

Exploring Intimacy and Temporality: Deconstructing Tsai Ming-Liang's *Stray Dogs* through Face, Close-up, and Long Shot

Jinlu Li

Columbia University School of the Arts

INTRODUCTION

This paper explores Doane and Balázs' theoretical interpretation of facial close-ups and discusses the readability of the face itself and how long shots and facial close-ups interact with each other, using Tsai Ming-liang's *Stray Dogs* (2013) as an example.

In classic Hollywood films, close-ups of the face represent a kind of intimacy and interiority. When they are juxtaposed with other shots, they jointly portray the "sign of an internal storm" (Balázs, 56) within the character. A case in point is *The Passion of Joan of Arc* (1928), in which the series of close-ups of Joan of Arc's face before her torture vividly expresses her pain and despair. "They show the faces of things and those expressions that are important because they reflect our own subconscious feelings" (Balázs, 35). Close-ups inspire the viewer to stay in tune with the character's state. Epstein describes it as "Pain is within reach. If I stretch out my arm, I touch you, and that is intimacy. I can count the eyelashes of this suffering. I would be able to taste the tears" (13). In a film without much subjectivity, this moment seems to fit Balázs' estimation that the close-up coincides with our own emotions generated in the same state while also providing a "sign of an internal storm" within the character. It is worth noting that Balázs identifies the role of montage for close-ups at this point as essential, "And yet it is also in the montage that the original face comes across more convincingly" (Balázs, 106). In Balázs' opinion, these individual shots do not create meaning on their own; rather, the conjunction of these shots through editing heightens continuity and connotation.

But when the duration of the shot becomes longer, the number of montages decreases, and even a post-modern "slow cinema" genre is created, what close-up of the face placed in the long shot can be explained?

Tsai Ming-liang's film *Stray Dogs* depicts an unemployed man who lives a life of uncertainty, from the woods of the suburbs to the river banks to the rain-stained streets of the city to the deserted areas where few people take care of him. He gets jobs holding billboards on the streets and spends his days wandering the city, while his children roam the neighborhood buildings and play among the supermarket goods. Three long close-up shots of the man's (actor Li Kang-sheng) face appear in *Stray Dogs*: One scene shows Li reciting the poem *Man Jiang Hong* on the streets of Taipei while holding a billboard (24:12-29:49); another scene shows Li standing outdoors eating a chicken drumstick (51:05-54:34); the final scene shows Li and his wife standing amidst the ruins gazing at a painting at the end of the film (1:45:34-1:58:02). In these three scenes, there is almost no narrative inside, and the extreme long shot can also be seen as almost static for the filming, only with the actors' facial movements filling the entire time. The director refuses to let the face take on any narrative function but instead treats the anger, desire, anxiety, and sadness presented by the face as a symbolic expression. He refuses sympathetic identification and logical designation in order to achieve a deep understanding of an unrecognizable, city-less, de-subjective state of existence.

These three scenes are highly independent and less dependent on context. I think there are two reasons for this, one is that facial expressions are inherently highly readable. The fluctuation of emotion causes the movement of facial muscles, which in turn generates external expressions. "The facial expression on a face is complete and comprehensible in itself, and therefore we need not think of it as existing in space and time" (Balázs, 61). This can be understood as the fact that the facial close-ups can become independent dimension regardless of the time and space into which they are thrown. Another reason is that the involvement of long and extra-long shots breaks the time stagnation and narrative fragmentation caused by the close-ups in traditional narrative films and allows the

three facial close-ups to form three separate passages. Finally, the act of the audience gazing at the protagonist's face for a long time becomes a phenomenological experience for them.

In Doane's argument, the disadvantages of close-ups for the division of space are that: "the close-up hence constitutes a potential danger, the foreclosure of the spectator's spatial orientation, the annihilation of the rationality of place" (Doane, 32). The close-up lifts its object out of its spatio-temporal coordinates, which hits the audience with a sense of unfamiliarity and uncertainty, and the audience needs to relocate the spatial location in which they are placed. In *Stray Dogs*, the camera suddenly cuts to a close-up of Li Kang-sheng's face. His face is slightly trembling due to the cold wind, followed by him starting to recite *Man Jiang Hong*, in which the tears in his eyes gradually increase, his emotions gradually become intense, and his expression progressively shifts from dullness to anger. The audience members who were rashly thrown into this close-up were gradually drawn to Li's face as they searched for their own position. Although they do not understand what is happening on this face, the viewer initially has an empathetic feeling toward the magnified face and then develops a deeper understanding on an intuitive and sensory level as the facial expressions change. "The face, in this sense, goes beyond and negates the logic of identity and measurability and resides in the realm of the pre-rational and intuitive." (Doane, 17) The face exists in a pre-rational and intuitive domain. This means that our understanding of the face is not only based on logical or analytical processes but is also closely related to our emotions and intuition. Our reactions to facial expressions and our ability to interpret them are usually based on subconscious emotional implication rather than conscious analysis. Therefore, this viewing process can be seen as a phenomenological sense of experience rather than a semiotic or typological logical link. Facial readability provides a spiritual experience that does not require additional language or symbols to operate.

This phenomenological experience can not be achieved without the addition of long shots. The close-up in continuity editing is considered "It elicits a protracted stare, brings the forward linear movement of the narrative to a standstill, coagulates time" (Doane 41). The long shot, as a representative shot of linear time, has the ability to present a continuum of time and space. With the addition of the long shot, the tie between the close-up and nonlinear time is broken. On the one hand, it makes the close-up shot once again free from the reliance on time and space, and on the other hand, it makes the time inherent in the close-up shot no longer stagnant but begin to flow linearly in its own dimension. What I would like to emphasize is that for postmodern films like *Stray Dogs*, the long shot still cannot restore the stagnation of the linear movement of the narrative produced by the close-up because the film itself has almost given up its focus on narrative and is more concerned with the phenomenological sense of experience. Therefore, it can only be said that the long shot, to a certain extent, frees the close-up from the temporal freeze and allows it to better participate in the temporal experience.

This temporal experience also occurs in the second facial close-up shot, "Eating Chicken Drumstick," in which Li eats his lunch with great concentration for three minutes, expressing the mechanical operation of human muscles while eating. It is a very daily facial scene. This reminds me of Merleau-Ponty's argument in *Cinema and the New Psychology*. The human being does not construct the objective world with his or her intellect but is placed within it as if intimately connected to it through a natural relationship. This neo-psychological theory helps to understand the close-up of the face and time in film together to build perceptual wholeness. Within this whole, for example, "chicken drumstick", and "facial expression" do not appear as separate symbols of meaning, but as a perceptual whole. The audience perceives the relationship between the mind and the body, between the spirit and the objective world, through perception rather than reason or logic. The viewer's perception is not reached through the understanding of one event after another, or through the notion of a linear, continuous temporal process. At this point, the use of long shots is not intended to convey information or meaning, allowing the audience to scrutinize and discover meaning, but rather to give the audience enough time to realize that they should not expect any reward for prolonged viewing at the level of emotional expression and narrative meaning, but rather to focus on experiencing the experience of temporal duration, experiencing the mechanical movement of the face in daily activity. On this point, Merleau-Ponty writes in *The Phenomenology of Perception*: "We must, precisely in order to see the world and to grasp it as a paradox – rupture our familiarity with it, and this rupture can teach us nothing except the unmotivated springing forth of the world."(14) Merleau-Ponty believes that cinema is not the sum of many images, but a form of temporality. Temporality is not an intellectual counterpart, but a dimension of human existence. The time of the present is the place where the subject's perception intersects with the living world. The prolongation of the present time responds in some way to the notion of a reduction in phenomenology. Through reduction, and the impossibility of reduction, it thus leads to a radical reflection of the viewer. And that radical reflection is "conscious of its own dependence on an unreflected life that is its initial, constant, and final situation."(15)

"The orography of the face vacillates. Seismic shocks begin. Capillary wrinkles try to split the fault. A muscle bridles. The lip is laced with tics like a theater curtain." (Epstein, 9) If the audience stares at this rising and falling curtain for 14 minutes, may I ask if what they see is still just a curtain? The third facial close-up is made up of an extra-long shot that lasts 14 minutes. In the side close-up, Li Kang-sheng stands behind his wife, gazing together at the painting on the wall in the ruins of a building, his wife silently weeping, Li intermittently drinking from a bottle during his silent gaze, and finally, he hugs his wife. The long, static shots are evocative of photographs as if the audience were simply gazing at one photo for 14 minutes. According to David Company, the use of two seemingly opposite techniques in filmmaking, montage, and the long take, eventually leads to the same result - photographic stillness." Montage sees the photograph as a partial fragment...The long shot sees the photograph as a unified whole. The shorter a film's shot, the more like a photograph it gets, until one ends up with a single frame. The longer the shot, the more like a photograph it gets too, the continuous 'stare' of the lens giving us a moving picture." (36) When the 14-minute close-up of the face is treated as a photo by the extra-long still shot, it means that the dynamic change process of the face has been refined into a symbolic state. This is not a dissolution of the meaning of the face, but a way to make the face no longer limited to the place where the expression occurs but become a medium. While the audience is fighting against the uncertainty of time, the face as a medium unconsciously leads the audience into the field where the face is located, that is, the ruins they are gazing at. This ruin is an industrial ruin in Taipei, and the painting they gaze at is about the Daan River. But the real Daan River has not existed for a long time. Their faces are symbolic of a fascination with the passing time of the ruins in physical space, which in turn leads the audience to walk through several layers of overlapping space and time to experience a symbolic tragedy, one that is deeply rooted in the passage of time and the transience of human existence.

CONCLUSION

I explore the interplay between long shots and facial close-ups using the example of Tsai Ming-liang's *Stray Dogs*. I illustrate that when the duration of the shot becomes longer and the number of montages gradually reduces, the facial close-up is given an aesthetic effect that cannot be produced in montage editing. The readability of the face distinguishes it from other close-ups, drawing the viewer's attention and leading them into a spiritual experience that does not require additional language or symbolic involvement. When the shot lasts longer and the camera remains still, the facial close-up is refined into a kind of photo. Then, the viewer's spiritual experience becomes a prolonged gaze at this photo, and at this point, the facial close-up acts as a medium, leading the viewer into the space where the face is placed to experience the symbolic tragedy.

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