

# Realism, intertextuality and humour in Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*

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## Abstract

*This article examines the uses of long takes, deep focus and intertextuality in Tsai Ming-Liang's Goodbye, Dragon Inn. Andre Bazin argued that long takes and deep focus create a form of 'cinematic humanism'. Tsai instead uses the techniques to produce effects of disorientation and humour. The article then examines the theory of intertextuality as proposed by Julia Kristeva. It is argued that Tsai uses intertextuality to confuse the boundaries between Goodbye, Dragon Inn and King Hu's Dragon Gate Inn as well as between the viewer, the medium of film and the cinema space. The article ends with a warning against putting too much faith in grand theoretical structures to provide exhaustive readings of Tsai's films. It is argued that an aspect of Tsai's cinema that is overlooked by such approaches is its light-heartedness.*

## Keywords

Tsai  
realism  
intertextuality  
humour  
Chinese cinema  
Taiwan

This article is a critical look at Tsai Ming-liang's *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (*Bu San*) (2003), the cinematic techniques used and the effects produced. Tsai's film provides a rich ground for critical reading, raising both technical issues over how certain effects are produced and wider cultural issues concerning the changing meanings of cinematic techniques as they travel around the world and are employed by diverse film-makers.

*Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is Tsai's fifth full-length film. Like the majority of his other films it is set in Taipei although the entire action of the film takes place within and in the area immediately surrounding a cinema where King Hu's classic *wuxia* (swordplay) film *Dragon Gate Inn* (*Longmen kezhan*) (1967) is being screened. The action of the film is minimal and follows a series of characters within the cinema building. Among them are a Japanese tourist who comes to the cinema seeking shelter from the rain, the projectionist played by Tsai's long-time collaborator Lee Kang-sheng, a limping woman who works at front of house and two actors who appear in *Dragon Gate Inn* and come to the cinema to watch themselves on-screen. The film follows these characters as they slowly move around the cinema. As in Tsai's other films minimal dialogue and slow pacing concentrate the viewer's attention on the details of the actors' physical performance.

In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* Tsai frequently uses both long takes and deep focus. In the long takes the camera holds its gaze on a specific place for a long period of time, allowing the characters to move across the shot without cutting to different angles to emphasize their movement. Deep focus complements the use of long takes by centring the attention of the camera at a point deep within the shot rather than focusing on objects close-up. These

techniques are made all the more distinctive because a lack of narrative action throughout concentrates the viewer's attention on the visual aspects of the film. In European film criticism, Andre Bazin argued that these techniques work towards an accurate impression of reality; the long take retains the integrity of time and deep focus retains the integrity of space. This marks a break from a style of editing that privileges the act of telling a story above all else. For Bazin, the great benefit of this realism is that 'on the screen everybody is overwhelmingly real. No one is reduced to the condition of an object or a symbol that would allow one to hate them in comfort without having first to leap the hurdle of their humanity' (Bazin 1971: 21). Although Bazin's criticism is extremely effective when viewing European film from immediately after World War II, it cannot provide a complete and exhaustive reading of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. The use of long takes and deep focus here do not work toward a kind of cinematic humanism. Instead, these techniques make the familiar seem unfamiliar. In the process Tsai creates wry, comic effects that call attention to the cinematic techniques in play.

Another noteworthy cinematic technique in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is Tsai's use of intertextuality; the process by which other texts are incorporated into a specific text either by allusion or direct insertion. The English title of Tsai's film is a reference to King Hu's *wuxia* (swordplay) epic *Dragon Gate Inn*. Tsai stages his film within a cinema screening of *Dragon Gate Inn* and in many of the scenes dialogue from Hu's film can be heard in the background. Julia Kristeva has written extensively on intertextuality, arguing that it destabilizes what are often held as natural, given meanings. Following Kristeva, we can say that Tsai's recontextualization of *Dragon Gate Inn* destabilizes the original meanings and associations it may have held. Further effects created by the use of intertextuality are consistent with the effects identified in Tsai's use of realism by Chris Berry (2005). The conceptual boundaries that separate the viewer from the on-screen object of their gaze are constantly called into question both within the film, as the characters sit in a cinema, and in a wider sense of how we, as viewers, relate to *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. Kristeva (1986: 112) sees this process of destabilization as a socially engaged and revolutionary process, but it will be argued again that Tsai uses this technique for comic effect. The destabilization of *Dragon Gate Inn* is extremely subtle and playful; the presence of dialogue from Hu's film providing a commentary for the minimal (and largely dialogue-free) action of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*.

Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh and Darrell William Davis note that critics often construct extremely complex and tenuous readings of Tsai's films. These critics are often able to do this through a lack of knowledge about specific cultural references. This article will therefore end with a warning against putting too much faith in such readings. When using European critical theory in relation to any text (especially non-European ones) it remains important to be aware of the context from which that theory emerged and the limits of its applicability as well as the ever-changing effects to which a set of techniques can be used. For example, it will be argued that in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* techniques of deep focus and long takes are used to create disorientating effects which are light-hearted and playful.

## Realist techniques in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*

In his famous essay 'An Aesthetic of Reality' Andre Bazin (1971: 20) praised Italian neo-realist cinema's 'perfect and natural adherence to actuality'. In the same essay he praises Orson Welles's use of deep focus to capture 'a fundamental quality of reality – its continuity' (Bazin 1971: 28). Also writing in the immediate aftermath of World War II, Cesare Zavattini, a leading figure in Italian neo-realism, strived for a temporal dimension of film that was driven by something other than narrative drama: 'the real time of the narrative is not that of the drama but the concrete duration of the character ... the film is identical with what the actor is doing and with this alone' (quoted in Bondanella 1999: 64). The pacing and composition of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* appear to correspond well to this understanding of realist cinema. The camera holds a shot for an extremely long time and frequently takes advantage of deep-focus techniques to display the cinema's entrance and corridors. In Tsai's film the principal character is the cinema building itself. Thus, in the second scene, the camera gazes at the cinema front for some time before a human character (Mitamura's Japanese tourist) enters the shot. The continuity of space is maintained through deep focus, allowing Zavattini's 'concrete duration of the character' to be depicted spatially as well as temporally. As Mitamura's character moves deeper into the cinema we are given a shot in which we see both him looking around for some human presence and the woman who (we may presume) usually looks after the front of house washing a glass in an adjoining room, out of sight of Mitamura's character. This simple narrative event is depicted without cuts; the building's spatial extension is preserved. Realist theory is therefore useful in describing the technical processes at work in Tsai's film. However, although the techniques employed in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* are similar to those of Italian neo-realist cinema, we should not take their application too literally. By using the building as the principal character, Tsai's film marks a break from the actor-driven realism advocated by Zavattini.

The question arises here as to how far cultural differences impair the applicability of certain theories. The use of space in Chinese cinema, for example, has been explained through the influence of Chinese landscape painting,<sup>1</sup> an influence that has been seen as more important than European film techniques. David Bordwell (2001: 9), however, arguing against the prevalence of culturally specific readings, concentrates on a 'transcultural' reading of Chinese cinema that concentrates on cultural similarities rather than differences. Fran Martin criticizes this 'transcultural' mode of analysis, specifically questioning Bordwell's analysis of the reasons for the Taiwanese adoption of the long take. By suggesting the long take could have been adopted because it is less demanding for non-professional actors or to brand their film as non-commercial, at best 'Bordwell misses an opportunity to interrogate the broader cultural politics' at work. At worst, one might say, 'European modernist film style is treated as if it were a "natural stage" in Taiwan cinema's progress toward some presumptively universal film aesthetic based on European norms' (Martin 2003).

We should note here that Tsai is strongly aware of the work of European film-makers. He cites Francois Truffaut as his favourite director (Martin 2003)

1. Bordwell (2001) quotes Lai (1980) as an example of this.

and includes sections of his *400 Blows* (*Les 400 Coups*) (1959) in his film *What Time is it There?* (*Ni Neibian Jidian*) (2001). However, by using these techniques, Tsai need not be producing an emulation of or tribute to European film realism; he could be parodying them or simply using the same techniques to create a completely different effect. Kim Ji-seok argues that in *The Missing* (directed by Tsai's long-time collaborator, Li Kang-sheng) 'familiar surroundings suddenly become unfamiliar through long takes. As a result the main character's confusion is palpable to the audience' (quoted in Yeh and Davis 2005: 237). This analysis also works very well for *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. The long takes of the cinema front and the stairs leading up to the projection room turn the familiar setting of a cinema into a strange and empty place. The effects produced foreshadow the fear of ghosts that Mitamura's character experiences later in the film in a sequence where he flees from a woman he believes to be haunting the cinema. The use of deep focus also makes familiar surroundings look strange. In a shot where the woman from the front of house reaches the top of the stairs on her way to the projection room to deliver some cake, we see her move to the back of the shot and open a door. This immediately deepens the focus of the shot. She then moves further back and does the same thing, deepening the shot again. Deep focus is used not to create a more recognizable, realistic image of the world, but rather to alter our impression of the world depicted on-screen, making familiar surroundings seem immediately unfamiliar. These uses of deep focus and long takes serve to give the cinema, depicted on-screen, a life of its own. This life, however, need not be the accurate portrayal that realist cinema aspires to.

Chris Berry argues that the realism in Tsai's film *Vive L'Amour* (*Aiqing Wansui*) (1994) 'performs its realism so excessively as to draw attention to itself' (Berry 2005: 89). Likewise, in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, the tropes of cinematic realism are emphasized to such an extent as to draw attention to them. In addition to the uses made of the long take and deep focus described above, the slow pacing of Tsai's film emphasizes the lack of narrative and focuses the viewer's attention on the performance of everyday actions. Examples of this are the extremely long takes of the woman from front of house washing a glass and attempting to remove a hot cake from the rice cooker next to her desk. However, this is where Tsai's realism breaks from the Bazinian mode. Where Bazinian realism purports to capture the actual, Tsai's realism performs a conception of the real. In one sequence Mitamura's character meets a man while wandering around the back corridors of the cinema, The man offers him a cigarette and begins to talk about ghosts. Mitamura does not seem to understand and replies 'I am Japanese' but not before leaning into the man's neck in a sinister motion that evokes F.W. Murnau's *Nosferatu* (1922). Although this scene is shot in long take and deep focus with all the hallmarks of Bazinian realism, the action captured by this realist mode is performative and self-aware. The conversation about ghosts introduces a theme that will recur later to comic effect (when Mitamura's character flees from a woman he believes is a ghost) and the language difficulties experienced by the characters as well as the vampiric lean into the man's neck serve to disorientate the viewer, again making apparently familiar situations seem unfamiliar and strange. By allowing his mode of realism to become aware of its own

performance, Tsai opens up the possibility of new uses for old techniques. The adherence to actuality that previously defined realism is displaced by a new awareness of the relationship of realist performance to the viewer. The classic cinematic-realist style, no longer only able to represent the actual, can therefore be used to create effects of humour, disorientation and, as Berry (2005: 90) argues in the case of *Vive L'Amour*, a sympathetic 'indulgence' towards the characters on behalf of the audience that, along with Tsai's use of intertextuality, ultimately destabilizes the conceptual separation of viewer and viewed object.

There is an extent to which the invocation of realism can also be seen as parody, a destabilization of the norms of that tradition. This effect, however, relies on an intertextual knowledge of both realist cinema and the criticism surrounding it. While Tsai is certainly aware of this tradition, a much more blatant intertextual reference is the film, which lends *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* its English title, King Hu's popular *wuxia* epic, *Dragon Gate Inn*.

### **Intertextual play and destabilization: *Dragon Gate Inn* inside *Goodbye, Dragon Inn***

Tsai's film opens with the soundtrack and narration of King Hu's *Dragon Gate Inn*. This is accompanied visually by *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*'s credits. When the credits have finished rolling we cut to the visual layer of Hu's film (which occupies the whole screen) and the unity of video and soundtrack are restored. We then cut further back to a crowded cinema interior to see people watching the film. This scene can be read as a wider comment within *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* on people's relationship to film, a sense carried by the Chinese title of the film; *Bu San* (literally: not dispersing). Over the course of the film we see a cinema that was once full completely empty out, culminating in the extreme long shot of an empty auditorium. *Bu San* can also be read as a playful comment by Tsai on the state of his own domestic audiences who have dispersed dramatically in recent years. The theme of people's relationship to the cinema (both as a building and in the general sense of the film medium) also dominates the action within *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* and as the characters move through the cinema auditorium their movements are constantly accompanied by the soundtrack of Hu's *Dragon Gate Inn*.

While the film is certainly a comment on people's close relationship to the cinema, intertextual techniques are also used to destabilize the conceptual positions that differentiate the viewing subject from the viewed object. Among the most prominent writers on intertextuality in the West is Julia Kristeva. She employs the Husserlian concept of a thetic phase of meaning 'which contains the object as well as the proposition, and the complicity between them' (Kristeva 1986: 99). This phase separates the identities of the object and the uttered signifying proposition:

The thetic posits the signifiable object: it posits signification as both a *denotation* (of an object) and an *enunciation* (of a displaced subject, absent from the signified and signifying position). From then on, the thetic prepares and contains within itself the very possibility of making this division explicit.

(Kristeva 1986: 106, emphasis in original)

She argues that the operation of intertextuality involves ‘an altering of the thetic *position* – the destruction of the old position and the creation of a new one’ (Kristeva 1986: 111, emphasis in original). In this way the separation between subject and object or viewer and viewed, which the thetic position claims, is undermined. Kristeva’s motivation here is the ‘struggle to employ pre-existent signifying practices for different purposes’ (Allen 2000: 54). She is concerned with freeing linguistic signifiers from a monologic existence where they must always mean/refer to the same thing, thereby allowing their meanings and significance to become more fluid and ultimately ‘set in motion what dogma suppresses’, allowing ‘the signifying process [to join] the social revolution’ (Kristeva 1986: 112). This process, allowing radical shifts in referential meaning, is employed throughout *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* to destabilize apparently secure notions of genre film (via *Dragon Gate Inn*) the status of different films as self-contained objects and ultimately the viewer’s relationship to both film and the cinema space.

Yeh and Davis see *Dragon Gate Inn* ‘almost as a host, through which [Tsai’s] contemporary vignettes unfold parasitically’ (Yeh and Davis 2005: 236). In their view, the ‘homophobic conflict’ (Yeh and Davis 2005: 136) of the martial-arts tradition (with its demonization of eunuchs) is subverted by the ‘homosexual ghost story’ (Yeh and Davis 2005: 136) that comprises the action of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. Both the homophobia of the martial-arts tradition and the *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*’s status as a homosexual ghost story (through reading Mitamura’s character’s wanderings as cruising for sex) are debatable, but the possibility of reading a shift in meaning is clear. Hu’s film, a lavish generic epic, is recontextualized by Tsai to a destabilized position that allows the possibility of readings such as that of Yeh and Davis.

The importance of intertextuality in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is made visible right from the start of the film, when the spectator is greeted by the incongruous experience of seeing a Tsai Ming-liang film (cemented by the introductory legend ‘a Tsai Ming-liang film’) opening with the well-known theme and narration of a completely different film. Throughout the film the camera looks at members of the audience while the audio track from *Dragon Gate Inn* plays. This technique creates several effects. First, it alters perceptions of Hu’s film, distancing the spectator from the generic dialogue. Second, it allows the dialogue of *Dragon Gate Inn* to provide a commentary on the minimal action of Tsai’s film. For example, as Mitamura Kiyonobu’s character enters the near-deserted auditorium, the disembodied voice from *Dragon Gate Inn* says: ‘They couldn’t have gotten far, we can catch up.’ Again, as the camera watches Mitamura’s character sitting and watching the film, the seats around deserted except for a couple in the back of the shot, we hear the following dialogue:

Voice 1: How many guests are staying here?

Voice 2: This month we don’t have any.

Voice 1: Good, I’ll book the entire inn.

Voice 2: The entire inn?

Voice 1: We’ll be living here for five to ten days or so. While we stay here don’t take any other guests. Do you understand?

This exchange not only acts as a knowing commentary on the empty cinema but also invokes the theme of haunting which is prominent in the film. One can take the inn mentioned in the dialogue as referring, not to the inn of the film's title, but to the cinema in which Mitamura's character is sitting. Indeed, the parallels between the cinema and inn, which reinforce this reading, have been drawn in a previous scene when we see Mitamura's character seeking refuge from a rainstorm in the cinema. In *Dragon Gate Inn* two characters also come to the inn seeking refuge from a rainstorm. The cinema-goers in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* are tied to *Dragon Gate Inn* as the actions they perform are echoed and commented on by the action that takes place on-screen as they move through the cinema.

Throughout Tsai's film the inseparability of the film and viewer is conveyed through near-constant intertextual play. This is realized most succinctly in a scene where we see the woman from front of house open a door next to the cinema screen. She steps through the door and looks at the screen. She remains there for a minute or so before returning through the door and watching the screen from behind. We then see a series of rapid cuts suggesting an interaction between the woman and an on-screen swordswoman in *Dragon Gate Inn*. The rapid cuts between Tsai's film and *Dragon Gate Inn* are all the more noticeable because of the extremely long takes which make up the rest of the film. This scene creates a number of effects. It emphasizes a strong link between cinema and viewer also implied in the film's Chinese title. This can be understood as something akin to the effect of 'indulgence' that Chris Berry notes in *Vive L'Amour*. Here, Berry argues, the mode of performative realism that Tsai uses creates a 'consoling effect' whereby the characters perform their loneliness in such a way that the audience enters into a sympathetic relationship with them (Berry 2005: 90). Berry's analysis is relevant to a discussion of intertextuality because his conception of performative realism also serves to unite the experience of the viewer and the filmic object, distorting and destabilizing the boundaries that separate the two. Intertextuality in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, however, destabilizes not only the boundary between viewer and film but also the boundaries between the cinema auditorium and the cinema screen and ultimately between the viewer of Tsai's film and their expectations of the film-viewing experience.

For the characters in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, the boundaries between viewer and film are frequently blurred. In addition to the sequence described above, towards the end of the film a scene appears in which Miao Tien and an opponent fight on-screen (in *Dragon Gate Inn*) while staring each other down (as viewers) across the cinema auditorium. Sequences such as the two described here can be explained in terms of Kristevan intertextuality whereby the thetic position of a signifiable object (*Dragon Gate Inn*) as separate from the subject (the viewer within the auditorium) is challenged and broken down. In the first case, the woman (from the front of house) as the viewing subject is allowed to interact with the film as on-screen object. This effect is created by Tsai's composition and editing. First, she is placed in the frame alongside the screen showing *Dragon Gate Inn*. She then moves from standing next to the screen to standing behind (and thereby within) the screen. Finally, the rapid series of cuts between her and one of *Dragon Gate Inn*'s on-screen protagonists creates the impression of

conversation and exchange between viewing subject and viewed object. The thetic position of the object, which previously separated the two, is overcome and the possibility of exchange is created. Later, in the scene where Miao Tien and his opponent sit in the auditorium watching themselves fight on-screen, a similar effect is achieved. The on-screen sword-fight between the two is given a direct off-screen analogue as the two actors, now over thirty years older, trade glances across the empty cinema. The distinction between viewing subject and on-screen object is therefore strongly confused in this sequence: Miao Tien and his opponent are simultaneously viewing subject and viewed object. The fact that, as viewing subjects, they are much older further destabilizes *Dragon Gate Inn* as a self-contained cinematic world. While the stars of *Dragon Gate Inn* remain young forever on-screen, off-screen their bodies age and their lives continue. As if to emphasize this point, Miao Tien is depicted visiting the cinema with his grandson. The on-screen characters of *Dragon Gate Inn* who, in contrast, remain unchanged, are likened to ghosts haunting the auditorium providing both extra-diegetic commentary on and conversation with the viewers.

The significance of cinematic ghosts elsewhere in Tsai's oeuvre is noted by Brian Hu who describes Tsai's nostalgia for 1960s Mandarin Chinese film and his use of popular song from this era as a means of communication with the past (Hu 2003). This process can be seen through the inclusion of Grace Chang songs in *The Hole (Dong)* (1998) and is echoed in the inclusion of another song from that era as the closing theme of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. The figure of the ghost in Tsai's films therefore acts as a bridge between the present and the past. In this way the screening of *Dragon Gate Inn* in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* overcomes temporal distance, linking 1960s Taiwanese popular culture to the present and the future. The present is represented by an elderly Miao Tien and the future being represented by his grandson. In Tsai's film *What Time is it There?* the inclusion of scenes from Truffaut's *The 400 Blows* and the presence of that film's child star Jean-Pierre Léaud (now a middle-aged man) achieve similar effects in overcoming the temporal distance between the past and the present. In *What Time is it There?* time is also used as a means to overcome spatial distance as Lee Kang-sheng's character obsessively resets clocks in Taipei to display the time in Paris. The desire to eliminate temporal and spatial distance in Tsai's films can also be read in Kristevan terms. Just as intertextuality seeks to overcome the distance between subject and object, so the elimination of temporal and spatial distance seeks to collapse distinctions between 'now and then' or 'here and there'. In the disorientation that follows this process, new spaces can be created through the performance of realism, humour or the nostalgic recreation of popular culture from the past.

There is also an extent to which Kristeva's notion of intertextuality acts as a metaphor for the cinema-going experience of viewing Tsai's film. A film is designed to be screened in multiple locations and viewed by different people. In this way it will have no fixed meaning, no correct reading; it is being constantly recontextualized. Indeed, the multiple positions of the cinema-going experience are represented visually in the opening scenes of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*. The camera takes the position of a viewer

surreptitiously peering out from behind a curtain, followed by a viewer in the middle of the stalls. The camera then takes two more positions, one further back and the other to the right before coming to rest directly behind the heads of Tsai and LeeYou-hsin (a prominent Taiwanese queer critic who makes a cameo appearance here).

Although the process that destabilizes and allows for constant recontextualization of the filmic object can be explained technically in Kristevan terms, we should not assume that it shares the same social-revolutionary motivation as the Kristevan project. Although Tsai has been claimed as director who draws on social alienation and 'queer' themes which celebrate the marginal (see Marchetti 2005) I would argue that the intertextuality, as it is employed in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, is also motivated to comic effects and a desire to entertain that is frequently overlooked in criticism of his films.

### The dangers of over-criticism

In the case of a film as elusive as *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, conclusions are slippery things to grasp and although the critical theory mentioned in this essay provides a helpful tool with which to speculate about Tsai's film, one should be cautious in using it to draw cast-iron conclusions. Yeh and Davis note that: '[f]rom time to time prevailing discourse even spins a mystical aura around [Tsai's] films, especially in French writing, because the more specific, localized contexts fail to catch the eyes of these critics' (Yeh and Davis 2005: 220). As an example, they cite an interview with Tsai conducted by French critics Jean-Pierre Rehm, Olivier Joyard and Danièle Rivière in which Tsai jokes:

You also draw attention in *Vive L'Amour* to the odour of May's underarm sweat. Do these bodily manifestations signify that the body is escaping from itself, becoming diluted, dematerialized, or on the contrary, does this oozing show that it is still alive? [laughter] That's something I've never wondered about!

(Rehm, Joyard and Rivière 1999: 114)

For critics working on Tsai's films, there is often a weight of expectation regarding what the films are and, indeed, should be. Chris Fujiwara complains that '*The Hole* displays the director's sense at its most exact, but the film seems precious and cute when it should be mysterious and transcendent' (Fujiwara 2002). Therefore, there remains a danger of approaching Tsai's films with critical tools that are effective in analysing the sophisticated technical processes at work but can be misleading if they are used to explain his motivations, or what critics assume his films 'should' be saying. In the use of Bazinian and Kristevan theory, one would be wrong to assume that the presence of certain techniques means that those techniques are always motivated toward the same effects. Bazin is interested in cinema as a humanist artistic intervention while Kristeva wants to set the very process of signification against social dogma and for social revolution. I would argue that the use of long takes, deep focus and intertextuality in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* is rather intended to destabilize the viewer's expectations in such a way as to create wry, comic effects that draw their humour from the audience's frustrated expectations.

Although Bazin and Kristeva's work is frequently very informative (as it is here in terms of identifying the technical processes at work), one should bear in mind cultural and temporal differences between the contexts that specific theories emerge from and the text in question. In *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*, the humanism which drove Bazin's writing in the wake of World War II and the revolutionary engagement of Kristeva's work in the wake of the May 1968 student uprisings lack cultural resonance. The limping woman, for example, could be read as part of a project of humanist realism. Under this reading, the long take forces the camera (and thereby the spectator) to move at her pace through the cinema's old corridors, thereby creating a sympathetic realist portrayal. I would, however, read both the limp and use of deep focus here as self-consciously playful and performative. In Tsai's film it is the long shot that (literally) comes first and the people in it that come after. In this way, the limping woman acts out the pace of the shot, drawing our attention to it by giving us a human metaphor that moves at the same halting speed. This sequence can be read as humorous in the sense that it plays with the audience's expectations of how fast people should walk in a film and how the camera should follow them doing this.

The use of deep focus is also essentially playful. When the woman opens the successive doors at the back of the frame, our expectations and understanding of the depth of the shot are undermined, not just once but several times. This echoes Kim Ji-seok's analysis of the use of long shots to make 'familiar surroundings suddenly become unfamiliar' (quoted in Yeh and Davis 2005: 237). This effect is linked with the ultimately humorous ghost-story theme later in this film which sees Mitamura flee the auditorium in slapstick fear. The playfulness of Tsai's use of long shots and deep focus can be seen in his other films. A fine example of this would be the extreme long shot of a stream of urine coming out of Miao Tien in *The River (He Liu)* (1997). The playful humour here relies on the fact that Miao Tien is a respected actor in Taiwan and that he is urinating for a super-human length of time. Although this scene could be read both as realist and as a parody of realism, it seems more intuitive to concentrate on the comic effect produced by having a respected actor taking a very long piss.

## Conclusions

*Goodbye, Dragon Inn's* use of long takes and deep focus initially seem to correspond to our understanding of European realist cinema. However, Tsai breaks from this humanist tradition first by using the building itself as the principal character and second by frustrating our notions of the familiar. Tsai's use of realist techniques is less about creating an accurate picture of the world and more about parodying the real through exaggerated performance; manipulating what the viewer initially takes for granted to create a series of comic effects.

The intertextuality of *Goodbye, Dragon Inn* cements the characters' (and by extension our) inseparable relationship to the cinema. At the same time, it destabilizes our impression of what, in Taiwan, is a well-known genre film. The recontextualization of *Dragon Gate Inn* further acts as a metaphor for the viewer's changing relationship with the cinema-going

experience itself. While viewing *Dragon Gate Inn* was previously done in a crowded cinema, the meanings have since shifted; in the bulk of Tsai's film *Dragon Gate Inn* narrates the life of empty spaces, filling them with the ghosts of the past. However, bearing in mind that *Dragon Gate Inn* is a widely seen piece of genre cinema, this process remains knowing, playful and ultimately humorous. As Tsai uses intertextuality to break down the conceptual boundaries between viewer and cinema he is able to manipulate his viewers and their expectations. Just as the woman from the front of house finds herself having a conversation with the swordswoman in *Dragon Gate Inn*, so Tsai uses intertextuality to converse with his viewers, playing with and occasionally frustrating the traditional viewer/object relationship.

The playful humour that emerges in *Goodbye, Dragon Inn*'s sophisticated use of cinematic techniques such as deep focus or intertextuality should be kept in mind when discussing Tsai's films. Although it is often tempting to compose grand stories in which Tsai fulfils the fantasies of European critical theory, ultimately what makes Tsai's cinema so compelling is its light-hearted playfulness.

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