

A movie so silent, it screams essay



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A Movie So Silent, It Screams Emotions do not have to be wordy or loud, and human feelings are most obvious and affecting in the silence of their dwelling place. This seems to be the message being delivered by *Vive L`amour*. *Vive L`amour* intertwines the lives of three very different city people who were unaware that they share the same apartment. They are: Mei, a beautiful real estate person who is undoubtedly attractive and sexually active; Ah-jung, Mei's casual lover; and Hsiao-ang, the gay guy who holds so much pain and fear in his heart.

They did not know that there were three of them finding solace in that empty apartment. The apartment is furnished only with a bed, as if the room itself has dictated its visitors on how to use the place. The three characters, as if they knew the message of the bed, use the room to engage in silly daydreaming, as well as making plans about or fantasizing about sex or actually having sex. Mei's regular day is about displaying signs, engaging potential clients to an open house, and waiting for the potential clients to show up. She spends a lot of hours on the phone with potential buyers. She desperately wants to show potential buyers the empty apartment. Hsiao-kang's day is about selling wall space for burials. Ah-jung, meanwhile, is a street vendor.

She sells women's clothes from Hong Kong. For all of them, the room is a retreat, a place for letting crap out, a hideaway or a place for casual, self-serving, non-committal sex. The bottom line is the room is empty, just like them. How *Vive L`amour* have become so dramatically tragic and yet fairly comedic, while also being highly erotic will never cease to amaze

generations of movie viewers. The film starts with Hsiao-kang, a timid gay, stealing the key that would be the three characters' apartment retreat.

Hsiao-kang makes himself comfortable in the empty apartment, and he even takes a bath there. When Hsiao-kang slits his wrist in a suicide attempt, it became very clear just how much his loneliness has been bugging him. May meets Ah-jung, and had sex with him soon after. For May, the apartment becomes a place for casual sex. May and Ah-jung never really talk to each other in the movie; and they do not less express emotions either. Ah-jung, although he is seen as cocky and cold, gets the fascination of Hsiao-kang.

May never meets Hsiao-kang, only Ah-jung does. Ah-jung just cannot love anyone. At the same time, he does not long for love. He is the symbol of what the other two characters might become in the end – numb and hard. Hsiao-kang is scared of life, more than he is scared of death. One of the most striking and poignant scenes is delivered by the character of Hsiao-Kang, who is seen hugging and kissing a watermelon. Hsiao-Kang seems to play with his imagination that life would be so good if the watermelon was everything he needed in life to live fully.

May Lin feels the lack of love and takes it the hardest. The film ends when May breaks down because of the sadness in her life. *Vive L'amour* tells of love, and the complex feelings that arise from deep within the minds and hearts of vulnerable persons facing the absence of love in their life.

Naturally, the film speaks of painfully unwanted loneliness. The movie takes its viewers into a journey about commonly perceived emotions that pierce the heart and damage the soul of a lonely person.

The setting and the characters in *Vive L`amour* are very rich in feelings and human emotions. The film proves that a movie can never go wrong if it utilizes a relatively silent approach in presentation of deep-seated feelings. *Vive L'Amour* is literally told in images. The dialogues that came far in between almost seemed unnecessary. Watching *Vive L`amour* is a painful journey, because in spite of the silence of the characters, it was so easy to identify with their predicament and sympathize with them. Loneliness is a universal concept. Everyone understands it. Perhaps, even our animal pets also understand it; just as much as love is a universal concept, too.

Writer-director Tsai Ming-liang used visual/cinematic language, as opposed to conventional dialogues in presenting *Vive L`amour*. What is not good about it is some viewers do want the dialogues. In fact, some viewers did not appreciate *Vive L`amour* for its silence. On the other hand, what is excellent about *Vive L`amour* is it did not let words get in the way of bringing the characters, as well as their thoughts and feelings, very close to the movie audience. If none of the characters in a movie speak in its first twenty-five (25) minutes on the screen, one would think that something is wrong. (Otherwise, we're back to the era where silent movies were big blockbuster hits!) As the story moves on, you will realize that there really is something wrong.

And it is the weight of burden in the characters' hearts. It is not the silence of the movie that is wrong; in fact, what is wrong is the very heart of each character. Each of the characters carries the load of emptiness and loneliness, and practically everyone in the audience keeps quiet to listen in this almost-silent movie. The movie's silence compels the audience to sit

back, and really feel the movie. It challenges the audience to get inside the characters' heads and know what they are thinking. Indeed, *Vive L'amour* is not meant to be watched, it is meant to be felt from deep within. *Vive L'amour* becomes more than a movie; it turns to a rich poignant experience that is meant to leave an imprint on one's mind.

At the start of the film, you will immediately begin to perceive that this film is definitely not about words. (It is good news for others; a boring picture for some.) You will see right away that so much of what the movie will be about is up to you. You try to figure out what is happening, and yet at the same time, you just want to be there without anticipation for anything but the best. *Vive L'amour* starts as a puzzle and ends as a puzzle not quite complete but otherwise whole.

It engages the audience to take a proactive role in comprehending the story and sympathizing with the characters. It is a movie that calls on its audience to feel, or not bother at all. Anyone who does not enjoy a movie that does not spoon-feed its viewers should not watch *Vive L'amour*.

It will ask you to guess, to explain and to formulate your own conclusion based on what you're seeing, feeling and ultimately, sensing in the entire motion picture. In hindsight, the movie moved rather slowly. The progress was controlled for optimum effect. In the end, you would realize that it just could not have been done in any other way.

Movie viewers whose interest was captured by filmmakers, such as Antonioni, should watch *Vive L'amour*. In fact, Antonioni's *L'Avventura* is even referenced in *Vive L'amour*. It is so amazing that in spite of the striking

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quietness of the characters, it is still so easy to relate to them. For instance, Mei, however beautiful she is, the film shows that she is an ordinary woman who cries buckets when she's hurt, and craps when she has to.

When she cries, she cries with big tears matched by mucal snorts straight from her nose. It only shows the skills of the movie's silent storyteller who wants to make a point, and the excellent actors in the film who knows the immense feelings they are representing in the film. I think that this film's movie script is only 10 percent (10%) dialogue and 90 percent (90%) picture. Perhaps all the dialogues in the movie would only cover one page. However, this movie says a lot more than your ordinary movies, where people talk no end. It is obvious in the movie that the individual characters are either reluctant or unwilling or unable to open up their true feeling and subsequently reach out to each other. As symbolized by the room they all liked to stay in. The characters are the empty rooms.

The characters can accommodate people in, but they would rather that they not stay or take a permanent dwelling in them. These characters spend their time without specific direction. They are content to let time pass by while they are busy with their lifestyle of beers-drinking and smoking. Such characters are everywhere. They are very easily identifiable.

They are our neighbors friends, families, self. Suffice it to say that these characters are known to us. It is very interesting note how Ming-liang takes angles his camera lens to narrate a character's life. The shots are made from a considerable distance, as if telling the audience that you can't get too

close to the characters that are normally disconnected from other people in their environment.

So from a distance, the audience sees how these characters suffer in their loneliness and in their disconnection, during their moments of meditative detachment. There are many stunning and memorable scenes in the film. One of these scenes is when Hsiao-Kang hides under the bed, masturbating. He masturbates while May and Ah-jung enjoy sex literally on top him. It is an erotically-charged scene but it is too painful, as well; because that scene intimately describes his loneliness. *Vive L'Amour* is a super film that successfully combines the aesthetics of old cinema with a modern prevailing theme, loneliness and sadness.

The painful irony of their life is that they are alone amidst countless people in Taipei. They are alone because they just couldn't reach out or connect to others. This scenario is very much symbolized by Ah-jung, who is too cold to need anyone in a compassionate sense. Over time, even Mei can wind up to be like him – to numb to need love. Towards the end of the movie, we see Mei; and she walks through a barren and desolate public park. Once again, a metaphor is made for Mei, as she reflects on the emptiness of her life, in a place similar to how she is feeling: barren and desolate.

It is a totally heart-breaking scene, where Mei breaks down and cry it all out – her heartbreak, her life. Out of the many poignant scenes in the movie, this one hits the hardest. For over six minutes, she is just there crying.

She pauses for a while to light another cigarette, then she cries again. She cries real hard as if purging her heart of all the pain. It is indeed an involving, powerful scene.

Overall, *Vive l'amour* can be taken as a long visual commentary about the relationships of man, the relationships made by chance, and the relationships we deliberately choose to keep or leave. These relationships cause raw emotions to flourish into bittersweet haunting memories in the end. The alienation and loneliness in a highly urbanized city is symbolized in *Vive l'amour*. It will continue to haunt any viewer who will feel the emotions in the film. The ending scene with Mei is both powerful in its familiarity and distracting in its length. Nevertheless, the director only remains consistent in his medium - sending more visual than audio messages.

Watching *Vive l'amour* will make you connect to your inner longing, inner fear and inner detachment. Each of the character dwells in us. Sometimes, we feel deprived of something wonderful; other times, we are just simply too tired of life to move on; and other times, we just couldn't care less.

This fact only makes it easy for most people to appreciate *Vive l'amour* - everyone is there in the movie. Everyone and every silent weight of burden we all carry within, especially loneliness. All emotions presented in *Vive l'amour* - fear, love, longing, sadness, discontent - were never shown in a loud manner. Everyone hardly ever talked in the film. Yet all the human feelings in the film are very obvious; so much, in fact that you begin to hurt inside for the characters. *Vive L`amour* silently leaves a distinct mark on anyone who has ever been lonely at least once in his life.