

# ***Degenerative Teenager, Family and Puberty: The Phenomenological Body in The River***

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**Abstract:** The focus on the living conditions of adolescents has always been an important in Taiwanese cinema. This paper combines philosophical phenomenology represented by Merleau-Ponty's body theory with the film phenomenology and unites the presentation of the cinematic body with the audience's corporeal preception to achieve a phenomenological oneness of subject and object. This paper hopes to use *The River* as a case study to explore Tsai's concern for marginalized groups and how it evokes emotional resonance in the audience; simultaneously, by examining body narrative and body images, it discusses the audience's visual experience and aesthetic reception on a physical and perceptual level, rather than only on a mental one, thus further stimulating academic thinking on the intersubjectivity of film and the body. Specifically, there will be three chapters for analysis: body narrative, situated bodies and role of film technology itself in facilitating the viewers' visual experience.

**Keywords:** Tsai Ming-liang, coming-of-age film, film phenomenology, situated body, visual experience

## **1. Introduction**

Teenage coming-of-age movies has been an important part of Taiwanese cinema in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, which are not the type of teenage romance films mostly known to mainland audiences today. The latter has been very common in the Chinese-language film market in the last decade, for example, *You Are the Apple of My Eye* (Giddens Ko, 2011), *Our Times* (Yu Shan Chen, 2015), *Soulmate* (Derek Tsang, 2016), or *Better Days* (Derek Tsang, 2018). These films are about teenage love, and although they will reflect on social issues or adolescent plights, such as *Better Days* which to some extent criticizes the phenomenon of school bullying, the focus of these films is on creating a dream where the love between adolescents is so beautiful that it can overcome the pain caused by reality and temporarily dispel the fear of growing up into adulthood. However, the Taiwanese teenage coming-of-age films of the late 19th and early 20th centuries are about the cruelty of youth, expressing the helplessness and disillusionment of young people rejected by mainstream society, and the cost and confusion of the transition from adolescence to adulthood, which is similar to the themes that Japanese directors, like Nagisa Ohshima, wanted to convey during the New Wave of Japanese cinema. The changes of the era have led to a fragile social structure and young people, as a vulnerable part of it, are facing an even more brutal crisis. As "the most important film writer since the New Cinema movement in Taiwan [1]", Tsai Ming-liang's films show his own concern for

this crisis in a very profound way at that time. In this new century, problems faced by teenagers have not disappear, but have become increasingly serious instead. There are countless children who commit crimes, or who commit suicide, some of these stories are reported in the news, others are forgotten forever, which reminds the public that teenagers are severely marginalized. Unfortunately, it is hard to change the dilemma of teenagers in a society ruled by adults. So, this paper hopes to enter the phenomenological and bodily world in *The River*, thus feeling and touching the anxiety and disillusionment of them.

Throughout the history of cinema, the “body” has always been an important part of the film, especially when the tactile school and the embodied experience theory emerged in 1990 and have become increasingly important in the 21st century. Directors purposefully portrays and displays the bodies of the characters, and viewer’s own body is affected in the experience of watching off screen. The film phenomenology allows the viewing experience to go beyond just looking with the eyes to touching and feeling. Linda Williams’s argument about body genres pioneers film phenomenology. Since then, scholars have refined the film phenomenology on this foundation. For example, Vivian Sobchack is one of the representatives of this theory with her article *The Address of Eye*.

From the perspective of Ming-liang Tsai, his films are symbolized by the presentation of bodies of marginalized people to make their desire and emotion visible, especially by using men’s body to express a sense of male homoeroticism. The real conditions of human body are exhibited on the screen: the body controlled by desire, the ugly body, or the sick body, which exist throughout his films, metaphorically affecting the senses and experience of the viewer in the slow rhythm of the narrative.

It can be said that Tsai’s unique style sets him apart from other directors at that time like Hou Hsiao-hsien and Edward Yang. Yang’s films are full of rationality, like a sharp blade stabbing at Taiwan with a strong social consciousness; Hou instead prefers a slower and gentler style, with a large number of empty shots and long takes, thus creating a classical and naturalistic beauty. However, in contrast to Yang, Tsai restrains his own emotions as a director during the filming process and does not forcefully intervene in the viewer’s reception process. He shows his characters’ bodies, expressions and living conditions without judging them, hoping to trigger viewers’ self-understanding. At the same time, although both seek a steady and slow flow of cinematic time, Tsai is more concerned than Hou with the lives of marginalized groups, especially sexual minorities, which allows his films to have an undercurrent of rebellion beneath their slow and gentle surface: for example, how marginalized groups live and build their identities under patriarchal or heteronormative hegemony.

## 2. Literature Review

From Edmund Husserl to Martin Heidegger, Jean-Paul Sartre and Maurice Merleau-Ponty, phenomenology had already been widely discussed and used in philosophical theory before it was used as a method in film studies. Influenced by Intentionalism of Franz Brentano, Husserl states transcendental phenomenology, trying to explore the nature and spirit. He believes that “the body [...] is indeed expression of the spirit and is at once organ of the spirit [2]”, which means that bodies are material and can be tools to spiritually express spirit, thus distinguishing “spirit” and “spirituality”.

At the end of the twentieth century, Heidegger changed the direction of phenomenological research, shifting it from a focus on essence to a discussion of being. He points out that conscious structure is much more fundamental than conscious experience and seeks “a non-dualistic explication of the body and intersubjectivity in terms of our being-in-world [3]”.

On the basis, Sartre further distinguishes concepts of “the in-itself” and “the for-itself”. He believes that “The in-itself refers to the being of phenomenological world. The in-itself is non-consciousness and simply what it is. The for-itself is consciousness. Consciousness is nothingness or non-being [3]”. These two conditions of being determines that the other and its body can be objectified. However, Merleau-Ponty disagrees with Sartre’s distinction between the in-itself and the for-itself. He puts

forward the notion of body-subject that “the body-subject is neither physical nor spiritual but both: it is an ambiguous of body and spirit [3]”, giving body its own conscious dynamic role. Additionally, he focuses on “the philosophy of embodiment - the experience of the body and the experience of the world through the body [4]”, thus seeing the body as the study object of phenomenology in its true sense. Compared with Sartre’s close attention towards consciousness, the direct experience of flesh much more matters in Merleau-Ponty’s theory. So, this paper will choose Merleau-Ponty’s theory of body-subject and perception as theoretical foundation.

Although phenomenology has a long history as a philosophical theory, it being systematically used as a method of film study began with Vivian Sobchack’s *The Address of the Eye*. Film phenomenology highlights sensation and tactility through screen, leading to more immersed understandings towards characters. Vivian Sobchack tries to give up traditional film theory on ontology but to discuss the film experience and cinematic vision, to describe the “experiential phenomenon of sensing, enworlded bodies that can see and be seen [5]”. She believes that film phenomenology “offers us [...] a new mode of seeing and reflecting upon our sight [5]”, which means the subjectivity of film equals that of human body, by using our sights both of which can constitute the phenomenological intersubjectivity. Through our eyes, viewers can understand film’s body and attain freedom created by vision. In addition, Jennifer Barker inherits Vivian’s idea, but explores the relationship between film and the body in greater depth. In her book *The Tactile Eye: Touch and the Cinematic Experience* (2009), Jennifer extends phenomenological vision to touch and skin, then to the muscles and bones of the body, and finally to the internal organs and cells.

Most studies of director Tsai and his films have dealt with themes of incest and homosexuality, either through semiotic analysis or by incorporating the films into spatial narratives. However, in this essay, phenomenology represented by Merleau-Ponty will be used to discuss how *The River*’s focus on the body and the senses presents the confusion of adolescence and how this confusion affects the viewer’s body to achieve a cultural reflection.

For example, Ray Chow specially provided a close analysis towards the same-sex incest scene between the son and the father from at the beginning of his article and then identify this film as a cinema of enigma from an allegorical perspective for it “poses puzzles [6]” and creates “a sense of existential alienation [6]”. He gave body and flesh semiology significance, while this paper sees them from the perspective of narrative body. Based on Merleau-Ponty’s Visible and Invisible, in *Screening Today: The Visible and Invisible Worlds of Tsai Ming-linag’s Goodybye, Dragon Inn*, Elizabeth Wijaya identified the “flesh of cinema [7]” and explored a theatre experience with the disappearance of audience. The visible theatre in the film and the invisible theatre where the audience stays form an intertwined space, where the senses to bodies are magnified to an infinite extent. Seth Wilder discussed Tsai’s experimental short *Journey to the West* (2014), stating that it “recalls the early ‘cinema of attraction’, but this is an attraction with a twist. As a spectacle, it is more specular than spectacular [8]”. He puts the attraction in the contemporary post-industrialized space, and this research on sentimentalism inspires the investigation about phenomenology below.

On the basis, this paper will be divided into three chapters to investigate: body serves as a narrative method to be a metaphor for characters’ emotion and condition; *The River* exhibits bodies in specific situation and space; The materiality of film technology influences viewers’ experience from a corporeal and flesh level.

### 3. Metaphorical Narrative Bodies

*The River* shows in detail the real state of the three main characters’ bodies as a way to correspond to three different identities and emotions. The body becomes an ideographic symbol in the film, conveying a richer message than their dialogue, which means that the body carries the function of narrative. According to Daniel Punday , “character bodies are the basic building blocks of narrative

events [9]”, and always place emphasis on tactility. On the basis, Alina made the conclusion: “given the physicality of touch and its attendant intimate relationship to corporeality both among the characters in the story and in the reader’s own experience with this particular mode of perception, a corporeal atmosphere develops within the text by which the embodied reader can identify [10]”. Bodies intervene in the narrative text of the film. Through the camera and screen, it becomes a metaphor for the emotional and mental state of the character, thus driving the narrative further. Tsai presents the bodies of three people: Hsiao Kang, his father, and his mother. The following section will precisely analyze how their different types of bodies influences the narration.

Bodies of father and mother are shown in a secret contrast, with the director drawing on the vast differences between them to show the abnormalities and deformities of the family. As a middle-aged gay man, the father is obese and senile. Tsai does not shy away from showing his unpleasant and ugly body. For example, when he tangles with strange men in the bathhouse, the damp air and crumpled white underwear adds to the shame of his image and his body. Later the father meets a young male prostitute at a mall and then obsessively goes to fondle his youthful and vibrant flesh at hotel, but in the end the male prostitute remains unbearable and leaves him. In contrast, mother’s body is young and slim, poor but very refined and elegant. However, being married to a gay man, she is fleshly horny and mentally lonely. She craves the love and sex of a man, so she finds a younger and stronger lover, who is still eventually proved not to be a considerate boyfriend at all.

Father’s desire for young same-sex flesh is rejected, and mother’s intense sexual hunger cannot be satisfied by her lover. The emptiness of their flesh essentially influences and determines the dysfunctional of family relationship, and the loveless parents allow the family to grow distorted and alienated in silence and stagnation. Because of his blood ties, Hsiao Kang, as their child, becomes the only link between them, but at the same time this link is very fragile and unstable, which also expresses through the depiction of his body.

Narrative bodies replace the cause-and-effect relationship in the traditional narrative, thus driving the text forward. The changes in Hsiao Kang’s body in the film are metaphorical for the changes in Hsiao Kang’s mental states. At the same time, Tsai refuses to provide an explanation for the causes of the corporeal changes to eliminate the influence of factors other than the body on the narrative to the greatest extent possible.

Hsiao Kang starts out as a healthy and young body. After meeting his ex-girlfriend, he is invited to a film shoot where she works, and the film director wants him to help play the role of a corpse in the water. However, when he returns home in the evening, he suddenly starts to feel pain in his neck, which becomes so worse that cannot even stand upright. That dead body he plays implicates his degenerated flesh and mentality in the future, like some prophesy. On the basis of this prophesy, Hsiao Kang’s deteriorating body does lead to his gradual depression and degenerate mental state. With the growing pain in his neck, he becomes dull and sensitive.

However, the cause of his illness is unknown, undiagnosed. His parents initially have turned to doctors but failed, and then they go to the temple, still no avail. Strangely in the end, Hsiao Kang lies in a hospital bed and his pain is suddenly cured. The ambiguity of cause and effect, which is supposed to be important contexts of narration, symbolizes that body itself becomes narrative texts, implying that the curse of predestination that he cannot escape and more importantly the nothingness and disillusionment of his existence.

In general, the narrative body of cinema makes the character’s body the main metaphorical symbol and expression technique of the narration. However, the body does not exist in isolation, but in space and environment. Therefore, the next section discusses the “situated bodies” in cinema by combining the body with space and environment.

#### 4. Situated Bodies and Embodied Space

Merleau-Ponty proposes a spatiality of the body, which is not a “spatiality of position” but a “spatiality of situation”. This means that “I” can “perceive” the existence of the body “with an absolute capacity”, while the space of the body and the external space together constitute a double realm. The body, as a living substance, transforms the inorganic material world into an organic and concrete physical system. Meanwhile, Merleau-Ponty argues that the spatiality of the body is realized in movement, which itself is accompanied by time: it is in the passage of time that the body achieves movement. And in cinema, the character’s body is placed in a specific space for a certain period of time (as known as a sequence), thus constructing a specific cinematic environment. *The River* completes the representation of the situated body by specifically placing the body in the midst of sewage, in a damp bedroom, and at last in a dark and cramped shower room, with long takes to make time complete and perceptible.

The corpse played by Hsiao Kong floats above the dirty water, so his body and the river that surrounds him form a cinematic death-like environment: the water is in a stagnant state, the rubbish floats on the surface and the body is inability to move, which are all metaphors for death. So, at this moment, Hsiao Kang’s body is not just pretending to be dead but foreshadowing the death. Death in this film is not an instantaneous stoppage of the heart, but points to the gradual erosion of the mind by the pain of the flesh.

Further, the unstoppable rainstorm destroys Hsiao Kang’s house, with water spilling out of the old roof, leaving the bedroom and the entire house filthy and damp. This house, which is supposed to be a sanctuary for teenagers, becomes uninhabitable, symbolizing that the confusion and helplessness faced by Hsiao Kang are essentially caused by his family. Unlike the water surrounding the corpse analyzed above, water in this space is fluid, violent and dangerous, like a beast that threatens everyone’s existence. People in this space are also highly transient: the father is always absent, and the mother always goes to her lover first after work. Here, people are alone, and the space itself is lonely as well.

Lost in the incurable pain, Hsiao Kang unconsciously breaks the taboo of incest: he walks topless in the male bathhouse, which is always considered as a symbol of male homosexual lust, and at last slowly and expressionlessly walking into the room of an old man, who is eventually revealed to be his father. In this cramped, vapor-filled, dark space, Hsiao Kang and his father’s skin is intimately touched, but not in a way that gives the viewer forbidden excitement or erotic beauty: his thin body and his father’s ageing, obese body is grotesquely intertwined with each other, while Hsiao Kang keeps pressing his hand against his aching neck as his father helps him masturbate. This long take enhances the bizarre and distorted atmosphere. Finally, the light illuminates the dimly lit room and completely exposes the father’s secrets and sin on the screen. Since then, the fragile bonds between father and son, and between husband and wife, have been completely broken. Hsiao Kang also died completely in incest with his father. The ugliness and shame of the flesh is played out in this space to the extreme.

It is worth noting that these images are characterized by the frequent use of long shots when presenting the situated bodies. Long takes are not part of the cinematic body, but rather a means of presenting the cinematic body. If the cinematic body perceptually affects the body of the spectator, then, as cinematography, the long shot affects the cinematic body and the spectator’s perception at the same time. The next chapter will analyze from an ontological perspective how the long takes effectively intervene in the phenomenological cinematic illusion.

## 5. In the Realm of Senses: From Images to Experience

Cinematography is a material medium for the emotional transmission, and this materiality connects the cinematic body to the experience of the viewer through the screen. Regardless of technological developments, what Tsai always pursues is to allow the viewer to enter the world as an experiencer, not just as a spectator. Therefore, this chapter will investigate long shots and picture textures in *The River* and compare them separately with Hou Hsiao-hsien, who also likes long takes, and his films after it, thus deeply exploring the world of senses constructed by Tsai Ming-liang.

Long takes deal with the question of cinematic time and film structure, which is one of the discussion objects of film ontology. In the film, an event links to another in the gaps of philosophical time, and thus film narrative can manipulate the spectator's perception towards time. Before the Second World War, the structure of cinema could mostly be described as the movement-image, where events are driven by cause-and-effect relationships. Whereas after the Second World War, the emergence of the time-image changes this narrative method, with time replacing movement as the dominant part of the film's structure. According to Deleuze, "the direct time-image is the phantom which has always haunted the cinema, but it took modern cinema to give a body to this phantom [11]". So, unlike the movement serving as a proxy of time, in the time-image, films provide a mediation of time where audience is presented with a pure time and can see time itself.

Therefore, long takes are the product of the time-image, making the characters' bodies and feelings complete, where viewers can experience and feel the melancholy flow of time passing in this real and indivisible duration of narration. Montage and editing make the cinematic time different from the flow of real time, while long takes abandon the cutting of time as much as possible in favor of showing complete time periods, thus creating an immersive illusion for the audience.

His contemporary Taiwanese director Hsiao-hsien Hou is also a representative of long takes. He tends to show a natural time and space, where the characters are no longer the center of the shot but exist attached to the natural scenery. Characters are small and transient, only nature is eternal. In contrast, however, in Tsai's camera, the characters always occupy most of the frame, with the environment as a background subordinate to the flesh.

At the same time, long takes in Tsai's films are not intended to achieve the so-called realism: showing an event in real time or representing people in some space within a real flow of time. Rather, they are lyrical, poetic long takes, featuring close-ups of the characters' bodies and emphasizing their emotions, thus allowing the audience to experience the subtleties of their bodies and emotions in a more immersive way as the film stretches over time. For example, when showing the incest, the long shot lasts five minutes in total from the time Hsiao Kang walks into the room to the point the father recognizes his son. During this time, they enjoy a brief indulgence before they recognize each other, and the audience can only hear the intertwined gasps of them with vision being restricted within this room. The cramped confines of the room bringing a slight sense of suffocation, and the darkness of the surroundings making the appearance of desire seem even more shameful and forbidden. Tsai breaks the beauty conforming to moral or ethical conventions and instead presents an immoral and ugly reality in a five-minute incest scene, where the characters' bodies and spirits are no longer secret. The viewer is given a voyeuristic glimpse into the secrets of the characters in this enclosed sensation, and at the same time is left with the anxiety of worrying that their secrets will be exposed as well.

Furthermore, poor images are also characteristic in Tsai's films, which is stated by Hito Steyerl. She "demonstrates the instrumental nature of the poor image from a political perspective, arguing that this genre of image strikes at the heart of elitism [12]". The definition of it is not only the low quality of the images, but also their presentation towards "ugliness", such as showing the plight of the poor rather than the refined elegance of the rich, photographing chaotic and crowded streets rather than luxurious skyscrapers, or depicting the immorality of human nature. Equally, poor families, ugly

bodies and dirty surroundings make up the portrayal of marginalized groups in Tsai's films. The place where Hsiao lives is damp and old, and the public bathhouse frequented by the father is overcrowded; in addition, Tsai refuses to glorify the bodies of his characters, and does not use filming techniques such as lighting or music to create an atmosphere of beauty when showing their eroticism.

Limited by its time and technology, *The River*, shot in 1997, can only present a low-resolution image, but under the contemporary era of rapid development in the film industry, Tsai still insists on his presentation on poor images. For instance, when shooting *The Deserted* (2017), Tsai tried technique of Virtual Reality for the first time, by using 24 cameras this film accomplished 120 frames per second. However, despite the use of such modern technology, the film does not depart from his traditional style: static long shots and fixed camera positions. The main character is still played by Lee Kang-sheng as Hsiao Kang, and his body is again in a state of illness. *The Deserted* generally consists of five long takes: ten minutes of Hsiao Kang taking a bath, a ten-minute physiotherapy session shot, ten minutes of him laughing meaninglessly at the camera, and five minutes of him eating and hoeing. Meanwhile, the setting remains "poor": ruined rooms, damp floors, worn-out bed and bathtub.

In other words, apart from the high quality of the picture and the different content of the story, *The Deserted* and *The River* bring the viewer such a similar feeling: despite his illness, the purpose of the film narrative is not to try to cure him, but to perpetuate his pain in the long passage of time and to allow the viewer to experience character's loneliness. In *The River*, Hsiao Kang has an incestuous relationship with his father in confusion, and in *The Deserted*, he falls in love with a woman transferred from a fish in solitude. In both films, Hsiao Kang is going to nothingness during his puzzled searching for meaning.

## 6. Conclusion

This paper takes a phenomenological perspective, dominantly using Merleau-Ponty's philosophical body theory to explicate the corporeality of the cinematic subject. The combination of phenomenology and the cinematic experience changes the way the viewer perceives: from a symbolic emotional projection of the cinematic body to a material perception towards the objective presence of the body. At the same time, the development of cinema has been accompanied by advances in cinematic technology, which have further blurred the boundaries between reality and image. The visual experience thus has changed from seeing with the eyes to touching with the body, and the image itself is no longer merely a material carrier, but accordingly has the ability to perceive with subjectivity.

There is much about director to be examined and discussed closely. Apart from *The River*, water can still be counted as a very important symbol of imagery in his other works: whether it is water in its natural form such as torrential rain and water flow, or a humid spatial environment. Meanwhile, marginalized groups and confused individuals have always been the focus of Tsai's films: sick persons, teenagers who are confused about their identity when facing the future, the state of survival for the gay male community, or the plight of women in marriages of convenience. Tsai refuses to glorify, or to fantasize them, but insists on a realistic tone to present their emotions and desires in a dispassionate, spectatorial manner.

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