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## Intersection:

### Tsai Ming-liang's yearning bike boys and heartsick heroines

by Chuck Stephens

Somewhere during the final third of Tsai Ming-Ling's *Vive L'Amour* - an aching, heartbreaking, and occasionally hilarious pas de trios through urban Taipei's scooter-clogged boulevards and antiseptic crypt-ominous - a young (but not for long) real estate broker swats desperately at a gnat. In a film filled with empty souls and lonely rooms, the broker's encounter with the gnat - or mosquito, winged maggot; whatever it is, we never see it - is among its most passionate moments. Her face a cinched grimace, vise-tightened into some ferocious madness, the broker pursues the gnat as if it were the primary motive for her continuing existence, or the herald of her end. She swats and flails, scoops at the wind, slaps her palm against the wall. Dose she kill is? Who knows?

She eludes it - or it eludes her - for now.

*Vive L'Amour*, made in 1994 and a prizewinner at festivals from Venice to Tokyo, is Tsai Ming-Ling's second feature. In it, the real estate broker, Mei (played, with forlorn exruciation, by *Eat Drink Man Woman*'s Yang Kuei-mei), saddled with a caseload of overpriced and apparently unsalable properties, picks up Ah-jong (Chen Chao-jung), a 20ish freelance clothing importer who peddles cheaply priced Hong Kong fashionwear on the sidewalk in one of Taipei's night markets, at a coffeeshop. As aloof and dispassionate as Mei is harried and paranoid, Ah-jong sees Mei as a comely twist, nothing more, and the loveless pair take to trysting in one of Mei's furnished luxury condos. Unbeknownst to either, a third party is involved: Hsiao-kang, a dissolute young sales agent for a firm that peddles urn space in a columbarium. Hsiao-kang has managed to pocket a spare key to Mei taken upo temporary residence there. It seems as good a spot as any of his needs: he's planning to kill himself.

In the meantime, Hsiao-kang -played by the radiantly taciturn Lee Kang-sheng, Tsai's recurrent star and Taiwan's video gaming-parlor James Dean - makes the most of the condo's big empty spaces: he luxuriates in the Jacuzzi, uses the hallway as an impromptu bowling alley, and waits to get caught. It probably won't take long; Ah-jong's just pocketed a duplicate key of his own.

Originally planned as a "comedy" about romantic isolation A la Eric Rohmer's *Le Rayon vert*, the mordantly titled *Vive L'Amour* indeed retains the skeleton of its inspiration-a woman's emptied life, the interminable pregnancies of happenstance, an eleventh-hour glimpse of human connection tempered by a flashflood of searing emotion-even if it jettisons the skin: there's more talk in *Rayon vert*'s first ten minutes than in *Vive L'Amour*'s entire duration. As for music cues, there are none at all. In Tsai's Taipei, the electro-drones of car alarms and street-crossing signals compete with the constant chirruping of cell phones and doorbells to blot out lyrical cues and melodic coercions. When a whisper of Muzak is finally heard-an hour into the film, in the salesroom of a columbarium-it's as if the dead had suddenly begun whispering, beckoning, and Tsai has his characters beat a hasty retreat. Ancestral voices are to be avoided at all costs, and the faceless fury with which contemporary Taiwan, where graveyards are full but apartment houses empty, is bulldozing its various pasts-social, architectural, spiritual-force *Vive L'Amour*'s friends and lovers into a constant state of directionless motion.

There is, nevertheless, a passionate determination throughout Tsai's work that

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these characters arrive-somehow, sometime-in each other's arms. But even if gratification is forever postponed, the waiting is imbued with a kind of tantric glee: though *Vive L'Amour's* oppressive, Antonioni-derived sense of urban, architectural nausea serves mainly to place potholes in its pilgrims paths, the ways they manage to skirt and dodge and eventually collide or nearly miss one another is effected with an almost Tati-esque choreographic grace. Connections, once made, are always tenuous, emotionally cryptic, and subject to revocation, and it's not until very close to *Vive L'Amour's* end-when Hsiao-kang finally summons the courage to steal a bit of pleasure while his inamorata, the aloof Ah-jong, lies sleeping-that Tsai shows his hand at all.

Tsai's first feature, 1992's rain-slick, fluorescence-smearred *Rebels of the Neon God*-a study of longing more cryptic still-also featured Lee as a character named Hsiao-kang, a disaffected adolescent whose mother is convinced that he's the reincarnation of the quarrelsome boygod Nocha. Through a series of fatal misdeeds and misunderstood attempts from the afterworld to right his wrongs, Nocha so alienated his father that the old man took to worshipping the temple in which Nocha's ghost became imprisoned, denying the boy's spirit redemption. Hsiao-kang's cabbie dad isn't quite so dire in his frustration with his son; he loves the kid, but-what with his batty wife, the Taipei traffic, and his dead-end job-he's simply sick of it all.

When we first meet Hsiao-kang, he too is involved in a passionate encounter with an insect: bored by his homework, Hsiao-kang spears a waterbug on his compass point, lets it squirm a bit, then flicks it out the window. It flits back and settles on the glass, taunting Hsiao-kang, who smashes the pane-and slashes his hand-in his attempts to shoo the creature. Dad is incredulous: "Don't you have anything better to do with your time?" A few days later, when Hsiao-kang-tired of his mother's superstitious attentions (the singed prayer notes she cooks into his food give him the shits)-drops out of his college entrance-exam cram school and begins squandering his tuition refund, dad kicks him out of the house for good ... though he leaves the door open. just a crack.

Adrift, Hsiao-kang begins trolling around after a young tough named Ah-tse (Chen Chao-jung. again) who spends his time ripping off pay phones and gutting video arcade games with his buddy. Ah-bing. So far, so generic: another punkedup portrait of hunks vandals, petty crimes, and ornamental love interestshere embodied by one Ah-kuei, an endlessly leggy hotcha who works at the roller rink and eventually falls for the sullen Ah-tse. But then there's the matter of Ah-tse's apartment. Forever flooded ankle-deep in undrained water and floating flip-flops (attentive Wong Kar-wai followers, take note). Ah-tse's flat-in fact, his entire flatblock. where the elevator has a habit of stopping, unbeckoned, on the "haunted" fourth floorseems to take on as much "life" as the occupants inside.

By *Rebels'* end, the characters have begun haunting one another, and nowhere more completely than in Hsiao-kang's confused interest in Ah-tse. Fascinated by Ah-tse's brutish independence but unable to devise an opportunity to befriend him. Hsiao-kang's longing for the slightly older boy culminates in a fit of vandalism that includes slashing the seats on Ah-tse's motorcycle and spraypainting "AIDS" on his gas tank-an act that Tsai intercuts with Ah-tse and Ahkuei's coupling in a nearby love hotel.

Big on sexualized crosscutting-and prone to superimposing the moans of female pleasure over images of knitbrowed. masturbating men-Tsai bids fair to become the Griffith of *le grind*: in another episode of gender-blurred longing, Ah-bing is thrashed by triad thugs, and Ah-tse proceeds to carry him home, tucks him in under a lifesize pinup-girl poster, and when Ah-kuei arrives, induces the girl to hug his broken buddy. Hsiao-kang, however, ends up outside the tactile loop: by film's end he listlessly joins a telephone dating

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service, but can't bring himself to answer the ringing phone. Wandering out into the Taipei twilight, Hsiao-kang leaves the door to the dating service open ... just a crack.

BOTH *Rebels* and *Vive L'Amour* are built around roaming loners who either yearn to connect and cannot, or who really couldn't care either way. Together they form the first two parts of a trilogy (to be completed by *Rirer*, now in production) concerned with alienated longing. straight, and somewhere in between-in contemporary Taipei, a economic boomtown with, as the Malaysian-born. 38-year-old Tsai sees it, a heart that's fit to bust. *Line* both features up with Tsai's gritty, often despairing work for Taiwanese television-where, as Tony Rayns has pointed out. "most images are sanitized and 'committedly' positive"-and you're faced with the strongest body of work yet produced by a member of the so-called "second wave" of Taiwan's New Cinema; the generation, still forming, that's arrived in the wake of Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang. (So strong, in fact, that Tsai already has his acolytes: lee Chihyin's 1995 *Lonely Hearts Club* posits a Taipei where reruns of *Rebels* are the only thing on TV.)

All *Corners of the World* ('89) and *Youngsters* (aka *Boys*, aka *The Kid*. '91) the only examples of Tsai's earl- television drama yet screened in North America (at the Vancouver International Film Festival, still the premier venue for Asian cinema on this continent)- establish patterns that *Rebels* and *Vive L'Amour* both extend and complicate. *All Corners of the World* describes the fraught domestic situation of a young brother and sister whose parents make a living cleaning love hotels and scalping movie tickets (to Hou Hsiao-hsien's *City of Sadness*, no less.) The preteen boy, Ah-tong, shows some promise as a writer: his essayistic meditation on a day at a trash-strewn beach wins a newspaper contest, despite his hypocritical teacher's attempts to have him disqualified. The teenaged girl, Meih-sueh, makes change at a video arcade and turns her salary over to her abusive parents; she's also taken up shoplifting, and has lately fallen into the orbit of a local pimp. Good comes to neither, and the telefilm-set amidst the rumble and rubble of a fortresslike apartment block closes on the image of young lives on the verge of ruin before they've begun. *Youngsters*, Tsai's first project featuring Li Kangsheng, describes a big-fish/little-fish food chain wherein theft, extortion, and parental malfeasance make up a boy's formative experiences.

Tragic in circumstance, and relentless in their condemnation of socialized indifference, both telefilms exude an almost limitless compassion for the children they depict. Moreover-and opposed to. say, Larry Clark's unfettered (if perversely pleasurable) ogling-Tsai's kids are ripe with possibility, but not for the plucking. This doesn't render his films fetish-free, however; it simply shifts the terms. Tsai always finds time to contemplate the conjunction of boy and motorcycle, and his films are littered with adorations of Taipei's thousands of teentoting two-wheelers. We see them parked and fleeing; revving and looming; getting towed and smog-checked and hopelessly totaled. They might be lovers, or victims, or angels of mercy, those scurrying crotch-rockets, but one thing's for certain: only a "grown-up" would drive a car.

*Vive L'Amour's* Ah-jong-the "grownup" extrapolation of *Rebels'* Ah-tse owns a car, but he appears to use it mainly as a storage locker. Hsiao-kang's Dad, in *Rebels*, drives a taxi, and allows a chance encounter with a motorcyclist (not coincidentally, the punk Ah-tse) to drive a wedge between himself and his son. *Vive L'Amour's* Mei-in her daily commute from work (in vacant condos) to home (a faceless flat, where her only companions are her hideously cawing alarm clock, and the gas heater that threatens to asphyxiate her while she bathes)-drives a car.

In both films. Hsiao-kang-still exploring, still forming-rides a scooter.

Tsai's recent videotape, *My New Friends*, Taiwan's first AIDS documentary and a perhaps unlikely place to encounter auteurist strains, culminates in an image of the director

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himself, juddering on scooter-back down a rural lane. Deeply empathetic in its study of love, sex, faith and acceptance in a society bound to codes of repression and denial, *My New Friends* doesn't simply reiterate the director's concerns, it illuminates them as well. As one of the anonymous "friends" interviewed explains, "In junior high school, everyone was curious about sex ... but no one really had the nerve to get close to a real girl. So sex and homosexuality were two things we thought of mixing...as something to brighten life. We often pretended that some [of our male] classmates were girls."

Beneath that paradigm lie many of Tsai's "fictional" images: Ah-bing, lying "wounded" under Ah-tse's pin-up poster in *Rebels*, and Hsiao-kang, in *Vive L'Amour*, crossdressed in one of Mei's slips, turning cartwheels and doing pushups to spend the energy he can't bating beneath the bed where Mei and Ah-jong undertake a final, joyless romp.

On scooter-back, in Tsai's films, there is always the possibility of growth; a maneuverability that affords Hsiao-kang-ready to once again confront his father in the forthcoming *River*-a glimmer of hope. It is a hope that the women in Tsai's work infrequently share.

For *All Corners of the World's Meih-sueh*, the future is bleak indeed: her flirtation with prostitution leaves her wouldbe pimp dead, and the film closes with the teenager weeping in the back of a police van, en route to State custody. For *Vive L'Amour's* Mei-Mei-hsueh's spiritual extension-hopelessness comes not from the State, but from the state she's in. Increasingly obstructed by forces beyond her control-at one point she finds her car parked in by a constellation of abandoned construction vehicles, and at another, reduced to pedestrianism. she's menaced by ceaseless traffic and looming signs promising severe fines for simply crossing the road-Mei, sick of trysting with Ah-jong, takes a dawn walk through a massive, still-under-construction public park. Surrounded by freshly poured paths and mounds of disinterred earth, Mei finds a park bench and, as the camera patiently rolls, endlessly sobs and weeps and moans.

Staring into the distance, the muffled clangor of cement mixers and early morning commuters dully closing in, Mei finds only a momentary respite from tears. She lights a smoke-they say you're never alone with a cigarette-but then the floodgates open again. Somewhere, back in the condo, Hsiao-kang has found a flash of tenderness, a stolen kiss from the sleeping Ah-tong. But for Mei-alone in a world unfinished: half fecal past, half fertile future-the green ray is nowhere to be found.

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