We are different kinds of directors. We think that movies can be looked at from a different angle. The movies made by us are shown in cinemas in Taiwan, but we have a marginalized audience. Over the past 20 years you could say that we have not developed a mature audience in Taiwan. People in Taiwan still want to forget when they go to the cinema. They don't want to think.

**TT:** Will showing the movie in a museum make a difference?

**TM:** I think there is a fundamental difference between the audience in Asia and the audience in Europe. In Asia the audience is not trained to appreciate a movie. Big studios produce films in a commercial way and most people in Asia, including Taiwan, don't know that movies can be very rich in content and do not know that movies can be extended into other areas. You can read a movie like you read a book.

In Europe they've had this market for artistic films for a long time. In Asia, maybe Japan is the only country that has a market for artistic films. The fundamental difference is in our culture. In Europe the kids are taken to the museum. But in Asia you don't have this habit of going to the museum. So the movie-going audience in Asia is trained to watch movies in the cinema. In Europe the audience is not trained in the cinema, they are trained by going to the museum. And if we can bring more children into the museum in Taiwan, in a way we are training the audience for my films and in a broader sense we are raising the cultural level of our people.

*It's a Dream* is currently on view as part of a group exhibit at the Taipei Fine Arts Museum called *Memory of a Journey* (旅人·記憶). The exhibit ends Aug. 15. Admission is NT\$30. Call: (02) 2595-7656 for more information.

THIS INTERVIEW HAS BEEN EDITED AND CONDENSED