

creasing left by the acupuncture chair running across his cheek like a scar. Now he is radiantly beautiful. For a moment, years appear to have fallen away, as if Anong's youth were contagious.

After the companionless physical torment Lee experiences in the film's first half, skin meets skin in an act of rejuvenating care—an act that is also a monetary transaction occurring across class lines. Care is frequently invoked as a reparative necessity in our neoliberal times, understood as a tending to the self or as a mutual obligation freely given and received. *Days* reminds us that care is also work, a devalued form of labor often performed by those who are themselves less cared for. Nowhere does it seek to transform the scene of sex work into a mawkish story of true romance; yet nowhere, either, does it suggest that payment diminishes the pathos of what takes place. These men are alive to each other during an encounter that exists on its own terms. Unlike all those films that enjoin their audiences to decry the ills of prostitution or trust in the transcendent power of traditional coupledom, *Days* refuses assimilation to familiar narrative arcs that seek to teach a tidy lesson. Instead, it captures the specificity and complexity of being in the world, alone and with others.

In addition to money, Lee gives Anong a music box that plays “Terry’s Theme” from *Limelight* (1952), Charlie Chaplin’s devastating late-career meditation on mortality. The final minutes of *Days* see Anong sitting on a bench, bathed in the night’s blue light, playing with the toy. Is he wistful for Lee or just bored? With his face at a distance, cloaked in shadow, it is impossible to know. Rather than any lapse into sentimental symbolism, the music box is better taken as a clue that *Days* is a skeletal remake of *Limelight*, a film in which the old clown plays an old clown who becomes entangled with a young ballerina after saving her from an attempt at suicide. She spurs the washed-up alcoholic to mount a comeback, but it is futile. As a white-haired Chaplin stands in front of photographs of himself in his glory days—images already etched in the viewer’s memory—the ravages of senescence are thrown into relief. The truth of the passing years electrifies the fiction, as it does in *Days*. Tsai’s filmography is replete with casting choices that create this kind of time consciousness—think of the actors from the wuxia classic *Dragon Inn* (1967) watching themselves on-screen in his *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003)—but it is his decades-long commitment to Lee that trumps them all. If the poignancy and seduction of cinema is that it captures bodies like flies in amber, *Limelight* offers a template for how to build a film around an acknowledgment of this deathly vocation. Haunted by a vast archive of images of a younger Lee, scrutinizing the performer as he aches and ages, *Days* is a reflection on how Tsai has raised the stakes of Chaplin’s wager, pursuing it not just for one movie, but for a whole career. ♦

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ABOUT THE FILM

Under the pain of illness and treatment, Kang (Lee Kang-sheng) finds himself adrift. He meets Non (Anong Hounghuangsy) in a foreign land. They find consolation in each other before parting ways and carrying on with their days. The latest film from Tsai Ming-liang (*Goodbye Dragon Inn*, *Stray Dogs*, *The Wayward Cloud*), *Days* marks yet another masterwork in one of contemporary cinema's most extraordinary careers..

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Time Is the Best Author by Erika Balsom

The following is an excerpt of an article originally published in Artforum, Oct/Nov 2020

Nearly thirty years of filming the same face, the same body: The old chestnut that “every fiction film is a documentary of its actors” takes on special meaning in the many works Tsai Ming-liang has made with Lee Kang-sheng since first chancing on him outside a Taipei arcade in 1991. “Without this face, I don’t want to make films anymore,” Tsai said eighteen years later. Is a greater declaration of love possible? Lee has appeared in nearly every one of the Malaysian director’s projects since their meeting, whether these were destined for television, cinema, the gallery, or VR. Although Tsai’s interest in duration may be most evident in his affinity for glacial long takes, Lee’s sustained presence offers another way of approaching the filmmaker’s exploration of protracted temporality, one that sets him apart from many other festival favorites who traffic in slowness. Tsai’s cinema is, among other things, a practice of portraiture unfolding over decades. Mapping changes in the flesh occurring so gradually as to be invisible to the eye, he registers the beauty and the catastrophe of aging.

This concern comes to the fore in his latest effort, *Days*. The film, which premiered in competition at this year’s Berlinale and screened last month at the New York Film Festival, comprises 127 minutes of contact with and between two bodies, one of whom Tsai has been watching grow older since that serendipitous day at the arcade, the other of whom he has never filmed before. Lee appears as himself, now past fifty and beleaguered by the same back and neck problems he endured in *The River* (1997). In that earlier film, he stars as Hsiao-Kang, a twentysomething plagued by pain that sets in after he is cajoled into lying facedown in the water on a film shoot while pretending to be a corpse. Hsiao-Kang’s parents unsuccessfully seek remedies for their son; the film culminates in an incestuous episode between father and son in a bathhouse. In *Days*, the veil of fiction that had been cast over Lee’s real-life malady is lifted. Youth has vanished; suffering persists. He again lies facedown—several times, in fact—but now it is he who occupies the role of the elder, appearing alongside first-time performer Anong Hounghuangsy, a Laotian immigrant to Thailand who had been employed making noodles when he met Tsai.

Shaped like an X, *Days* alternates between the solitary existences of these two protagonists before and after they meet at its center, when Lee pays Anong for sex and a massage in a Bangkok hotel room. On either side of this event, each lives out the mundanities of life alone. Precisely framed tableaux succeed one another with infrequent concern for causal logic. Tsai worked with a small crew to collect images over a period of several years, only later organizing them into a loose narrative structure. He patiently arranges these gathered fragments, banal and routine bits of days that could be any other. Fiction maintains only the most tenuous hold as Lee stares out at the rain, soaks in a bath, stretches his neck. He goes to an acupuncturist, receiving a moxibustion treatment that leaves his back looking bruised and swollen. In a dim tiled room with dirty walls, Anong prepares a solo meal, fastidiously rinsing fish and greens in a plastic basin on the floor, cutting papaya into slivers with a cleaver. Both wait and sleep, the minutes piling up. Things take the time they take, and the camera almost never moves. Motifs of water and the maintenance of the body—consistent preoccupations throughout Tsai’s filmography—circulate across the two axes, but no narrative relationship between the men emerges for more than an hour, until Lee is lying naked on his stomach and Anong grasps hold of his feet, rutilant light seeping through closed curtains, air conditioner whirring.

[...] Throughout *Days*, Tsai gestures toward the emphatically private nature of bodily feeling, filming his performers with a determined externality, often at a distance, never calling on them to explain themselves in words. He expunges actorly expressivity, treating the human countenance as an almost opaque surface.

At the same time, Tsai strains against the incommunicability of embodiment, allowing time to pool around Lee and Anong as they go about their days, submerging the viewer in a flood of detail that courts sensation more than meaning. Through close observation that bypasses the grid of language, Tsai renders sensible the body’s unrelenting woes and fleeting joys, its mortality and frailty. In the hands of another director, this kind of prolonged examination could amount to a cruel, machinic stare. Tsai is unflinching, but his attitude is above all one of compassion. [...]

Nowhere is this more palpable than in the erotic massage at the film’s heart, during which the body—until then a site of affliction, for Lee—becomes a medium of relation and solace. The sequence lasts nearly twenty minutes; Tsai cuts only once. Kneeling over Lee in white briefs, Anong applies oil and diligently rubs the back and buttocks of the older man. Lee’s face is turned toward the camera, expressionless, pressed into the pillow. Through small moans, he registers the pressure of Anong’s hands and the enjoyment and release they generate. The sequence overwhelms in its tenderness and tactility, asserting a corporeal presence so strong that I could feel it in my muscles and on my skin. It is an experience of implication and contact, not only between Lee and Anong but between viewer and film. If pain unmakes the world, can pleasure given by another remake it? After he turns onto his back so that Anong can reach his mouth, nipples, and cock, more of Lee’s face becomes visible. In the aftermath of the moxibustion procedure, he had submitted to the camera’s gaze in close-up, looking haggard and uncomfortable, the