

cinema scope

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Bi Gan on *Long Day's Journey Into Night*

BY BLAKE WILLIAMS



“If the cinema isn’t made to express dreams or everything that in waking life has something in common with dreams, then it has no point.”

—Antonin Artaud, “Sorcellerie et cinéma”
(ca. 1928)

Cinema, however realist it may ever strive to be, is synonymous with dreaming. Fundamentally past-tense, after the fact; industrially and institutionally representational; propelled, sometimes equally, by desire and terror—it is drenched in absence and familiarity, illusorily leading us back to a source that is always further away from us by film’s end. And then we wake up. It’s quite something, then, that descriptors like “oneiric” and “dreamlike”—always approbative adjectives for a work of cinema—are never used tautologically. That simply isn’t the default. And yet, in a field where theatrical modes of expression continue to reign, it’s those dreamier experiences—bellowing to us in a primal tense that’s indifferent to language, order, and stability—that tend to win the favour of critics, especially those who are committed to the idea that movies are an expressive art rather than a stepping stone be-

tween themselves and the cultural conversation *du jour*. Reality, after all, as unsightly and debased as it insistently is, is always daring us to turn away from it—to leave it side-glanced, prefaced with a prefix.

When we talk about dreams and cinema, even now, the tendency is to leap to the Surrealists. This inevitably, confusedly evokes that movement's myriad wars (with the bourgeoisie, with theatre, with words, with War itself), which aren't always relevant to the topic at hand. Yet for many Western filmmakers—and this includes David Lynch and Alain Resnais—this would indeed be the most productive genealogy to trace. The liminal states of consciousness they present are predominantly achieved via spatial abstraction: distorted or disorganized images of the mundane that, however imperceptibly, make the world look and feel uncanny, dreadful, alien. And it's a strategy that, implicitly or explicitly, comes to denounce many of the same mores and institutions as Breton and his ilk did.

Yet there is another tendency, one more trained on abstracting temporality, that has also developed over the last few decades, especially in Asia. A veritable Somnambulist Cinema, these are works—made by the likes of Apichatpong Weerasethakul, Tsai Ming-liang, Wong Kar-wai, and legions of their protégé—that, as a matter of course, slow or even stop time in their (anti-)narratives as a way of producing dream states for and *in* the viewer. One could credit this inclination as being largely a continuation of the legacy left by arthouse modernists like Antonioni, who developed a syntax for de-emphasizing narrative from within narrative shells. But there is both an extremity and a magnanimity here that sets these filmmakers apart.

Which is one way of approaching the work of 28-year-old Chinese filmmaker Bi Gan, whose virtuosic and in every sense sensational sophomore feature, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, has to be one of the most richly ambivalent films this century about cinema's ontological relationships with time, space, memory, and dreaming. Like his debut, *Kaili Blues* (2015), *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is loosely concerned with a man who returns to his hometown in order to confront and/or reunite with a figure from his past that won't leave him at peace. More technically impressive and impressionistic than its predecessor, *Long Days* borrows from—even pays homage to—Bi's fellow Somnambulists: the bifurcated structures of vintage Joe; Wong's languorous rhythms and clocks (still stopped, as they were in *Kaili*); the decayed, tear-crustured interiors of Tsai's *Stray Dogs* (2013). It's also forthcomingly indebted to cinema's Old Masters: to Tarkovsky's train beats and gliding glassware, and Hitchcock's roaming, jade-stained all-timer. In other words, Bi bears his cinephilia quite proudly, and does a commendable job of not simply stopping at the doors of his cinematic ancestors.

Where *Kaili Blues* operated, as Shelly Kraicer observed in these very pages, in a "realer sort of realism," *Long Day* luxuriates in deep dreams and genre artifice. The protagonist here—a love-scarred noir hero, Luo (Huang Jue)—is a walking shadow, emerging out of the past to haunt, and be haunted by, the damp city streets of Kaili. His father is dead, and a woman who he once shared a romance with—the green-dressed Wan Qiwen

(Tang Wei), a "movie star's name"—appears to him, to us, as the spectral figment of a fading unconscious. By car and by foot, Luo follows her, much to her concern, and then loses her, much to his recurrent perplexion. Unable to grab onto anything solid in the present, he dips into his memories with her, flashing back to their days of being wild (circa the turn of the millennium), when her materiality was less unstable. Crime and jealous boyfriends adorn the architecture of Luo's memories, which are presented in murky enough vignettes that we're never sure if he's recalling an actual event or some movie he once saw; most likely, he's fusing the two together. (A key murder does, naturally, take place in a cinema.) It's an uncertainty, though, that you feel you can drift along with without the obligation to keep track of things. If Bi's cinema has been clear about anything so far, it's that he is completely unburdened by narrative cohesion.

And why would he be? For one, Bi came to filmmaking from poetry, which he's written a book of, and which he credits as the primary foundation for *Kaili Blues*. His films, then, *ought* to confuse our imagination, to place us on the margins of events, where, as Bachelard believed, we can be awakened from our automatisms. There's a necessary two-ness and, thus, in-betweenness in *Long Day*, which is part of why it creates such an unusual aura. Electric yet catatonic, roving yet paused, indexical yet virtual, multidimensional yet flat—Bi's films are never content to offer just one impression, derived as they are from such disparate sensibilities. While *Kaili Blues* is perhaps the more balanced embodiment of both of these modes, it's this follow-up that hones and enriches his dualistic grammar, creating tension and complexity out of low-key lighting, long pauses, and—most of all—stylistic dissonances. Indeed, *Long Day's Journey Into Night*, which takes place almost exclusively at night *despite* beginning on the summer solstice ("From now on our days will be shorter, our nights longer"), is often in conflict with what we expect from it. It's the kind of film where you receive a pair of polarized 3D glasses on your way into the cinema only to be instructed, via an opening onscreen intertitle, to not put them on ("This is NOT a 3D film," it begins). The spectacles were eventually needed, of course—albeit to behold a nearly hour-long single take originally photographed in 2D—but there was something productively perverse about being forced to experience nearly two-thirds of such a ravishing, plaintive, *tactile* motion picture while holding onto, and thus be constantly kept at least somewhat mindful of, such a flappy, flexible, plastic piece of hardware, never knowing when (or even *if*) they'd need to be transferred to my face.

It's a film of here and not-here, of has-been and will-never-be. It names itself after an immortal Eugene O'Neill play, a Sidney Lumet Palme d'Or-contending Katharine Hepburn vehicle, and an episode of *Growing Pains*' second season, without having anything to do with any of them. (The title "matched with the film's spirit," Bi says.) It sutures together two competing impulses duking it out in the Chinese film industry: the impulse to globalize and welcome Hollywood and computer-generated imagery, and the impulse to be true to local roots and historical perspectives, forwarding documentary aesthetics as the essen-



tial avenue to truth and resistance. It speaks (literally) of spells and out-of-body experiences, of forgetting our bodies and the facticity of where we are in space, and then frames its action in formal registers that are notoriously conducive to proprioception—making us feel and become conscious of our bodies and its various operations, thus grounding us very much in ourselves, the Earth’s gravity magnified. It offers not one (ping pong), not two (billiards), but three (basketball) near-satisfactions of 3D cinema’s great unfulfilled promise—to revitalize and finally, absolutely complete the sports movie—only for each respective sphere to remain attached to the screen, swallowed back into a plane from which it always artificially bulged.

And it’s across these points—in the midst of its post-converted long take—that I became most won over by *Long Day’s* journey to the stars, precisely because it delivers, however incidentally, one of recent cinema’s most damning demonstrations of how technology is cosmically incapable of saving us. The film transitions, finally, into stereoscopy at the moment Luo goes to the movies, puts on a pair of 3D glasses, and then slips away to Neverland, drifting off into hostile territory, to some incarnation of Luo and Bi’s hometown of Kaili. Having already warned us earlier in the film that movies, unlike dreams, “are always false,” we plunge deeply, unremittingly into a despairing domain that feels simultaneously tangible and illusory. Movie, dream, or something else entirely, truth and falsehoods become altogether indistinguishable here.

Guided merely by a map on a door, the camera traces a winding, flying trajectory that we might cognitively follow along with, provided that our memories are as trustworthy as promised. By foot, motor headlight, zip-line, and (absurdly, beautifully) a spinning ping pong paddle, we move through a space that is bent and warped in some most plastic and untruthful ways, thoroughly analyzed though the terrain was by post-conversion algorithms that still, to my eye, cannot pass the Turing test. As Michael Snow reminded us (with an assist from John Lennon) in the midst of his own iconic “long” take: Nothing is real. Here, though, it’s something to get hung about. In Bi’s tireless effort to convince Luo *and* us otherwise, *Long Day* achieves its greatest power, having arrived at something we can comfortably call night. Because we *can* go home again, but time will not have stopped, and the sparklers won’t still be burning when we get there.

Cinema Scope: At what point in your conception of the project did the idea that it would utilize 3D technology occur to you?

Bi Gan: From the very beginning actually.

Scope: Was it the initial impulse then?

Bi: The idea to use 3D came first. I have a lot of stories in my head all the time, so it was really a matter of finding the right story to match this method of shooting.

Scope: You’ve said that your interest in 3D is mostly tied to its ability to capture texture, for its tactile qualities, but its incor-



poration into the movie's storyline arrives at the point when it needs to become more synthetic, more dreamlike—when we see Luo fall asleep in the cinema. This is somewhat counter to stereo-cinema's more common ties to realism and representations of space. Do you think 3D is useful as a way for cinema to move beyond realism?

Bi: 3D images look fake to me, but they're real in other ways. For example, to me 3D looks like how I think memory looks. I spent a year doing tests with the 3D format and I eventually realized that it's not a very good format for long takes, but at the same time, after doing those tests, I realized that it's actually a really useful way of containing time. The film is about memory, so it's about moving through time rather than space. But of course 3D is also very good for capturing space, so I really wanted to express that aspect during the second half of the film, to communicate time as an essential component of space. They work together.

Scope: What was the nature of these tests that you were doing? Was it for perfecting the choreography of the camera's and actors' movements?

Bi: It was mainly a time when I was testing a few different cameras, to decide which one I would use. I did this for a full year. There's this German camera that I worked with for a while, which is a smaller 3D camera, and the biggest problem was that, since everything in the shot was going to be filmed at night, I needed a camera that would work well with low light, and unfor-

tunately the small camera was not able to do that very well. The other option was to use two regular cameras. This looked great for static shots, but that whole rig ended up being too heavy for the Steadicams. So the testing phase was a lot about finding the best kind of camera to use for the shot.

Scope: What camera did you settle on?

Bi: I eventually decided to film the 3D sequence using just one Red camera, which meant that I needed to learn certain things I hadn't planned on, like how to place a camera like that onto a plane so that it could translate easily into 3D. I also spent a long time researching the history of 3D, learning the rules of 3D, and asking myself if I should try to disrupt these rules and do my own version of the format, or if I should stick to the rules.

Scope: When it came time to film the long take, did it require many attempts before you were satisfied with it?

Bi: I basically shot the 3D long take over two periods. For the first part I spent a couple of months doing three attempts and none of them worked, so we went back and recalibrated the approach we were taking. Then we went back a second time and we did five attempts, and the version you end up seeing in the film is the final attempt. That was the last one.

Scope: When you say you were looking at the history of 3D, what were some of the films or filmmakers you were looking at?

Bi: *Gravity* (2013) is the main one. The way they combined CGI with real footage was very impressive, and a good resource for some of what I did in this film. I'm also a big fan of

Ang Lee's approach to 3D, so I studied his last couple of films very closely, especially *Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk* (2016). I've never seen a 3D film that was as comfortable to watch as that one is. When I saw that I knew I wanted to explore 3D more deeply.

Scope: In ultimately deciding to shoot with only one Red camera, you therefore had to produce the image's 3D illusions with a post-conversion process. For you, is there a significant difference in the 3D experience when the stereo image is created with computer-generated effects rather than the presence of a second camera lens?

Bi: I'm not sure. To me, I can't see a difference between how the shot came out in the post-conversion process and the tests we were doing with the actual 3D cameras. Because I learned the rules about how to correctly shoot 3D cinema, I was able to make sure that we shot it as though we were filming it with a 3D camera, following the same rules. In the end, I can't say I feel a difference between the post-converted image we ended up with and the shot as I envisioned it in my head.

Scope: Were you very involved in the post-conversion process, or did you hand the footage over to a technical team and let them take care of that process themselves?

Bi: I did turn it in to a company to do the conversion, but I checked in every few days to look at the footage and make sure I was happy with it. In fact, I'm not entirely pleased right now with some of the conversion, since I had to turn in the film to Cannes on a specific date—the day before I arrived for my screening, actually; it's an extremely wet print that you saw—I'm going to go back and do more work on the film after the festival, to get the film and the 3D exactly where I want it to be.

Scope: Isn't it also true that you're not completely satisfied with *Kaili Blues* either?

Bi: I didn't have the budget to do everything I wanted technically with that film. I did this time, but I just didn't have the time. I'll be satisfied when I eventually finish it.

Scope: The credits list three different directors of photography, who I understand each worked on different sections of the film. Were you worried that there would be a tonal disjunction between the different sections, namely between 2D and the 3D parts?

Bi: Could you tell that it was shot by different DPs while you were watching it?

Scope: No, I couldn't.

Bi: So, no!

Scope: Did you have the three DPs coordinate? Were they looking at one another's footage in order to ensure that the transition would be seamless?

Bi: There were a few starts and stops in the production. Sometimes we stopped because I wasn't happy with the way the set looked. This breaking of the schedule impacted the roles of the different DPs. Yao Hung-I was the DP for the 2D section, for example, and he had to leave early because he had some work to do back in Taiwan. Dong Jinsong came in and finished the 2D section and started pre-production for the 3D shoot. Then, at the very end of that process, another DP took over, this one

a Frenchman by the name of David Chizallet. David basically shot all of the 3D section. On top of that, during the shoot there were three cameramen helping us out, making sure that the 3D section worked properly. Everyone studied where the previous person left off. That helped smooth it out.

Scope: Now that you've gone through so much time and experimentation to learn the process, do you think you'll use 3D again in future projects, perhaps to explore techniques that you didn't utilize here?

Bi: In truth I have no interest in 3D as a form. I have a lot of stories, and this was the best way to tell this story, but moving forward I don't see this becoming a specialty of mine. I can't see myself doing what Ang Lee did, making 3D film after 3D film.

Scope: I'm curious about some of your influences. There are a number of allusions to *Vertigo* (1958) during the film, for instance. It's there in Luo's quest to resurrect Wan Quiwen, a woman from his past who may no longer exist; and then of course the spinning bedroom, an homage to Scottie and Judy's 360-degree kiss shot, when they're bathed in green light.

Bi: *Vertigo* was definitely a starting point for me, especially for my film's structure—the fact that that film has two parts, for instance, or that the first part represents a dreamworld vision of this woman and the second part a more realistic interpretation of her. Green is a major motif in my film as well: the Jade Hotel, the green dress, the book. It conjures up this mysterious woman who always disappears. Luo is never able to quite hold on to her. That colour green is tied to the woman because of the dress she wears, and every time we see the colour again on screen it serves as a reminder of her. It was a way of not only evoking her in Luo's memory but also in the viewers' memories.

Scope: You've written books of poetry, and *Kaili Blues* is based on one of your poems, but your poetic writing has less of a presence in this film. How do you negotiate the relationship between your written poetry and your cinema, between your abstract poetic instincts and a more narrative storytelling logic?

Bi: *Kaili Blues* was written as a poem from the beginning—the structure, the flow—so it was born already from the logic of poetry. I'm not a screenwriter, even though I have stories in my head. Writing them out in a screenplay doesn't feel natural to me. *Long Day's Journey Into Night* is different, though. I think of this film as a murderer. It operates under the logic of murder rather than poetry.

Scope: Is this murderousness a characteristic that you intentionally worked into the film?

Bi: No, what I mean is that while I was making it, the film always threatened to destroy me.

Scope: Before he passed, Pierre Rissient likened the film to the work of Jacques Audiberti. He said it was like watching a "flaming torch in the heart of the night...a poetry of blood." I wonder if you think his feeling was evoked at least partially by this—by the film's antagonism towards you.

Bi: It's possible. I always felt like I was in danger during the production—like I was always about to either destroy the film by making the wrong decision, or destroy myself. I was always at risk.