

**Manufacturing orgasm: Visuality, aurality and female sexual pleasure in Tsai Ming-liang's *The Wayward Cloud*\***

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**Abstract**

*In the study of both sex and the city, sound tends to be an aspect that does not receive as much attention as visuality. By examining the sound of sex in Tsai Ming-liang's 2005 film, The Wayward Cloud, this article will argue that the aural is privileged over the visual and explore its implications for female subjectivity, sexual intimacy and gender politics. It suggests that the film challenges us to think whether it might be possible to forge what Mary Ann Doane calls 'a political erotics of the voice', but in a wayward manner that deploys comatose bodies that have no voice, that fragments the unity of voice and body and that privileges the representation of the sonic over the visual in a cinematic tradition that generally dictates otherwise.*

**Keywords**

sound

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*The Wayward Cloud*

In 2002, Tsai Ming-liang made a 22-minute short film *Tianqiao bujian le/The Skywalk is Gone* (hereafter *Skywalk*), a film rooted as much in the changing cityscape of Taipei in real life as it is in Tsai's cinematic oeuvre in reel life. The title and premise of the film stem from the demolition of the skywalk in front of Taipei's central train station that appeared in Tsai's 2001 feature film, *Ni nabian jidian/What Time is it There?* (hereafter *What Time*), in which Tsai's regular actor, Lee Kang-sheng, plays a street vendor selling watches on the skywalk. In *Skywalk*, Chen Shiang-chyi reprises her role as the woman who bought a dual-time watch from Hsiao-kang (the character played by Lee) in *What Time* before travelling to Paris. At the start of *Skywalk* she is seen wandering aimlessly opposite the Taipei train station. Looking lost because the skywalk is gone, she follows another woman (played by Lu Yee-ching, Hsiao-kang's mother in *What Time*, although her identity in *Skywalk* is undefined) in jaywalking. While both women are reprimanded by a traffic warden when they arrive on the other side of the road, Shiang-chyi asks the traffic warden whether he knows the whereabouts of the street vendor who used to sell watches on the skywalk, a clear reference to Hsiao-kang in *What Time*. Thus, *Skywalk* not only premises itself on the actual disappearance of the skywalk in Taipei, it also self-consciously builds intratextual plot and character elements from *What Time* into its own diegesis, forging a continuation that develops like a serial.<sup>1</sup>

This intratextual seriality is developed in *Tianbian yiduo yun/The Wayward Cloud* (2005), Tsai's first film to be located almost entirely outside of Taipei. Set in a spanking new housing estate in Kaohsiung in southern Taiwan, much of the action takes places in the interiors of a high-rise building, including a flat inhabited by Shiang-chyi and another used as a set for a porn film. Here Hsiao-kang and Shiang-chyi reprise their roles in *What*

*Time* and *Skywalk*, although their characters have moved on from their previous incarnations, not least to a different city. Hsiao-kang no longer sells watches on a skywalk near the Taipei train station (as revealed, in *The Wayward Cloud*, in a conversation between the two in a scene set in a park, the only overt intratextual reference to *What Time*) but is now a porn actor (a role he first auditioned for in *Skywalk*); Shiang-chyi has returned from her travel to Paris, a luggage she struggles to open in her Kaohsiung flat providing the visual connection to the ending of the earlier film in which her luggage floats on the pond while she falls asleep in a Parisian park. Their chance encounter in *The Wayward Cloud* rekindles their previous interest in one another, although their new relationship has to be negotiated amidst a drought that plagues the country (echoing the drought in *Skywalk*) and the compromising position they find themselves in given Hsiao-kang's new vocation as a porn actor.

*The Wayward Cloud* also forges another intratextual link within Tsai's oeuvre in its return to the use of musical numbers, which made their first and only previous appearance in Tsai's fourth film, *Dong/The Hole* (1998). The musical numbers in *The Hole* are gloriously camp and the costumes colourful, but the staging of sound and colour in these numbers stands in stark contrast to the main narrative set in the drab urban environment of a derelict building plagued by a millennium virus and unstoppable rain so that the two anonymous protagonists (played by Lee Kang-sheng and Yang Kuei-mei) have no means of escape except in flights of fantasy. The fantastical musical numbers in *The Hole* (the title points to a physical hole between the two upstairs–downstairs flats inhabited by the protagonists while alluding to other orifices available for sexual activity), it can be argued, are displaced sexual acts that make possible an intimacy

between the characters that is otherwise denied in their quarantined reality. Compared with the drabness and wetness of *The Hole*, the setting of *The Wayward Cloud* in the sunny city of Kaohsiung is uncharacteristically ‘bright, colourful, and *dry*’ (Lee 2007: 118, original emphasis). Here the numbers are interspersed with the main narrative that also includes various sequences of the making of porn films. Linda Williams has argued that ‘the hard-core feature film *is* a kind of musical, with sexual number taking the place of musical number’ (1990: 124, original emphasis), although in *The Wayward Cloud* both sexual and musical numbers are interwoven into the main narrative, forming not two but three narrative strands within the diegesis. In Tsai’s films, the representation of sex via the musical numbers performs a spectacular form of displaced sexual activity in an urban environment that, whether drained or full of colour, is often spatially constructed to deny human interaction, intimacy and agency.

Whether set in Taipei or in Kaohsiung, Tsai’s films are decidedly urban and full of sexual activities. In the study of both sex and the city, however, sound tends to be an aspect that does not receive as much attention as visuality. In her seminal study on hard-core pornography, Linda Williams speaks of the ‘frenzy of the visible’ as a male fantasy aimed at capturing the ‘out-of-control confession of pleasure’ in a female body whose orgasmic excitement can never be objectively measured (1990: 50) and whose sounds of pleasure are held suspect as evidence of orgasm as they are often dubbed over in post-synchronization (1990: 122–23). The dichotomy between ‘the spectacularization of male pleasure and the aurality of female pleasure’ (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996: 104) implores us not only to investigate the corollary (following Williams’ famous phrase) that is the ‘frenzy of the audible’ (1990: 103) but also to rethink the relationship between visuality

and aurality. Can sound ever be considered spectacular? Among the definitions of the word 'spectacular' the *Oxford English Dictionary* provides is 'a radio or television programme, entertainment, etc., produced on a lavish or spectacular scale' (*OED* online), suggesting that entertainment provided via sonic radio waves can also be described as spectacular as long as the scale of the production is lavish. Thus, in the representation of sex, male sexual pleasure, measured visually by 'liquid volume', and female sexual pleasure, measured aurally by 'sonic volume' (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996: 103), can both be spectacular as it is the lavishness, not the nature, of the volume that matters.

By this definition the sound of sex in *The Wayward Cloud* is spectacular indeed. Through an examination of selected sequences of the film I will demonstrate that the aural is privileged over the visual in this film and explore its implications for female subjectivity, sexual intimacy and gender politics. Aurality is further problematized by the use of a comatose body that is incapable of sonic utterances in sexual activity (also a feature in Tsai's 2006 film, *I Don't Want to Sleep Alone*). By employing a stand-in character to produce the sound of sex on behalf of the comatose body, the film suggests that such vocalization (hence female sexual pleasure) can be interchangeable and readily disposable in an industry and sexual economy produced and consumed mainly by men. Yet, despite setting the film in the milieu of the compromising circumstances of the porn industry, *The Wayward Cloud* exploits the musical and sexual numbers to stage a critique of sexist and nationalist ideologies, to give voice to female agency and desire and to make human connections possible in a city where the only commonality among its denizens is the lack of water. The film also challenges us to think whether it might be possible to forge what Mary Ann Doane calls 'a political erotics of the voice' (1980: 48),

but in a wayward manner that deploys comatose bodies that have no voice, that fragments the unity of voice and body and that privileges the representation of the sonic over the visual in a cinematic tradition that generally dictates otherwise.

### **Dial V for vagina: Visuality, aurality, spectacularity**

The binary opposition between visuality and aurality in the cinematic representation of sex is premised upon gender difference. In a famous scene set in a New York diner, Meg Ryan's character in the film, *When Harry Met Sally* (Rob Reiner, 1989), demonstrated to a mainstream cinema audience how easily a woman could fake the sound of an orgasm even in public and right at the heart of a megacity.<sup>2</sup> As Williams notes, in pornography, the often dubbed-over 'disembodied' female voice that provides the sounds of 'ooohs' and 'aaahs' may stand as the 'most prominent signifier of female pleasure in the absence of other, more visual assurances' so that sounds of pleasure 'seem almost to flout the realist function of anchoring body to image, halfway becoming aural fetishes of the female pleasures we cannot see' (1990: 122–23). Yet Williams also acknowledges that these sounds of pleasure merely serve to 'augment the realist effect of what in cinema is the hierarchically more important visual register, lending an extra level of sensory perception to the pleasures depicted' (1990: 123). Therefore, if visuality is inextricably linked to the male gender whereas aurality is tied to the female gender, the sound of sex that emanates mainly from a female voice remains subordinated to visuality, functioning as a complement to the visual rather than claiming its own autonomy in a cinematic sexual economy in which the visual image par excellence is the (male) 'money shot'.

While the context of Williams's discussion is the American porn film, I suggest that her insights can be extended to examining other modes of film-making that also include representations of sex, especially those that centre on the porn industry in their narratives, such as *The Wayward Cloud* and Paul Thomas Anderson's *Boogie Nights* (1997). The case for looking at Tsai's film through the lens of Williams's classic work is even more compelling, given that a real-life Japanese porn actress, Sumomo Yozakura, is cast in the lead role for the porn-film-within-a-film strand of *The Wayward Cloud*, blurring the line between a commercial porn film and art-house cinema while enhancing the realist effect in Tsai's film. As mentioned above, the *mise-en-abyme* of making a porn film and the film's main narrative featuring the growing relationship between Hsiao-kang and Shiang-chyi converge towards the end. As I shall analyse in the next section, this convergence complicates the film's sonic representation as Shiang-chyi partially replaces Sumono's role by providing the sound of sex in the making of the porn film, rendering it impossible to divorce the sound produced for the *mise-en-abyme* and the effect it has on the audience of Tsai's film.

*The Wayward Cloud* attempts to dissolve the dichotomy, along gender lines, of visuality versus aurality by staging spectacles that combine the two senses while locating both on female bodies. The film opens with a shot showcasing Tsai's trademark visual sensitivity to urban architecture: in a static long take that lasts about a minute and a half, a V-shaped underpass whose straight lines are curved by the wide-angle lens is first shown empty for 36 seconds before two female figures enter, one shortly after another, from two different ends at the top right and left corners of the frame, crossing each other after the vertex in the centre of the frame (Figure 1). The two women are Shiang-chyi and

Sumomo, the latter dressed in a nurse's uniform and carrying a watermelon pressed below her bosom. The film then jump-cuts to a high-angle shot, reflected in a mirror on the right, of Sumomo lying on what looks like a cheap hotel bed, with her legs spread in a V-shape that echoes the previous shot, a red-side-up halved watermelon placed in between them (Figure 2). Into the frame enters Hsiao-kang, dressed in a doctor's coat, and he begins to lick the watermelon, then pokes his fingers in it, feeds the flesh of the melon to Sumomo's mouth, licks her breasts and torso that are drenched in watermelon juice, and finally performing penetrative sex with Sumomo's vagina while wearing the hollowed shell of the melon on his head. Even without the presence of a camera or film crew in the entire sex sequence, this is clearly the set of a porn film, foreshadowing the breakdown of the boundary between the *mise-en-abyme* and the main narrative in the dénouement.

**Figure 1:** V-shaped underpass in Tsai Ming-liang's *The Wayward Cloud* (2005).

**Figure 2:** V-shaped posture in porn-film-within-a-film.

The film, however, does not neglect the other woman in the opening shot as the sex-with-a-watermelon sequence is crosscut throughout with scenes of Shiang-chyi at home watching television news broadcast of the promotion of watermelons in the time of drought while she sips watermelon juice with her legs also spread in a V-shape pointing in the direction of the TV screen, between them a flower-patterned pouffe. As Vivian Lee insightfully points out, 'the parallel between [the V-shaped] public architectural spaces and the sexualized, private spaces marked by female body parts begs the question of



where, and how, to draw the boundary between legitimate and illegitimate desires by locating the erotic in everyday activities'. In her reading, the television screen seen through Shiang-chyi's open legs, crosscut with the making-of-porn-film sequence, is 'yet another transgressive act that put [sic] the mass media in a critical spotlight by fetishizing/sexualizing the daily news' (2007: 121–22). The opening sequence thus sets up, on the one hand, a parallel between the sexual number and the film's narrative with the use of crosscut and, on the other, the interchangeability of the two female characters despite their apparent differences, their common fate being to share a V-shaped posture that is visually enshrined in this sequence.

This spectacular, and more importantly, gendered V-shaped structure – architectural, postural, anatomical – is not only represented visually but is also the locus of some spectacular sounds of sex. As Weihong Bao argues, with the “split beaver” shot (legs apart exposing the genitals for the direct consumption of the film viewer)' of Sumomo 'obscured and substituted by the watermelon', the use of watermelon in the opening sequence is 'simultaneously exhibitionist display for the viewer's pleasure and a parody of the pornography genre', ending in a simulated 'money shot' with the melon juice as sperm before returning to a 'real sex' scene (2007: 156), whose action is terminated when the helmet-like watermelon shell Hsiao-kang wears on his head falls onto Sumomo's torso. The parodic nature of this sequence is heightened as Sumomo duly performs orgasmic sounds even when Hsiao-kang is licking and fingering the watermelon rather than her vagina. Here the aurality of female pleasure is at once disembodied and artificial: disembodied because the watermelon stands in for Sumomo's vagina and stands in the way of physical contact between the sexual organs of the two porn actors,

artificial because the sounds of sex produced by Sumomo are a purely vocal performance that is not necessarily derivative of any sexual pleasure. While I am not suggesting that sexual pleasure cannot be attained without physical bodily contact, the use of watermelon in this porn film sequence highlights precisely the artificial, manufactured quality of the female voice as a sexual commodity, capable of emoting sounds of sex as orgasmic evidence even as the vagina is upstaged and made superfluous by a prop: a watermelon.

In pornography, therefore, the visuality of the V-shaped structure embodied by the female form plays second fiddle to a manufactured aurality. John Corbett and Terri Kapsalis, in their essay on the female orgasm in popular sound, trace the recorded sound of sex and sexual pleasure across many media products and practices, from popular music and phone sex to porn films and cyber-sex. If, following Williams, the ‘money shot’ is the visual evidence of male pleasure within the sexual economy of the ‘frenzy of the visible’, and if the ‘frenzy of the audible’ becomes the responsibility of females in providing aural evidence of their sexual pleasure, what then, Corbett and Kapsalis ask, ‘do recorded female sex vocalizations become evidence *of*’ in the absence of a synchronous or an illustrative visual image (1996: 104, original emphasis)? Corbett and Kapsalis’s question about aurality *without* visuality highlights the disembodied nature of female sounds of sex precisely because the aurality of female sexual pleasure does not demand an anchoring to the visuality of a body, unlike the evidence of male orgasm that is inconceivable without the tyranny of visual corporeality. Moreover, in the age of digital technology, female sounds of pleasure become ‘infinitely repeatable and renewable resources’ because the visual/aural dichotomy is premised on the gendered opposition and biological construction that ‘male orgasm is *seen* as singular and

terminating; female orgasm is *heard* as multiple and renewable' (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996, emphasis added). What does the artificial, manufactured quality and mechanical reproducibility of this disembodied female voice of sexual pleasure tell us about female subjectivity, desire and agency even (or especially) within the sexist regime of heterosexual pornography?<sup>3</sup> Is there a space in such a compromising milieu for a critique of sexist ideologies?

### **Becoming a woman: Femininity, performativity, corporeality**

Much has been written about the general oppression of the female body in pornography. While this is not the place for a fuller debate on the topic, suffice it to say that 'it is precisely because the body has been a major site of oppression that perhaps it must be the site of the battle to be waged' (Doane 1980: 50). An anecdote will illustrate how explosive the issue of pornography remains even when it is embedded into the diegesis of what is clearly an art-house film. During the first Brisbane Film Festival screening of *The Wayward Cloud* in 2005, a female audience reacted to the film's ending by standing up, pointing at the screen and yelling 'Fuck you!' before storming out of the theatre, to the cheering of some of the audience, and a few others followed suit (Bandis et al. 2005). My analysis in the rest of this article will focus on the film's controversial dénouement, but I want to begin by discussing the film's representation of a broader oppression of femininity so as to better contextualize the gender and sexual politics of the ending. I will demonstrate that the performativity of femininity and female sexuality in the film allows for the emergence of a female subjectivity whose desire is articulated sonically rather

than visually, favouring voice-over body in a sexual economy that generally privileges corporeality.

If *The Wayward Cloud* parodies the fantasized female sexual ecstasy by highlighting its aural artificiality and mechanical reproducibility in the opening sex-with-a-watermelon sequence, it chooses to unveil, in visual form, idealized images of femininity that circulate in a wider social milieu insofar as they have become naturalized and thus invisible. The film illustrates the latter point in the ending with the strategic positioning of Shiang-chyi on the porn film set. Separated by a wall, she looks through a gridded circular window into the bedroom where the film crew is filming Hsiao-kang and Sumomo, while beside her erects a cardboard model of two life-sized figures of China Airline stewardesses (Figure 3). This staging marks Shiang-chyi to be at once inside and outside: she is located outside of the sexual exchange in the making of the porn film until, moments later, her voice penetrates the window into the bedroom while her mouth is, in turn, penetrated by Hsiao-kang's penis, thus breaking down the physical barrier of the wall separating them; she is also inside of the femininity that defines and dictates idealized forms of female appearance and behaviour as she is aligned in position with the cardboard figures of the two air stewardesses. This simultaneous inside/outside configuration also maps onto the film's structure so that the *mise-en-abyme* and the main narrative eventually become one, much like the way in the ending of *The Hole* when the two upstairs-downstairs flats are conjoined as a result of physical contact of the couple through the window/hole.

**Figure 3:** Service, servitude and subservience in two-dimensional image of femininity.

It is no coincidence that many airlines, national or otherwise, adopt idealized images of femininity in their marketing campaigns since femininity is culturally recognizable as a commodity that connotes service, servitude and subservience while hinting at sexual availability.<sup>4</sup> The cardboard models of Taiwan's national airline's stewardesses in the ending of *The Wayward Cloud*, with their cheongsam-inspired uniform signifying modernity and smiling faces exuding Oriental demureness, are aptly two dimensional. The camera draws the viewer's attention to the constructedness of this femininity with a very slow zoom, uncharacteristic in Tsai's film-making, to the full length of the cardboard models placed strategically next to the window in the centre of the frame, while a voice whose source is visually obscured by the separating wall indicates the film crew's preparation of Sumomo's comatose body for action in the right half of the frame. Meanwhile, Shiang-chyi, immodestly dressed (compared to the stewardesses) in an undergarment-like top with spaghetti straps and a pair of worn-out jeans, enters the frame zombie-like from the left, clutching in her right hand a single black stiletto she must have picked up on set. The contrast between Shiang-chyi's unkempt appearance and the touched-up images of the air stewardesses is a visual reminder and critique of the ideological investment behind the cultural construction of femininity and the price one must pay to become a woman, to maintain that artificial, two-dimensional façade to literally keep up appearances, the stiletto in Shiang-chyi's hand symbolizing the modern-day version of the bound feet.

Femininity is, thus, in itself a form of spectacularity, a hyperbolic identity, as Judith Butler reminds us, 'tenuously constituted in time, instituted in an exterior space through a *stylized repetition of acts*' (1990: 140, original emphasis). In fact, Shiang-chyi

herself is not exempt from such stylized gender performativity. In an earlier sequence set in her workplace Shiang-chyi is dressed in her uniform, as an assistant at the National Palace Museum, of a traditional cheongsam. The camera again draws our attention to the constructedness of femininity in a slow-tracking shot (another uncharacteristic shot for Tsai) that follows her walk across an exhibition room. Here she is a three-dimensional embodiment of the two-dimensional cardboard image of idealized femininity, every inch as perfect and demure as the air stewardesses (Figure 4). This seemingly perfect femininity, however, is only a façade. In the preceding shot Shiang-chyi is shown pushing bottles of mineral water out of a gridded window of what must be a ladies toilet in the museum; the sequence following the tracking shot then shows her picking up these bottles in her off-duty clothes in the narrow alleyway between two buildings (another shot with a V-shaped composition) and staggering off with the bottles in a large bag across the museum car park while a statue of Chiang Kai-shek, Taiwan's ex-President, stares down on her in a high-angle shot.<sup>5</sup> In this sequence of four shots Shiang-chyi is at once the embodiment of idealized femininity and a dishonourable thief who steals water from her workplace, her gentle silent walk in small steps constricted by the cheongsam and her role as a museum assistant a stark sonic contrast to the brisk noisy footsteps across the car park later. Echoing Butler's argument that it is 'acts and gestures, articulated and enacted desires [that] create the illusion of an interior and organizing gender core' (1990: 136), this sequence clearly demonstrates that there is no necessary conflict in Shiang-chyi's gender identity despite an apparent disjuncture between her acts, expressions and images. Indeed, the different images of femininity Shiang-chyi embodies here foreshadow the ending of the film, where her gender performativity is split into two:

the idealized version now represented by the two-dimensional cardboard models, erected immobile next to the corporeal version about to literally lend voice to her agency and desire.

**Figure 4:** Shiang-chyi as three-dimensional embodiment of idealised femininity.

Just as an idealized image of femininity is constructed and critiqued in visual form, the film demonstrates that fantasized female sexual ecstasy is similarly a constructed commodity but in an aural form instead. In the case of Shiang-chyi, her sexuality is constructed in tandem with the film's dual structure. The use of crosscut in the opening sequence sets up the parallel development of the *mise-en-abyme* and the main narrative (plus another strand showcasing the musical numbers), mirroring the characterization of the two female protagonists to the extent that, as the film progresses, Shiang-chyi seems to be preparing herself to replace Sumomo's role in the making of the porn film. As Vivian Lee observes, Shiang-chyi 'gradually emerges as the active viewer while the Japanese woman is increasingly objectified and silenced, a fact that tellingly reveals her role *as* a porn star, an object and victim of the institution of pornography and the sexist visual regime that supports it' (2007: 121, original emphasis). As I shall discuss below, the regime of pornography is not merely visual as Shiang-chyi's stand-in performance for Sumomo at the end of the film is purely on the vocal level.

If the air stewardesses in cardboard form stand as a visual model for (and critique of) feminine gender expression, its aural and sexual equivalent is to be found in porn films. In the lead-up to the climactic sex scene in the film's *dénouement*, Shiang-chyi rescues an already comatose Sumomo to her flat and discovers, in a porn film she had

brought back from a video rental shop, that the stars of the film are Sumomo and Hsiao-kang. The scene in which Shiang-chyi watches the DVD can be described as an education in the production of female sounds of sex. The one-minute-40-second-long take clearly favours the aural as we hear Sumomo perform a spectacular sonic repertoire of female orgasmic sounds (Figure 5). Here the visibility of the sexual activity is denied as the television is placed at such an acute angle to the left of the frame its images are completely distorted and almost impossible to decipher. What is visually privileged, instead, is a medium close-up on the right of the frame of Shiang-chyi's face illuminated by the TV screen, her expression ranging from fascination to bewilderment. Through the consumption of these manufactured visual images and, more importantly, sonic spectacles of sex, Shiang-chyi is able to participate later in the production of a porn film while giving voice to her own agency, desire and subjectivity.

**Figure 5:** Shiang-chyi's bewilderment at manufactured orgasm.

### **Voice-over body: Pornography, agency, comatosity**

Following the scene in which Shiang-chyi receives an education in the manufacturing of female orgasmic sounds, the film cuts to the porn film director lifting the comatose Sumomo back to the set, with Shiang-chyi tailing them and eventually lending a helping hand to the director. On set there are tense moments between Hsiao-kang and Shiang-chyi as they meet for the first time at his workplace. As Hsiao-kang and the film crew prepare the comatose Sumomo for action, Shiang-chyi looks on from the gridded window into the bedroom. Visually, what is most striking in the ensuing sequence is the use of



shot/reverse shot and fast editing, both techniques that are rarely seen in Tsai's films. In this sequence there are ten shots in less than two minutes, during which Hsiao-kang and Shiang-chyi gaze back and forth as if they are visually having sex with each other, albeit mediated through the body of Sumomo.<sup>6</sup> More importantly, this visuality is deployed to bring forth an auralty so that Hsiao-kang's gaze serves to interpellate Shiang-chyi into vocal action, turning her from a spectator on set to a crew member specializing in sound effects.

Aurally, this sequence is most notable for Shiang-chyi's performance of orgasmic sounds, although the meaning of these sounds in relation to her agency and subjectivity is indeterminate and open to multiple readings. To begin with, given Shiang-chyi's amorous interest in Hsiao-kang over the course of the film, to what extent is her vocal performance here an expression of her sexual desire? Note also that in an earlier scene, carrying a watermelon under her T-shirt (echoing Sumomo in the film's opening shot) Shiang-chyi pretends to give birth, mimicking sounds induced by contraction and delivery in a manner that not only foreshadows this sequence but also suggests her probable maternal wishes. Most crucially, given the intensity with which she watches the DVD only moments earlier, are the orgasmic sounds she manufactures in this sequence a mimicry of Sumomo's performance, with the porn film serving as 'a normative model for the "correct" female response to sexual stimulation' (Corbett and Kapsalis 1996: 106), a model she is merely replicating here to aid the production of this porn film or do they signify something else?

I would argue that, despite the compromising circumstance of the porn film milieu in which she finds herself, the myriad sounds consumed and produced by Shiang-

chyí in these various sequences combine to give voice to a female subjectivity and agency in the ending of *The Wayward Cloud*. This female agency is contrasted with the male's inability to perform without the sonic spectacularity of the female voice as a performance-enhancing agent, an aural Viagra if you like. Throughout the film Hsiao-kang is shown to suffer from performance anxiety both on and off the set, his vocation as a porn film actor clearly becoming an obstacle in his attempts to form an amorous relationship outside of his workplace.<sup>7</sup> After his chance encounter with Shiang-chyi in the park, he is invited to her flat, where she offers him watermelon juice that he secretly pours away, a sign of his rejection of any association of an object used as a prop at work with a potential love interest. In another scene set in the porn film section of a video rental shop, as Shiang-chyi gestures to perform oral sex on Hsiao-kang, he grabs her by the head and presses it against his belly before she could do so, indicating his discomfort in conducting an intimate sexual act with someone with whom he has an emotional connection in an environment that reminds him of his occupation. In both instances, pornography gets in the way of intimacy and the male's willingness or ability to perform. Ironically, it is precisely pornography that facilitates the sexual union between Hsiao-kang and Shiang-chyi in the film's dénouement so that Hsiao-kang's performance of sexual climax is predicated simultaneously on the comatose body of his sex work colleague and the orgasmic voice of his love interest at a location none other than his workplace: the porn film set.

Rather than seeing Tsai's use of a female comatose body that cannot grant consent as a form of misogyny,<sup>8</sup> it can be argued that the film illustrates forcefully and critiques unequivocally the exploitation of the sexed-up female body in its various forms,

at once consumable, disposable and recyclable. It is clear in this climactic sequence that Shiang-chyi has a voice but not a body whereas Sumomo has a body but not a voice. Like the ambivalent meanings of Shiang-chyi's orgasmic sounds, the state of Sumomo's body in this sequence is also indeterminate: has she merely passed out or is she dead? Lisa Downing has argued, following Erich Fromm, that necrophilia is as much 'an aesthetic, a mode of representation, as it is a sexual perversion' (2003: 4). If Sumomo's body can be read as dead, the necrophilic potential in *The Wayward Cloud* is not so much a fascination with this specific form of sexual perversion but more an aesthetic and a mode of representation, a consistent trait in Tsai's film-making career during which he has used various aesthetic devices to make the unrepresentable representable, such as 'a poetics of desire that engenders a kind of *écriture* queer' in his early films (Lim 2006: 130). In this final sequence, the division of labour between Sumomo and Shiang-chyi highlights the interchangeability and disposability of the female role in the sexual economy of the porn film industry insofar as the female actress's role can effectively be split into two: one providing a body but not a voice and another a voice but not a body.

The spectacular sex in the city in *The Wayward Cloud* raises questions about the dichotomy of visibility and aurality along gender lines and the possibility of reconciling the two modes of sexual expression for both genders. In her article on the voice in the cinema, Mary Ann Doane spells out the major difficulties of the notion of a political erotics of the voice, not least because to mark the voice as 'an isolated haven within patriarchy, or as having an essential relation to the woman, is to invoke the spectre of feminine specificity, always recuperable as another form of "otherness"' (1980: 49). Would it be possible to imagine a new mode of cinematic sexual representation beyond

the fantasy of the frenzy of male visibility and female aurality, so that the visual/aural dichotomy can be realigned vis-à-vis gender and sexuality? I propose to read the penultimate shot of *The Wayward Cloud* – a 93-second-long take of a close-up of Shiang-chyi’s profile with Hsiao-kang’s penis in her mouth (Figure 6) – as an attempt towards the dissolution and resolution of this dichotomy.

**Figure 6:** Evidence of “money shot” displaced, sublimated, purified.

In the climactic sex scene, a female comatose body and another female voice combine to induce male ejaculation, yet the evidence of the ‘money shot’ is denied as Hsiao-kang dashes to the window and sticks his penis in Shiang-chyi’s mouth, at once collapsing the dual structure of the film’s main narrative and the *mise-en-abyme* and achieving sexual union with Shiang-chyi. Insofar as this penultimate shot adheres to the convention of the porn film in its disavowal of the reproductive imperative, ending with a shot of external penile ejaculation (Williams 1990: 73), it does not make visible the evidence of male orgasm – the semen – as Hsiao-kang comes instead in Shiang-chyi’s mouth and silences her hitherto spectacular sonic performance. This is not simply because Tsai’s film is not a porn film but a film partly about the making of porn films. Rather, by showing a shot of Hsiao-kang’s ejaculation on the face of another female porn actress in an earlier scene in the *mise-en-abyme* that fully adheres to porn film convention but denying a similar shot in this penultimate scene, the film makes a distinction precisely between, on the one hand, the exploitative, dehumanizing nature of the porn industry that treats both human bodies and voices as replaceable and disposable and, on

the other, the quest for sexual agency, emotional intimacy and human connection despite the unpromising milieu of the porn film set and the tyranny of gender performativity.

*The Wayward Cloud* therefore stages the porn film set of the *mise-en-abyme* as the unlikely site for the sexual union of the two protagonists of the main narrative while reconfiguring the visual/aural binary by channelling the visual through the oral/aural. In the close-up of Shiang-chyi's profile in the penultimate shot a tear is visibly rolling down her cheek while her head is held in position by Hsiao-kang's hands so that his penis is firmly in her mouth.<sup>9</sup> The tear on Shiang-chyi's face, I would suggest, is a substitution for or a sublimation of the male orgasmic evidence as if Hsiao-kang's semen has been displaced as a teardrop. This shot thus simultaneously expunges the frenzy of male visibility as the 'money shot' is denied and the frenzy of female aurality as Shiang-chyi is silenced. The transformation of the visual evidence of male orgasm (semen), through Shiang-chyi's mouth that otherwise produces aurality, into a different liquid form (tear) flowing out of yet another orifice – crucially, the eye, the visual organ – reconfigures the visual/aural binary of sexual economy constructed along gender lines. More importantly, this transformation can be read as sublimation precisely because, to follow Mary Douglas, tears are like 'rivers of moving water' that 'purify, cleanse, bathe the eyes' and, removed from bodily functions of digestion and procreation, are seen as less 'pollution-worthy' than other bodily fluids such as saliva and genital excretions (2002: 154–55). The denied visual evidence of male sexual pleasure (Hsiao-kang's semen), channelled through the denied aural evidence of female sexual pleasure (Shiang-chyi's silenced mouth), brings forth a new and different form of visual evidence (teardrop), at once displaced, sublimated, purified.

After a spectacular session of sex in the city that involves a threesome comprising a comatose female body, an almost hysterical female voice and an all-sweating male hard at work (not to mention a film crew on set), *The Wayward Cloud* once again demonstrates, as with many Tsai films, the possibilities of forging human connections under the most bizarre circumstances. The ending of this film can also be read, in line with the ending of other Tsai films, as utopian, symbolized by the purifying potential of the teardrop.<sup>10</sup> *The Wayward Cloud* closes with a song from which the film's title is derived to remind us that the wayward forms of sexuality depicted, from porn to possibly necrophilia, culminate in a tear just like a raindrop that takes shape slowly from condensed moisture in the cloud.<sup>11</sup> This is, after all, a film set in a time of drought; hence, the inducement of a teardrop from the sexual union can only be a symbol of the fulfilment of desire for the characters (particularly Shiang-chyi) as they have been shown throughout the film searching for water to quench their thirst. Hsiao-kang's ejaculation of a liquid into Shiang-chyi's mouth through a window encased in a separating wall recalls the glass of water extended by the male protagonist to the female protagonist at the end of *The Hole* through the hole separating the upstairs–downstairs flats. Both films close with the sound of music, the former with an extra-diegetic Mandarin song from the 1960s and the latter with a diegetic musical number based on a song from the same era. With urbanity once again becoming the default site for improbable human union, *The Wayward Cloud* stages sonic spectacles that herald a new cinematic language for the representation of sex in the city.

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**Notes**

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<sup>1</sup> This paragraph is taken from an earlier publication of the author (Lim 2007: 226), where ideas of intratextuality, intertextuality and paratextuality in Tsai's films are developed more fully.

<sup>2</sup> The scene is now so famous it recently inspired a parody version in a TV advert for PG Tips tea, starring the British comedian Johnny Vegas and a puppet monkey. The advert can be viewed on YouTube at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=v4Os3OmX4i4>, accessed 17 March 2010.

<sup>3</sup> Indeed, the aural/visual dichotomy would be configured differently if not dismantled altogether in gay and lesbian porn films, but this is the subject for another article.

<sup>4</sup> As Vivian Lee notes, 'The very presence of a "positive" cardboard image of modern professional women in a "high-flying" business as a property of a porn film can be read as a mockery of the cultural logic behind the production of socially acceptable femininity, while the professional image of the air stewardess[es] hints at the global circulation of similar images in the production of gender identities' (2007: 128). Indeed, a longstanding tagline for Singapore Airlines's advert is 'Singapore girl, you're a great way to fly'. See, for example, the 2006 TV commercial on YouTube at:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ykSBMqffuQ8>, accessed 19 March 2010.

<sup>5</sup> The setting of this musical number, along with a sequence in which Shiang-chyi works in the Taipei museum as an assistant, is inconsistent as the rest of the film is set in Kaohsiung. For example, it is improbable, as happens in the film, for Shiang-chyi to leave the museum with bottles of mineral water only to arrive at her flat in Kaohsiung moments later. The statue of Chiang Kai-shek in front of the museum is also the setting

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for a musical number that could be read as a critique of sexist and nationalist ideologies (see Lee 2007: 133–36).

<sup>6</sup> The ten shots run from 1:41:21 to 1:43:09 on the DVD counter, averaging 10.8 seconds per shot. The other salient use of shot/reverse shot in Tsai's oeuvre is in *Busan/Goodbye, Dragon Inn* (2003) when the female theatre assistant (played by Chen Shiang-chyi) looks up at the on-screen heroine in King Hu's 1967 film, *Longmen kezhan/Dragon Gate Inn*. This sequence comprises fourteen shots in 49 seconds, with an average shot length (ASL) of 3.5 seconds. To put this in context, the ASLs of Tsai's *films* range from 19.15 seconds in his debut feature, *Qingshaonian Nezha/Rebels of the Neon God* (1992), to 90.11 seconds in his latest film, *Lian/Visage* (2009).

<sup>7</sup> While Hsiao-kang is shown to have ejaculated twice on set, he also rejects the offer of another female porn actress (played by Lu Yi-ching) when he struggles to get his penis ready for action.

<sup>8</sup> It is debatable whether Tsai can be accused of misogyny since his representation of the comatose body is not (female) gender specific. In his next film, *Heiyanquan/I Don't Want to Sleep Alone* (2006), Tsai introduces a male comatose body (played by Lee Kang-sheng) sexually abused by his mother forcing the hand of the household maid (played by Chen Shiang-chyi) into the disposable incontinent pants worn by the comatose body and masturbating him. Here again aurality is privileged as the scene obscures the visual by fragmenting the action through partial reflection in the mirror so that the focus is instead on the sound produced by the friction between the maid's hand and the disposable pants.

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<sup>9</sup> There is a strikingly similar shot of a tear rolling down the cheek of a female character while she performs oral sex on a male character in Carlos Reygadas's *Batalla en el cielo/Battle in Heaven* (2005), released in the same year as *The Wayward Cloud*.

<sup>10</sup> See Lim (2006: 148–50) for a fuller discussion of how the ending of Tsai's earlier films can be read as utopian, noting in particular the role of sound.

<sup>11</sup> The ceiling of Shiang-chyi's bedroom is a painting of a blue sky with white clouds, the latter of which can be read as visual representations of semen.