

The Gaze from the Crack: The Three Faces of the Lacanian Gaze in Tsai Ming-liang's *Vive L'Amour*

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Abstract: *Vive L'Amour* is filled with visual scenes of peeping through door cracks, fixed long takes, and a final crying sequence. These are not merely Tsai Ming-liang's aesthetic signatures but three variations of the Lacanian gaze. Drawing on Lacan's theory of the gaze and supplemented by object relations theory, this paper reveals a complete psychoanalytic trajectory of the gaze in the film: from excitation (the door crack as the embodiment of object petit a), to persistence (the long take as an intrusion of the Real), and finally to withdrawal (the final cry as traversing the fantasy). This progressive structure not only exposes the void inherent in the structure of desire but also presents the modern subject's desperate plea for existence, connection, and meaning after the failure to internalize a "good object." The film's title, *Vive L'Amour*, is not ironic but a mournful cry for the impossible, uttered from the depths of emptiness.

Keywords: Lacan, Gaze, The Real, *Vive L'Amour*, Object Relations Theory.

1. Introduction

In *Vive L'Amour* (1994), Tsai Ming-liang constructs a disquieting portrait of modern urban life.^[1] Three lonely characters – Mei-mei (a real-estate agent), Hsiao-kang (a street vendor), and Ah-jung (a columbarium salesman) – wander through, meet in, and depart from a luxury apartment for sale. The film has sparse dialogue, endless long takes, and a plot compressed almost to a vacuum. Yet nearly every crucial action takes place in a context of "being watched" or "peeping": Hsiao-kang peeps through a door crack at Ah-jung and Mei-mei having sex; Ah-jung later gazes through a keyhole at Hsiao-kang's self-mutilation; Mei-mei is subjected to a prolonged gaze by the camera until she finally sits on a park bench and cries alone. The viewer is left enveloped by solitude – each character is lonely, even when two are together, and loneliness only intensifies when all three share the same room.

This structure of "looking and being looked at" constitutes the film's central narrative engine. But a more fundamental question remains: where does the "look" truly come from? Are the gazes from the door crack, keyhole, and fixed camera positions merely mutual voyeurism, or are they a trans-individual, anonymous gaze? Why do we feel uneasy when watching these long takes – are we infected by the characters' solitude, or do we sense that we ourselves are being watched? These questions cannot be fully answered by "urban alienation" or "spatial enclosure." They touch upon deeper psychoanalytic issues concerning subjectivity and the structure of desire. This paper argues that Lacan's theory of the gaze provides the key to unlocking this enigma.^[2]

The paper is divided into three main chapters, forming a progressive analytical chain.^[3] Chapter 2, "The Excitation of the Gaze," focuses on the door crack and keyhole. These narrow apertures are not obstacles to seeing but engines of desire: objet petit a appears at the site of the "just-missed," making the gaze an inexhaustible source of desire. Chapter 3, "The Persistence of the Gaze," turns to Tsai's fixed long takes. The enduring, motiveless gaze within them is not a character's look but an automatic gaze from the Real, exposing the void and trauma hidden in everyday life. Chapter

4, "The Withdrawal of the Gaze," analyses the final scene – Mei-mei's long cry in the park. When all gazes recede, the subject confronts the vertigo of "traversing the fundamental fantasy": she realises that the Other never existed, and "love" is merely a fantasy concealing the void of desire. Through the structure of "excitation → persistence → withdrawal," this paper traces a complete psychoanalytic trajectory from the activation of desire, to the exposure of the Real, to the collapse of fantasy.

2. The Excitation of the Gaze: The Door Crack and Objet Petit a

(1) The Topology of the Door Crack

The first key visual event in *Vive L'Amour* takes place in front of a half-open door. Hsiao-kang, having accidentally obtained the key to the empty apartment, wanders aimlessly until he hears movement in the next room. He approaches the incompletely closed door and presses his eye to the crack. The frame instantly narrows into a long, thin visual fissure, and the viewer shares this cramped field of vision with him, catching glimpses of Ah-jung's bare arm, exposed skin, and rapid breathing. The crack is extremely narrow; what is seen is always fragmented.

Lacan's theory of the gaze offers a radical understanding of this scene. For Lacan, "the subject's viewing is not his own seeing, but is structured by the gaze of the Other."^[4] This means that when Hsiao-kang looks through the crack, although he appears to be actively "seeing," it is actually a gaze from the Other that structures the very act of looking. Lacan further argues that "behind the gaze of the Other always hides the gaze of objet petit a from the Real, which makes the subject's looking an impossible seeing." The narrowness and limitation of the door crack precisely make objet petit a appear at the site of the "just-missed": Hsiao-kang (and the viewer) can never see the whole picture, and this invisible gap is precisely where objet petit a resides.

This is the topological significance of the door crack. It is not an obstacle but an engine of desire. Hsiao-kang might have remained a purely aimless presence in the apartment, but the moment he presses his eye to the crack, he acquires a clear

coordinate of desire – he wants to see more, to occupy the position of the invisible. Yet Lacan tells us that this desire is doomed to remain unsatisfied, for the essence of objet petit a is absence. Objet a is not a physical object waiting to be discovered, but the “void” that makes desire what it is. The door crack is a topological space of desire precisely because it both presents and conceals, both opens and closes. It lets Hsiao-kang see something while ensuring he can never see everything. In this sense, the gaze manifests itself as objet a in the door crack – eternally absent, yet eternally seductive.

Notably, this topological structure also applies to the viewer. Tsai Ming-liang does not cut to Hsiao-kang’s subjective point of view; instead, a medium fixed long shot maintains a subtle distance between the viewer and Hsiao-kang. We share his viewing angle but cannot fully occupy his position. The viewer, too, is constrained by that “door crack,” consuming the same anxiety of desire as Hsiao-kang. This visual structure turns the viewer from a safe observer into someone caught in the circuit of desire. In his Lacanian analysis of Tsai’s cinema, Guo Xinchao astutely observes that Tsai creates a Brechtian alienation effect, even “referring within the film to the operation and production of the cinematic apparatus itself,”^[5] preventing the viewer from simply falling into the soft net of imaginary identification and instead leaving the viewer “disoriented” and prompted to reflect. The door crack thus becomes not only Hsiao-kang’s desire apparatus but also the viewer’s.

(2) The Reversal of the Keyhole

If the door crack presents Hsiao-kang’s position as voyeur, a later scene in the film reverses this visual structure. After Ah-jung discovers Hsiao-kang’s wrist-cutting, he lies down on the floor and brings his eye to the keyhole. This time, Ah-jung is looking at Hsiao-kang. The frame narrows again, now into the circular field of the keyhole, through which Hsiao-kang’s vulnerable body is framed at the other end of the lock. Ah-jung becomes the viewing subject, and Hsiao-kang becomes the viewed object.

What is truly radical about this reversal is that it reveals a fundamental feature of the gaze: the gaze has no fixed owner. In the door-crack scene, Hsiao-kang is the viewer; in the keyhole scene, Ah-jung is the viewer. Yet between these two scenes, there is a subtle symmetry. Earlier, when Ah-jung had sex with Mei-mei, he did not know that someone was peeping at them. But in the keyhole scene, he actively occupies the position of the watcher. This means that anyone can be a voyeur, and anyone can also become the object of voyeurism. And the “gaze” in Lacan’s sense is never the look of any specific subject. The gaze is not “someone’s seeing” but “the seeing from the object” – like a diffuse light with no determinate source, yet it pervades the entire visual field.

This is the radical implication of Lacan’s claim that “the gaze is on the side of the object.” In Lacan’s theory, the gaze is not a look emitted by the subject but a look from the object that looks back at the subject. This proposition overturns the everyday assumption that seeing is a subject’s active observation of an object. In *Vive L’Amour*, the door crack and the keyhole are not viewing channels actively chosen by the characters; they are more like pre-installed visual apparatuses – anyone standing before them will inevitably lean in. This means that the impulse to see does not originate from the subject’s own will but is captured by a gaze that pre-exists the subject. The characters seem to be actively peeping, but in fact they have already fallen into the trap of the gaze.

(3) The Apartment as a Gaze Apparatus

Placing the door crack and the keyhole in a broader spatial context, we can see that the entire apartment in *Vive L’Amour* can be understood as a sophisticated “gaze apparatus.”^[6] In her analysis of closed spaces in Tsai’s films, Jia Xuedi points out that Tsai “likes to create closed spaces, represented by the city, the apartment, and the body,” within which “the home stripped of its domestic meaning” constitutes an important layer.^[7] The apartment in *Vive L’Amour* is not a “home” for dwelling, but the shell of a visual machine. Its multiple doors, winding corridors, and abrupt corners all serve the segmentation and reorganisation of vision.

Every time a door is pushed open, every wall that blocks, every extension of a corridor, redistributes who can see whom and who can be seen by whom. As the characters move through the apartment, their bodies are constantly cut by the geometric structure of the architecture: you can only see as far as the corner of the corridor, unable to tell whether someone is watching you from behind that corner; you can only hear sounds from the next room, unable to determine their source. This strategy of spatial segmentation is not accidental in Tsai’s work. Researchers analysing Tsai from a spatial perspective have observed that he “composes with minimal means, often presenting empty apartments, rooms, elevators, corridors,” yet “this minimal spatial layout hides a secret: through the strategy of spatial segmentation, it aptly renders the characters’ inner emotional postures.”

Within such a spatial structure, the architecture itself seems to acquire a certain capacity to see. When Hsiao-kang hides behind a door and listens to Ah-jung and Mei-mei, it is the door that blocks the sightline for him; when Ah-jung follows the sound to find Hsiao-kang, it is the corridor that creates suspense for him. The characters think they are actively watching, but in fact the building’s configuration decides for them when and where they can see what. Jia Xuedi further argues that in discussing Tsai’s body-centred scenes, one must focus on “sexual encounters, voyeurism, and lonely situations,” all of which unfold within closed architectural spaces.^[8] Guo Xinchao, from the Lacanian dimension of the Symbolic, points out that Tsai’s works repeatedly “perform what Lacan calls a ‘puncture of the Symbolic,’” presenting effective discourse, deconstructing the symbolic father (the big Other), and subverting traditional voyeuristic mechanisms – all manifesting a distrust of the ostensibly smooth symbolic order.^[9] The “closure” of the apartment space is not isolation but the creation of fissures. Through the building’s own structure, it produces a tension between presence and absence, visibility and invisibility, among the characters. Each opening of a door crack is a manifestation of the gaze; each closing of a door is its retreat. It is in this alternation of opening and closing that desire obtains its eternal fuel.

3. The Persistence of the Gaze: The Long Take and the Real

If the analysis in Chapter Two focused on “the gaze in the fissure” – where objet petit a excites desire through visual lack – then this chapter shifts attention from voyeurism between characters to a more fundamental dimension: the gaze of the camera itself. In *Vive L’Amour*, Tsai Ming-liang repeatedly employs fixed long takes with unsettling persistence. These shots belong to no character’s subjective point of view; they bear no mark of “who is looking.” Yet with an almost indifferent patience, they continuously “watch” the

characters. This watching is neither Hsiao-kang's seeing, nor Ah-jung's or Mei-mei's; it is not even the director's conscious arrangement. It is a gaze from the Real – subjectless, pure.

Lacan clearly distinguishes between “seeing” (vision) and “the gaze” (le regard). The former belongs to the interplay of the Imaginary and the Symbolic, while the latter is the extension or intrusion of the Real into the Imaginary and the Symbolic.^[10] The gaze is never the subject's look at an object; rather, it is the look from the traumatic kernel of the Real directed at the subject. The subject fantasises that there is a terrifying, impenetrable thing looking back at him. The key to the Lacanian gaze lies in the reversal of the subject-object relation: there is a paradox between the eye and the gaze – the gaze is on the side of the object, representing the blind spot in the visible field, through which the picture itself “photographs” the spectator. In other words, when we think we are looking at the world, it is actually an invisible spot in the world – objet petit a – that is looking at us.

Tsai's fixed long takes are the most direct cinematic embodiment of this reversal.

(1) The Fixed Long Take as “Automatic Gaze”

What Tsai employs most frequently are deep-focus shots without zoom, rich in character movement. His signature is the “salute-like” deep-focus shot. Unlike Hou Hsiao-hsien's long takes in long shot, Tsai favours medium and medium-close fixed long takes, pressing directly into the characters' solitary existence. The term “salute-like” is particularly evocative: it suggests that the lens does not merely “record” but “gazes”. But we must ask: from whom does this “salute-like gaze” come?

Not from any character. In the voyeuristic scene of *Vive L'Amour*, when Hsiao-kang peeps at Ah-jung and Mei-mei having sex through the door crack, Tsai does not cut to Hsiao-kang's subjective point of view. The camera remains fixed in what appears to be an objective, “third-party” position. But let us pause and think: what is this “third party”? No one is there. The apartment contains only three people. This camera position that watches the voyeur has no corresponding subject in physical space. It belongs to no one. Yet it does see. With cold, unmotivated, inescapable persistence, it continuously watches everything that happens in the frame.

This is precisely the Lacanian “gaze from the Real.” In his classic study, Wu Qiong points out that the core of Lacan's theory of the gaze lies in a paradox: the subject's seeing is not his own seeing but is structured by the gaze of the Other.^[11] On the one hand, the subject makes himself possible as a seeing subject by imagining the gaze of some Other; on the other hand, because behind the Other's gaze always hides the gaze of objet petit a from the Real, the subject's looking becomes an impossible seeing. In the fixed long takes of *Vive L'Amour*, this “impossibility” is concretised: the camera occupies an impossible subject-position, yet it exists, and it sees. This seeing does not belong to the narcissistic identification of the Imaginary, nor to the symbolic order of the Symbolic. It comes from the Real: an impenetrable, traumatic, meaningless “spot.”

From the temporal dimension, this “persistence” is crucial. Tsai's fixed long takes often last several minutes, far exceeding the duration required by conventional narrative cinema. In this elongated time, editing is suspended, narrative is paused, and the characters are fixed within the frame, with nowhere to escape. The spectator, too, is fixed in their seat, with nowhere to escape. The lens is like an eye that never blinks, forcibly imposing a meaningless, indigestible

“existence” on everyone. This is how the gaze of the Real operates in the temporal dimension – not through “what it sees” but through “the very act of continuing to see.”

(2) Case 1: Lin Mei-mei Eating Watermelon – The Void in the Everyday

There is a sequence in the film where Mei-mei eats watermelon alone in the apartment's kitchen. The camera is fixed and lasts several minutes. There is no dialogue, no dramatic event, no “plot progression” in any usual sense. She simply sits there, spooning watermelon into her mouth, chewing, swallowing, and repeating. This is a thoroughly quotidian scene – so ordinary that “nothing happens.” Yet it is precisely this “nothing happening” that makes the spectator feel a strange unease.

Why does a shot of someone eating watermelon make us uncomfortable? Because the camera's gaze is not directed at the action of “Mei-mei eating watermelon” but at the void within her actions. She eats, but her gaze is vacant; she chews, but her expression is blank. She is not enjoying the sweetness of the watermelon; she is “filling” – filling time with food, filling her body, filling the internal void that can never be filled. Tsai uses a long take of several minutes to expose the futility of this filling. Time passes; the watermelon is consumed; but Mei-mei does not change at all. She is still alone, still in that empty apartment, still immersed in that nameless solitude.

Tsai is committed to presenting the ruined state of the world, the failure of life, and the fragmented experience of existence, revealing the inherent lack of the symbolic big Other (especially the symbolic order of modernity).^[12] In the long take of Mei-mei eating watermelon, this “inherent lack” is visualised. We can compare this shot with the door crack discussed in Chapter Two: the gaze of the door crack is the “gaze in the fissure,” exciting desire through visual lack; the gaze of the long take is the “persistent gaze,” exposing the void through temporal elongation. The former is the dynamic mechanism of desire; the latter is the traumatic effect of the Real. Together, they constitute the double face of the gaze – excitation and persistence.

(3) Case 2: Hsiao-kang's Wrist-Cutting – The Display of Trauma

If the watermelon-eating sequence exposes the void in everyday life, then Hsiao-kang's wrist-cutting pushes this void to an extreme. Midway through the film, Hsiao-kang slits his wrist in a bathtub. The camera is fixed above the sink, looking down at Hsiao-kang's naked body soaking in water that gradually turns red. Blood seeps from the wound on his wrist, slowly spreading and diluting in the water. Hsiao-kang's expression is numb, showing almost no sign of pain. He simply does it – slits his wrist, then waits. There is no cut, no fast editing, no montage. The spectator is forced to watch this process, second by second, watching the blood mix with the water, watching the wound's contact with the water.

This sequence forms a cruel contrast with the watermelon-eating sequence. Eating watermelon is a filling of the everyday void – using food to fill an inner lack; wrist-cutting is a traumatic exposure of the void – using a wound to mark inner lack, even using the loss of life itself to confirm “I exist.” In Lacan's system, such behaviour belongs to the realm of jouissance – not pleasure, but a surplus enjoyment beyond the pleasure principle, tinged with pain. By harming his own body, the subject tries to touch the boundary of the Real, to feel the painful evidence of being alive. For Lacan, jouissance and trauma are two sides of the same coin: both are intrusions of

the Real into the Symbolic, extreme experiences of the subject confronted with an unsymbolisable kernel. The jouissance of wrist-cutting is not the enjoyment of the wound itself, but the enjoyment of the fact that “when my blood flows out, I finally feel that I exist.”

In analysing this sequence, special attention must be paid to the reversal of the power of looking. Earlier, the spectator more or less imagined himself as a “voyeur” – like Hsiao-kang, hiding in the dark to watch the desire of others. But in the wrist-cutting long take, this power relation of looking is reversed. The spectator is no longer an active viewer but a passive witness. We cannot look away (the lens does not permit it), cannot fast-forward (the film does not permit it); we can only remain trapped in our seats, watching a body gradually lose its warmth in bloody water. In Tsai’s fixed long takes, the spectator is forced to confront a state of “disorientation.” Tsai creates a Brechtian alienation effect, preventing the spectator from simply falling into the soft net of imaginary identification and instead leaving the spectator “disoriented” and prompted to reflect. This is precisely the impact of the Real’s gaze on the spectator – it does not seek your identification, does not invite your empathy; it simply and forcibly presents before you a traumatic experience that cannot be digested.

From the perspective of Lacanian theory, the wrist-cutting long take also reveals another dimension of objet petit a. Objet a is not only the spot in the visual field but also the cause of the subject’s desire. In the act of wrist-cutting, Hsiao-kang tries to use his wound as a “testimony” – as if to say, “Look, I am here, I have a wound, therefore I am real.” But the cold gaze of the long take reveals a crueller fact: the wound cannot serve as testimony, because no big Other is watching. The camera is filming, but it is not the big Other – it is the empty gaze of the Real. It sees the wound but does not thereby confer meaning on Hsiao-kang. Trauma is displayed, but no redemption is offered. This is precisely what is most unsettling in Tsai’s imagery: he shows trauma, but provides no illusion of healing.

4. The Withdrawal of the Gaze: The Cry and the End of Fantasy

(1) The Final Long Take: Lin Mei-mei Crying in the Park

The film’s ending is its most unsettling and most psychoanalytically significant moment. After spending the night with Ah-jung, Mei-mei rises alone at dawn, leaves the apartment, crosses an unfinished city park, and sits down on a bench. What follows is a fixed long take that lingers on her face for approximately seven minutes – no one disturbs her, no dialogue occurs, there is no door crack to peep through, no other person to look at. She is first silent, then sobs, and finally bursts into tears. The camera gazes motionlessly at her face until tears blur her makeup, until her cries turn into dry heaving, until she seems unable to produce any more sound.

This is the only scene in the entire film without a voyeur, without a door crack, without the presence of another’s gaze. From the perspective of Lacan’s theory of the gaze, this signals a crucial turning point: the gaze withdraws.

It is worth noting that the Venice Film Festival once suggested that Tsai cut this crying scene, but the director insisted on keeping it, saying he would rather withdraw from the competition. Tsai’s insistence precisely confirms the centrality of this scene: it is not the epilogue of the plot but

the ultimate revelation of the psychoanalytic truth the film seeks to convey. If the voyeuristic scenes and the long takes analysed above present the two dimensions of “excitation” and “persistence” of the gaze, then this final cry leads us to the third and last dimension of the gaze – its withdrawal. When peeping ceases, when the camera’s gaze recedes, when others are no longer present – when all the looks that once excited desire and captured the subject disappear – what confronts the subject?

(2) Traversing the Fundamental Fantasy

To understand the psychoanalytic significance of Mei-mei’s cry, Lacan’s concept of “traversing the fantasy” is an unavoidable theoretical anchor. “Fantasy” in Lacan’s usage is not simply “imagination” or “daydream” in everyday language. As Hu Jihua points out in his exposition of Žižek’s reading of Lacan, fantasy is an imagined scene of desire’s satisfaction; it structures the subject’s mode of “how to desire.” The subject uses fantasy to answer the most fundamental and most painful question – “What does the Other desire?” – and thereby finds an orientation for his or her own desire. As Zhang Yibing reveals, human desire is always the desire of the Other’s desire; the individual subject’s “I want” is always a pseudo-“I want,” and fantasy is precisely the visual-imaginary apparatus that maintains this pseudo-“I want.”^[13]

In everyday life, people constantly chase various objects – love, wealth, fame, recognition – but Lacanian psychoanalysis tells us that these objects themselves are never the true target of desire. What desire points to is always the unattainable objet petit a hidden behind the object. The function of fantasy is to provide the subject with a scene in which desire “as if” could be satisfied, thereby concealing the fundamental unsatisfiability of the structure of desire itself. What enables people to endure the repetition and frustration of daily life is precisely the support of fantasy: it makes the subject believe that once a certain object is obtained, everything will become different.

However, the goal of psychoanalytic treatment is not to help the subject satisfy desire better, but to guide the subject to “traverse the fantasy” – that is, to stop using fantasy to fill the lack in the Other’s desire. As some scholars explain in elaborating Lacan’s ethics of desire, when the subject no longer uses fantasy to fill the lack in the big Other’s desire, he or she can encounter the thoroughly heterogeneous big Other and enter an unconscious position of radical alterity. But “traversing the fantasy” is by no means a pleasant experience. It means the subject must confront a cruel fact: the object of desire for which he or she has long struggled, suffered, and sacrificed has never actually existed. Kong Ming’an, in analysing Lacan-Žižek theory, even points out that traversing the ideological fantasy has only two outcomes: death or madness. From this we can see that traversing the fantasy is the most traumatic event in the subject’s psychic structure – and Mei-mei’s cry on the bench is precisely the cinematic presentation of this traumatic moment.

Her sexual encounter with Ah-jung has no emotional communication; it is more like an empty bodily operation. When she eats watermelon alone in the apartment, smokes, swats mosquitoes, the long, fixed long takes constantly capture her emptiness and disorientation. Yet in all these moments, her behaviour is still supported by a certain fantasy – perhaps a fantasy called “Ah-jung might fall in love with me,” perhaps “one day I will find true emotional 归宿.” Whatever its specific content, the fantasy allows her to endure the daily void, gives her desire a direction, and makes her

believe that “next time will be different.”

But the final cry shows that she has finally traversed this fantasy. She sits on the park bench, surrounded by no door crack, no keyhole, no voyeur, no gaze from beyond the camera – all the external apparatuses that once excited her desire and allowed her to maintain the illusion of subjectivity have now withdrawn. After the withdrawal of the gaze, she is forced to confront the void that belongs to her, long concealed by fantasy. This is no longer the absence of a particular object of desire, but the lack in the structure of desire itself – not “I didn’t get Ah-jung’s love,” but “even if I got it, that place was always empty.” As Tsai Ming-liang himself said, “This is an empty era of desire; the spirit is dead.” This emptiness is so devastating precisely because the collapse of fantasy makes it impossible to avoid any longer.

Mei-mei’s cry is not sadness. Sadness points to a specific lost object – “I lost him/her” – and is therefore object-directed and narratable. But Mei-mei’s cry has no object: she has not lost a particular person; rather, she has discovered that she has never possessed anything that could be “lost.” This is precisely the Lacanian “vertigo of the Real”: when the Symbolic (language, social order) and the Imaginary (fantasy, self-image) simultaneously fail, the subject is thrown into the void of the Real, and there is nothing left to do but cry.

5. Conclusion

(1) The Progressive Logic of the Three Faces

Through a Lacanian analysis of the gaze in *Vive L’Amour*, this paper has revealed a complete psychoanalytic trajectory hidden within the film: from the excitation of the gaze (peeping through the door crack), to the persistence of the gaze (the fixed long take), and finally to the withdrawal of the gaze (the final cry). These three faces are not simply juxtaposed but form a progressively structured logical chain – desire is activated in the fissure, then its void is exposed through the enduring gaze of the Real, and finally, after the collapse of fantasy, the subject is forced to confront her own lack. This trajectory corresponds to three core moments in Lacanian psychoanalysis: the lure of objet petit a, the intrusion of the Real, and the traversing of the fantasy.

Within this progressive structure, *Vive L’Amour* ceases to be merely a social-realist film about “urban loneliness” and becomes a psychoanalytic diagnosis of the predicament of modern subjectivity. The film’s unsettling long takes, its silent voyeurism, and its seven-minute crying scene are not mere stylistic flourishes by the director but the most faithful cinematic presentation of the Lacanian proposition: “man’s desire is the desire of the Other.”

(2) A Supplement from Object Relations Theory: The Origin of the Void

Lacan’s theory of the gaze reveals the structural void of desire, but it does not fully explain why this void causes the subject such profound suffering. Why can the subject not simply accept the unsatisfiability of desire, but must constantly attempt to fill it through voyeurism, self-mutilation, and crying? Object relations theory precisely supplements this inquiry.

Winnicott’s concept of the “false self” offers another clue for understanding Mei-mei: a subject who has long conformed to environmental expectations and suppressed genuine feelings gradually loses contact with her own inner state, becoming “functionally normal yet feeling empty and unreal.” Mei-mei’s eating of watermelon, swatting mosquitoes, and mechanical sexual encounter with Ah-jung –

all these behaviours are performances of the false self, not expressions of authentic emotion. The final cry, then, is precisely the moment when the false self collapses and the repressed authentic lack suddenly erupts. From a Lacanian perspective, this cry is the traversing of the fundamental fantasy; from the perspective of object relations theory, it is simultaneously the primal mourning of a subject who was never held by a “good enough mother” and who, in adulthood, touches her inner void for the first time. The two perspectives are not contradictory but explain the same phenomenon from different theoretical levels.

(3) The Desire for Connection and Its Impossibility: A Psychoanalytic Rereading of the Title *Vive L’Amour*

A closer look at the film’s title, *Vive L’Amour*, invites a deliberate interpretive move: breaking it down into its constituent elements – “love” (ai) and “feeling” (qing), each followed by “long live” (wansui). This is not a celebration of “love” as a unified whole, but a cry of “long live” for “love” and “feeling” separately – a yearning for a state of emotional connection, where love is the impulse to connect and feeling is the flow of affect, with “long live” as a prayer for their eternal presence. Yet in the film, there is neither love nor feeling. Hsiao-kang’s obsession with Ah-jung is not love but a mirror-stage misrecognition; Ah-jung’s sexual encounter with Mei-mei is not feeling but a bodily operation; among the three characters, there is never any genuine emotional exchange.^[14]

To exist, to connect, to mean – object relations theory tells us that the most fundamental human motivation is not instinctual satisfaction but the establishment of a relationship with an object. Behind Hsiao-kang’s voyeurism, Mei-mei’s crying, and Ah-jung’s constant changing of partners – all these symptomatic behaviours – lies an unmet need: the need for confirmation of existence, the desire for connection, the plea for meaning. The characters in the film cannot love not because they do not want to, but because they have never internalised a “good object” and have never learned how to let emotion flow between two people.

Thus, the film’s title acquires a tragic rereading. It is not ironic but a mournful cry for the impossible, uttered from the depths of emptiness. When Mei-mei cries on the park bench, she is not crying over the absence of love but over her own never having truly possessed the capacity to enter into emotion. This is not only her predicament but also – as both Lacanian theory and object relations theory diagnose – the most common predicament of the modern subject.

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