



Acropolis Cinema, La Collectionneuse, and MUBI present

# YOUR FACE AND VISAGE

A DOUBLE FEATURE BY TSAI MING-LIANG

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## YOUR FACE

76 minutes // Taiwan // 2018

Tsai Ming-liang's latest digital experiment turns the human face into a subject of dramatic intrigue. Comprised of a series of portrait shots of mostly anonymous individuals, the film deemphasizes language while reducing context to a bare minimum.



## Through the Looking Glass

By David Phelps

*The following is an excerpt from a review originally published in MUBI's Notebook*

Tsai Ming-liang's movies, critics noted more and more in his last few films, are founded from parallel universes, banal reality and another universe that opens up inside it. The other universe can be one of movies, of musicals from movies, of water flooding bourgeois homes, of Europe in Taiwan, or of phantoms, in *What Time is it There?* and *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, who come back to walk and eat among the living. Almost all of Tsai's films feature these other worlds intersecting with a reality of lovers courtships, cookings and fuckings, as the whole courtship itself often seems to be nothing more than two bodies who intersect each other in the night, fuck and say they're in love, and move on—"you look like you come from somewhere else" Jean-Pierre Léaud tells Fanny Ardant vaguely in *Visage*. As Tsai's favorite, Boschian image is of contamination-as-bursting, always sexual—the bursting of a water pipe in the kitchen, the bursting of food out of its container, or a cock's ejaculation—one world, in Tsai, tends to literally bursts into another, as if by spontaneous generation: the inexplicable floods that

## VISAGE

141 minutes // Taiwan, France // 2009

A Taiwanese filmmaker makes a film based on the myth of Salomé at the Louvre. He gives the part of King Herod to the French actor Jean-Pierre Léaud. For the box-office, the production company gives the role of Salomé to a famous model. But problems arise as soon as filming begins...

his French producer (Fanny Ardant) who goes to bury her and of the film he envisions—told entirely as visual evidence: the only proof that Léaud, the star of the film, has even gone to Taiwan is that he's burying ashes in Taiwanese, just as the only indication that Lee's mother has died is a shot of him crying, and the only sign that Léaud has been hurt is his producer complaining about the insurance company.

*Visage* exists in the gaps between the scenes; what's shown, almost exclusively, is people reacting to unseen developments and their own unseen fears and urges. The film works, or doesn't, as symbolism and film theory executed as performance art—an idea rendered physically. The main idea, as it always is in Tsai, is of people trying to isolate themselves from parallel worlds and the parallel worlds breaking through: Rivette-ian (there are echoes of *L'amour fou*), and Tsai's as good as Rivette at showing people standing in rooms, doing nothing, and contemplating themselves in total terror. Mirrors are everywhere, little worlds, like films, of images which people try to block out or enter into. There is a musical both Léaud and Lee (as director) dream of. There is a real elk in a fake snow, like one of Courbet's symbols of majestic innocence, that wanders around. There are a couple shots of reflections in the window, one as a woman naps while cars track the lines of highways intersecting below. Nathalie Baye appears out of nowhere—things always appearing out of nowhere in Tsai—from under a table to join a conversation with Jeanne Moreau and Fanny Ardant. Later the same

shot is repeated, chairs empty, as Moreau sings off-screen like a ghost. An actual ghost reaches its hand into a frame to grab an apple; it puts on slippers at the smell of cooking food. Water gushes, tomato paste seeps out of a can, and the movie bursts into song, though characters contemplate singing before they do. People try to lock themselves up, go to sleep, go to Taiwan—try to escape themselves—or sing songs and look at images from Truffaut films, even at an image of Truffaut himself—as if trying, like ghosts, to recover their past lives. *Visage* is based entirely on these echoes, done in still life longeurs of bodies enacting rituals: incantations as they call each other, even the elk, to come back, sometimes, and sometimes just the minute process of a "body-machine" (Martin) at work covering black tape on a window or dancing a pre-choreographed dance.

Physical isolation is a given in Tsai, but unseen forces inevitably break through to connect people: the smell of food, a virus epidemic, the tacky song a girl lip sings when she dances, someone realizing they're desperately in love. And so *Visage*, after two hours of near-static repetitions and parallel stories of actors trying to connect to the roles they played, a director trying to connect to his dead mother, and Jean-Pierre Léaud and Fanny Ardant trying to figure out what to do with the fact they love each other, gives way to bursts of movements, transgressions, and connections as spaces are crossed and people come together. Tsai's minimalism is so totalizing that all it takes to suggest sex—really good sex—is a



model entering the slit of a plastic drape and coming over to kiss the director, also covered in plastic, asleep, and the soundtrack of rustling plastic to suddenly come on. Léaud's entrance below a De Vinci, through a hole in the Louvre wall, also plays as some spontaneous generation of an icon, as does the elk's return.

Whether they're real or dreamer's delusions hardly matters—*Visage*, filmed largely in the back hallways of the Louvre, takes place, like almost all of Tsai's films, in a ghost world where people can become artworks and artworks can become real. Nothing so different from Keaton's *Sherlock Jr.* The problem this time is just that the spaces and people can't connect; the characters, Tsai's strangers passing in the night, go back to being phantoms, unable to touch or fuck each other, but at least aware of each other there even while they drift into private fantasies realms of sleep, empty rooms, and the underworld, here shown as a sewer. There are at least moments of contact, always desperate. Formally, one shot will echo the last (a model being made-up as a painting matched with a dead elk hanging on a wall), fake snow falls on a burning pile of the dead mom's possessions, and motifs—the water that makes one girl drift towards her lover and away, the birds in the first second and the last and a tribute to dead directors in between, the fake elk, and the food—that draw threads through the movie. More important are the moments of physical contact: the dead mother coming for food; Salome coming to kill the director in seduction; Fanny Ardant rocking Jean-Pierre Léaud back and forth and smiling as she tells him she'll take care of him and they look into the mirror. Whether it's real or delusion doesn't matter when the characters don't know themselves. In *Visage*, everyone, even Tsai, gets a face-off in the looking glass.

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