

An interview with Tsai Ming-liang, director of *The Hole*

David Walsh
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Tsai
Ming-liang

DW: The film is a personal statement, but it's difficult not to see it as a social statement too. A spectator will inevitably draw very dark conclusions about modern society, and not only in Taiwan. Is this what you want?

TML: The personal statement comes out of my own environment, because I'm living in Taiwan. When they first came to me with this project of making a film about the new millennium, I thought the end of the century was too close to describe a future predicament, so it's actually a reflection of contemporary society. And being so dark, and full of disease, I think it's my observation of people also being so lonely, existing in their own solitude. It's what I've observed about Taipei. It's a city that developed too fast and too soon; we've seen the negative sides of all this progress and civilization.

DW: Four years ago, in *Vive l'amour*, you seemed more sympathetic, more patient with people suffering from alienation, loneliness. Has something changed your views?

TML: I think this is a somewhat different situation. All three of my previous films were more related to my life and those characters, those individuals were quite distinctive. *The Hole* is more symbolic. It's simply a man and a woman, in a broader sense, it's not referring to a particular character or individual who is living through the millennium.

DW: The film refers at one point to the 'Taiwan fever.' I would say that the problem is not particular to Taiwan. This alienation is fairly universal at this point.

TML: I agree with you, because I think that although

I invented a disease called 'Taiwan fever,' there are similar situations happening in many parts of Asia. There are a lot of strange diseases developing. Ever since AIDS there are all sorts of unprecedented diseases. I believe it's not an individual case, it's universal. Right after we finished the film, two months later, in Hong Kong a virus developed in the chickens, and a lot of chickens had to be killed. It really reinforced my idea.

In terms of the cockroach symptoms, it's something specific to Taiwan and all Asian countries, because the development of technology, city life and modern society is very different there than in the Western world. Those Asian countries wanted to imitate what happened to the West and follow the path of being high-tech and all that, and they adopted drastic methods. They destroyed the environment. And while they want to improve their economic situation, you don't see the quality of life being improved.

One of the most prominent problems is the difference between the poor and the rich, the uneven distribution of wealth. And under those conditions a lot of people live in poverty, and try to adapt to the role, to the living environment they have, and acquire the characteristics of a cockroach. Being adaptable to a bad situation. Living purely on survival instinct, with a lack of any dignity.

DW: How typical is that apartment building?

TML: That building has 400 or more households or families. It is public housing for low-income people. It's unusual because it is located in downtown Taipei. There is a big waiting list for people to get into this housing, which means there are a lot of people who share this economic status.

Real estate is so expensive in Taiwan. Again, there is this gap between rich and poor. The average rent is

higher than Toronto, perhaps equivalent to Tokyo.

DW: What is the significance of the song and dance numbers?

TML: The musical numbers play a different role here than they do in other musicals. For me it's more like the statement of the inner world, particularly of the female character. This woman apparently is very cold, on the surface she has to be very fierce to fight her environment, she's very defensive. But her inner world is very passionate and she craves somebody to love her.

On another level, the musical numbers are weapons that I use to confront the environment at the end of the millennium. Because I think that toward the end of the century a lot of qualities--such as passionate desire, naive simplicity--have been suppressed. The musicals contain those qualities. It's something that I use psychologically to confront that world.

DW: At the beginning of the century there was a general feeling, including among artists, that society was progressing, going to a higher stage. At the end of the twentieth century this is not the case.

TML: I think the biggest crisis is that the world has fallen under the control of a very few politicians and businessmen. It appears that the world is marching toward progress, but it's all for individual profits. A lot of strategies, a lot of things happening are not done with consideration of the whole of humankind or human beings' welfare in mind, so for me it's very dangerous. These few people are only thinking about the profits they'll get from a certain action; meanwhile they are endangering the whole of civilization. Sometimes I really wish there would be no more progress. I think the current disasters, one after another, are the feedback from nature on the whole concept of technology and progress. And I think it's a warning.

DW: The present economic crisis has not affected Taiwan as severely at this point as it has other parts of Asia, but I'm assuming it will. I wonder what the consequences will be for Taiwan and for Taiwanese artists in particular. Will it force them to think about other things, to do other things?

TML: In terms of filmmakers in Taiwan, the changes will not be so drastic, because we have never gotten support to begin with. Whereas in Hong Kong the crisis will have a big impact. For some filmmakers in Hong Kong there are no more investors for their films and the industry could collapse overnight. In Taiwan it wasn't

good before; it's not going to be any worse in the future.

The Asian situation causes people to suffer, but I think the situation will be an impetus for filmmakers. Take the Indonesian riots, or the Malaysian power struggle--these things will eventually turn out to be something for artists to draw inspiration from.

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- Part 3:

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- Part 4:

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