

Identity in Chinese film: conflict, transformation, and the virtual

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Abstract

This thesis is an analysis of the notion of the virtual as laid out in works by Brian Massumi, Gilles Deleuze, and Félix Guattari. In it, I explore the virtual across several Chinese films of the last two decades and with respect to different challenges to identity. Through *Center Stage*, *Farewell My Concubine*, and *Frozen*, I investigate the dangers of the virtual in performance and the difficulty in recognizing the line between role and real. I then compare this to the similar yet distinct notion of disguise in *House of Flying Daggers* and *Infernal Affairs* in order to demonstrate the different manifestations and effects of the virtual when one's performance is undisclosed to those to whom one plays. Finally, I examine identity and the virtual through cinematic doublings in the films *Center Stage* and *Suzhou River*.

Résumé

Cette thèse est une analyse de la notion du virtuel telle que présentée dans les travaux de Brian Massumi, Gilles Deleuze et Félix Guattari. J'explore le virtuel au travers de plusieurs films chinois des deux dernières décennies en ce qui a trait aux différents défis de l'identité. Par des films tels que *Center Stage*, *Farewell My Concubine*, et *Frozen*, j'examine les dangers du virtuel dans la performance et la difficulté de pouvoir reconnaître la mince ligne entre le rôle et le réel. Je compare, ensuite cela à la notion similaire mais quand même distincte de camouflage¹ dans *House of Flying Daggers* et *Infernal Affairs* de manière à démontrer les différentes manifestations et les effets du virtuel lorsque la performance d'une personne est non-dévoilée à quelqu'un avec qui elle joue. Finalement, j'examine l'identité et le virtuel par les doublages cinématiques dans les films *Center Stage* et *Suzhou River*.

¹ En anglais *disguise*

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CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

Framework

When one engages in a discussion of film, a great many avenues for analysis are available. Within the film itself, character development and psychology, set design, wardrobe, musical score, and lighting are merely a few possibilities in an exhaustive pool of facets, each contributing to the film to varying degrees. Likewise, one may choose to focus on the plotline, the director's message, political or philosophical implications, historical accuracy, or on any one of a variety of film theories. With this in mind, it is at least somewhat surprising that little analysis of contemporary Chinese film is available. Those who have undertaken its analysis have often done so under limited parameters: by genre, or by "generation," a notion that seeks to group newly graduated filmmakers by their proximity to the reopening of film academies following the Cultural Revolution (implying a collective tone, subject matter, and film style that changes, in "generations," as the attitude towards the Cultural Revolution changes). Given these limited discussions, it can become difficult to apply Western film theories to the unique Chinese situation. What I wish to discuss in this thesis, however, is the less tangible and less culturally-rooted notion of the *virtual*, which I wish to explain in depth before beginning my analysis.

I draw heavily from Chapter 5 of Brian Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual: Movement, Affect, Sensation* to articulate the concept of the virtual and its applicability to film. The virtual here is not to be understood as "opposed to the real,"

but is instead a fully real exchange between the virtual and the actual. To phrase this differently, the virtual is everything that is not yet actual, but that could become actual at any moment. As such, the virtual is “inaccessible to the senses,” unable to be felt in and of itself, but perceptible in its effects. The virtual cannot be represented by any one image, sound, or form; rather, it exists – fleetingly – in the ins and outs, the cracks and spaces between and around the images, sounds, and forms. It is necessary, he says, for an image to “twist and fold on itself, to multiply itself internally.” Multiplication, overlay (sampling), transition, and self-referentiality all approach the virtual through “infoldings and outfoldings, redoublings and reductions, punctual events falling away from themselves into self-referential encompassment, pasts projecting ahead to futures bucking back into the moment, extended intensities and intensifying extensions” (Massumi 133).

The virtual appears in the folds that buckle and knot up, in the vanishing point, in the movement between samples. A related concept that helps to clarify this concept is Gilles Deleuze’s concept of the crystal image. Deleuze offers the description of an image stepping out from a mirror, photograph, or postcard and becoming actual. When this occurs, however, “coalescence” between the actual image and its “immediate, symmetrical, consecutive or even simultaneous double” – formerly the reflection yet to become actual – causes a “double movement of liberation and capture” whereby the image stepping out of the mirror is replaced by the actual stepping into the mirror, filling the void (Deleuze 68). In this double movement, the virtual and the actual briefly coalesce to become a single image with two sides, actual

and virtual, “referring back to each other around a point of indiscernibility.” This is the crystal image.

Taken together, application of these two concepts provides a way to approach identity issues in film, spanning a range of problematic conflicts. When viewed through the metaphor of audio sampling, Massumi’s notion of the virtual illustrates the potential for an identity in conflict to resonate or interfere with itself as it fragments or multiplies. Likewise, the crystal image suggests the exchange of one identity for the other, by sacrifice or takeover, as the not-as-yet actual identity becomes favorable to the existing self in some way. Through examining the unique identity conflicts in my chosen films and their relationship to the manufacture and effects of the virtual, I hope to illustrate certain qualities of identity that are easy to overlook or to approach from a strictly psychological perspective.

Approach

I have chosen to apply these concepts to identities constructed within six recent Chinese films and over three main categories of identity conflicts. In Chapter 2, I begin by discussing performance as a source of identity conflict in *Center Stage*, *Farewell My Concubine*, and *Frozen*. Each of these films features a performer, an individual whose craft it is to temporarily assume the identity of another person. My analysis of *Center Stage* examines the performer’s inability to distinguish between her own identity and that of the character she portrays as the line between the role and the real dissolves. *Farewell My Concubine* provides the basis for a similar exploration

of the role/real dichotomy, with the exception that the film's protagonist's inability to separate the two stems in part from his reluctance to abandon his role. Finally, *Frozen* looks at a performance artist who wishes to perform a trade of life for art, such that his feigned suicide has a strong influence on his identity. I will also analyze the way that, in each case, the character's inability to resolve his or her conflicted identities leads to the destruction of the self in the form of suicide.

Chapter 3 will consider the similarities and differences between performance, whose pretence is overt, and disguise as a type of performance aimed at an uninformed audience. The veiled nature of this type of performance requires a complete commitment to the role, in some cases necessitating the sacrifice of competing facets of the self. In both *House of Flying Daggers* and *Infernal Affairs*, undercover agents simultaneously infiltrate rival groups. For them, the credibility of the role is key to their missions as well as their self-preservation. However, *House of Flying Daggers* highlights the conflict of identity that arises when the sacrifices made for disguise are too deep, when too much is at stake. *Infernal Affairs* focuses on the formation of identity through one's actions rather than one's history, complicating the moral stances of the two long-term moles by virtue of having lived in each other's role over the course of many years. The identity conflicts in this section send the agents into a paradox, engaging in self-destructive behavior on behalf of protecting their chosen identities and allegiances.

Departing from the notion of performance in Chapter 4, I examine the multiplicity of identities – and the broader doubling of the films themselves – by returning to *Center Stage* and introducing *Suzhou River*. In *Center Stage*, the unique

multi-modal condition of the film causes the multiplying of the interconnected areas of temporality, meaning, and characterizations as well. This creates a film whose scenes are constantly shifting in meaning and purpose, whose pasts and presents blend and combine, and whose characterizations are multiplied, nuanced references to the same identities standing side-by-side-by-side. *Suzhou River* itself functions as a double in its relationship to Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*, from which it is adapted. In addition, it directly employs the use of one actress to fill two roles, a familiar face in an unfamiliar identity. The protagonist and the viewer alike are left baffled by this unexplained multiplicity until the two previously-defined individuals finally combine.

CHAPTER 2

PERFORMANCE: THE ROLE VS. THE REAL, THE BREAKDOWN OF IDENTITY, AND SUICIDE

Introduction

Perhaps it goes without saying that the cinema maintains the ability to move audiences, but what might not be as obvious is that this engagement between film and viewer can occur both emotionally and on another, more bodily, visceral level. This visceral level is what I will be calling *affect*, meant to describe a reaction to the audio-visual image that is pre-cognitive, immediate, and irreducible to emotion or sentiment. Affective response may be in line with emotion or cognitive preference, or it may contradict it. In this way, a scene that is *emotionally* coded as sad may be the most pleasant on an *affective* level. Brian Massumi points out that there is a lack of correspondence between quality (emotional, cognitive) and intensity (affect) other than their ability to resonate or interfere with one another like audio feedback (85-6), a concept that will prove important in my analysis.

The films chosen for this section all deal with the issue of performance and its intrusion into (or in some cases next to) the subject via the virtual. Massumi's description of the appearance of the virtual is critical to my analysis of its importance throughout the chosen cinematic works. To reiterate, he describes it as follows:

Since the virtual is in the ins and outs, the only way an image can approach it alone is to twist and fold on itself, to multiply itself internally ... At a certain point, they knot up: infoldings and outfoldings, redoublings and reductions, punctual events falling away from themselves into self-referential

encompassment, pasts projecting ahead to futures buckling back into the moment, extended intensities and intensifying extensions. (Massumi 2002: 133)

In order to illustrate the way the virtual impinges on the subject, I have chosen three Chinese films² produced within the last fifteen years: *Center Stage* (1992),³ *Farewell My Concubine* (1993),⁴ and *Frozen* (1997).⁵ Each of these films is affective via slightly different devices and techniques, but all three can be said to rely on the concept of the virtual (not entirely complementary to the actual) to create the strongest affective experience. Additionally, the analysis will consider the common thread of performance as a device for giving rise to the virtual, through consideration of Gilles Deleuze's notion of the crystal-image, the tension that rises between the virtual and the actual.

In *Center Stage*, the virtual can be sensed as product of a multiple temporalities overlapping one another, of multiple instances of the same person, or of different roles indeed played by the same person or persons; in *Farewell My Concubine*, the virtual can be sensed when multiple subjects seek to simultaneously inhabit a single identity; and in *Frozen*, the virtual can be sensed as multiple

² I am, in this case, referring to *Center Stage* as a Chinese film despite its production in Hong Kong before the handover from British colonial rule in 1997.

³ Chinese title: 阮玲玉 Ruǎn Língyù

⁴ Chinese title: 霸王别姬 Bàwáng bié jī, literally "The Overlord Leaves His Concubine"

⁵ Chinese title: 极度寒冷 Jídù hánlěng, literally "Extreme Cold"; Production year for this film varies from source to source, as it was shot in China in 1994 and smuggled to the Netherlands, where postproduction took place. It was released in 1997.

existences of a single person coincide. I intend to show, first through an analysis of the emergence of the virtual in each film, and then through a more careful look at performance as a common thread in creating the virtual, that these films carry the common trait of taking the virtual to its extreme, whereupon the distinction between virtual and actual is destroyed. This process takes a slightly different course of action in each case, however the end result is inevitably the same. As each character is forced to deal with the resonance or interference his (or her) performance has imposed upon his identity, the manifestations ultimately lead to the characters' inability or unwillingness to exist; four characters across these three films commit suicide. It is this common end that stems from an unstable subject, itself made unstable by the virtual as introduced through performance.

Mixing Styles, Temporalities, and Characterizations

Before undertaking the discussion of performance, it is necessary to establish the emergence of the virtual in each film. Stanley Kwan's *Center Stage* seeks to document the life and career of the 1930s Shanghai silent film star Ruan Lingyu (played by Maggie Cheung),⁶ although the film cannot simply be labeled as a biopic or a documentary due to its mixed-style/mixed-media format. *Center Stage* combines three different kinds of images into an unstable mélange of temporalities, using a

⁶ Throughout this paper, including the Notes and Works Cited sections, traditional Mandarin Chinese and Japanese names will be presented with the surname first, while Cantonese Chinese and Westernized names will be presented with the given name first.

three-part⁷ color scheme to guide the viewer. The first type of image is what Mette Hjort describes as “historical traces,” which include stills, clips, and photographs from Ruan’s 1930s films and are presented in grainy black and white (39) and bring some legitimacy to the film by providing what historians would call “primary source material.” Also present are documentary images of the research and making of the film, of interviews conducted in the early 1990s between Kwan and the cast of *Center Stage*, and also between those individuals and Ruan’s 1930s contemporaries.⁸ These images are coded in blue. Hjort calls the final type of image “interpretive reconstruction,” a term meant to include any instance whereby the director would be required to speculate or extrapolate in order to create the scene, shown in full color (47).

Center Stage resonates with early 1990s post-structuralist and post-modernist proposals that reality and truth are essentially unknowable, requiring that skepticism and suspicion be due to all such truth claims in order to justify belief (Hjort 59). While intending to contribute an air of the genuine, the fact and remainder of a past being reconstructed, the film’s historical traces seem to remain at a distance from the viewer (Is it not possible that they, too, have been created by the director?), contributing less knowable truth to the overall depiction of Ruan than the documentary images, except in the cases where they are combined with one or both of the other types of images, each resonating with and reinforcing the other. The

⁷ Throughout this paper, I will reference only the shortened version of *Center Stage*; the longer “director’s cut” version employs only a two-part color scheme.

⁸ It is worth noting that 20 of the 26 cut minutes between the long and short versions of *Center Stage* were documentary images.

documentary images, on the other hand, are replete with information about the researching and making of the film, imbued with Kwan's first-person authority (Hjort 46). The aim of the interpretive reconstruction images, and of the film as a whole, is to present what Kwan calls the "best possible available account,"⁹ shying away from the truth-or-quit mentality of documentary filmmaking (Hjort 63). These images (and the color schemes that code them), rather than setting each other up in a fact/recreation dialogue, blend, switch, and combine, and it is in this multiplicity of temporalities that the virtual appears in *Center Stage*.

The standard has already been established whereby each type of image is coded in a certain color scheme to aid the viewing audience, and this use of color scheme is of great importance to understanding the appearance of the virtual. Thinking back to Masumi, the virtual can be perceived in the folds and redoublings, its affective quality stemming from its portrayal of strangeness (in this case, strange experiences of time) and its temporariness. It is in this way that the unique temporal situation of *Center Stage* is able to generate affective response. The different structures and qualities of time cause an experience of strangeness in their juxtaposition and blending, their comparison and contrast.

One of the best examples of this occurs between *Center Stage*'s portrayals of the filming of *Goddess*¹⁰ and of *New Women*.¹¹ In the form of an interpretive

⁹ Interestingly, the full-color representation of the opening interview, the only true break of the color scheme, clearly establishes Kwan's acceptance of the film as a reconstruction in general, despite the wealth of information he was able to draw from in the researching of Ruan's life and career.

¹⁰ Chinese title: 神女 Shénnǚ (1934)

¹¹ Chinese title: 新女性 Xīn nǚxìng (1935)

reconstruction, the director of *Goddess*, Wu Yonggang, demonstrates “smoking as resistance” for Ruan to emulate in her on-screen performance as a prostitute. Still in interpretive reconstruction, Cheung-as-Ruan acts out the scene, followed immediately by the same scene in black and white, a clip from *Goddess* featuring the real Ruan Lingyu. “Cut!” At first, this shout seems to come from the filming of *Goddess*, but as the video catches up with the audio and the film cuts back to full color, it is Cai Chusheng, director of *New Women*, giving the order to Ruan as she acts out the death scene of Wei Ming. More coaching occurs to mold Ruan’s portrayal of her character to the director’s vision of Wei Ming’s desperate albeit belated wish to live. But after the desired shot is achieved, Cheung-as-Ruan begins to sob, clumsily burying herself beneath the sheets of the bed in which she had lain to shoot the scene, suggesting that Ruan was overcome with her character’s emotion. In a close shot on the trembling sheets, the scene unexpectedly fades to blue: in similar fashion to Ruan’s portrayal of Wei Ming, the viewer is to understand that Cheung is overcome with the emotion involved in portraying Ruan. The shot pans back to reveal Kwan and his film crew (fig. 1). The blue-tone signifies that this is presented as a documentary image, as truth, as something that happened by chance while filming. Finally, the historical image of the actual scene from *New Women* is shown, only to cut back to full color and reveal that the historical image is being watched within the parameters of the interpretive reconstruction as the film *New Women* is being screened for the first time before an audience. In this way, the multiplicity of temporalities is not merely a stacking or ordering, but a mixture, a sharing, an overlap where, as Massumi said, “pasts [project] ahead to futures buckling back into the moment” (2002: 133). This is the emergence

of the virtual, which ripples through not only the film's temporality but also through its characterizations, as the viewer has simultaneous access to several actors/characters in multiple temporalities.



Figure 1: Emotion comes through character and actress alike on more than one level [*Center Stage*, Dir. Stanley Kwan, 1992]

Inhabiting “The Concubine”

To continue to a different manifestation of the virtual and its effects on identity conflict, I move briefly to Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine*. Aside from the initial framing of the bulk of the film as a flashback, *Farewell My Concubine* follows a linear and chronological account of the historical and political conditions of China between 1924 and 1977. In *Farewell My Concubine*, it is the convergence of multiple identities into the framework of the concubine that generates the virtual. The main character, Cheng Dieyi (called Douzi/“Bean” as a child and played by Leslie Cheung),

and his stage brother Duan Xiaolou (called Shitou/“Stone” as a child and played by Zhang Fengyi) grow up in an opera troupe in Beijing, trained to play the King of Chu (Xiaolou) and his concubine, Yu (Dieyi), from the Beijing Opera also titled *Farewell My Concubine*. But the question must be asked: Who is the concubine in this film?

It is easy to equate Dieyi with the role of the concubine – the one for which he was trained and has played since his childhood – and make no further distinctions about it, but a deeper investigation leads to some alternatives. In the opera, the King of Chu is a noble and courageous warrior on the verge of being defeated by the King of Han. He dispatches his soldiers, prepared to face his death alone, but his horse and his concubine remain by his side. As the enemy forces approach, Yu draws the King’s sword and kills herself so as to be faithful to him until death (fearing violation by the conquering soldiers). However, Xiaolou does not share the love that Dieyi feels for him. While the two share a connection, it becomes clear throughout the film that Xiaolou’s affection for Dieyi is brotherly while Dieyi’s affection for Xiaolou is love. In this disconnect in degree, Dieyi fails to be Concubine Yu, faithful until death, because his “king” does not wish Dieyi to be his concubine. Though his desire to be with Xiaolou remains largely unchanged, Dieyi finds shallow approximations of love elsewhere, with the opera patron Yuan Shiqing (played by Ge You) after Xiaolou marries. Dieyi fails to be the faithful concubine to Master Yuan as well, dressing him up as the King of Chu to make him resemble Xiaolou and refusing to corroborate Yuan’s testimony at Dieyi’s trial for treason. Furthermore, he denounces both Xiaolou and his wife Juxian (played by Gong Li) during the Great Proletarian

Cultural Revolution (1966-1976) after being betrayed by both of them, an act which would have dire consequences.

Juxian is also a concubine in some ways, the most obvious of which being her former position as the most sought-after courtesan at the House of Blossoms brothel, where she was selected by Xiaolou (the symbolic king both in his role and through his star status) to be his exclusively (though Juxian had to contribute through buying her freedom from the madam and by pressuring Xiaolou to keep his word and marry her). If Juxian, then, could also be Xiaolou's concubine, she is, after leaving the brothel, faithful to him until death. The two "concubines" more convincingly occupy the role together, supporting different aspects of Xiaolou's life. Juxian, the real female, supports Xiaolou's real/physical life, urging him into business and steering him away from dangerous political entanglements (fig. 2). Dieyi, the unreal female, instead supports Xiaolou's unreal/spiritual life by pressing him to be loyal to his artistic roots (Lau 24).



Figure 2: Juxian (left) prevents Xiaolou (center) from running to Dieyi's aid during the denouncement of Yuan Shiqing [*Farewell My Concubine*, Dir. Chen Kaige, 1999]

The two “concubines” vie for occupancy – intentionally on the part of Dieyi, but perhaps not on the part of Juxian – of the identity of Concubine Yu. As they gain or lose ground towards this end, share space, and combine forces, the framework of Concubine Yu becomes a source of the virtual in the multiplicity of the character, especially if the replication is, at times, flawed. The virtual resides not only in the multiplicity, however, but also in the near-convergence of separate identities to approximate the *one* concubine, a topic which I will cover in more depth below.

Fracturing the Subject in *Frozen*

While *Farewell My Concubine* is an example of the near-convergence of separate subjects into the single identity of the concubine, *Frozen* is an example of the opposite: a single subject multiplied across various identities. *Frozen*, directed by

Wang Xiaoshuai,¹² generates the virtual in almost the opposite manner of that of *Farewell My Concubine*. *Frozen* takes place in the mid-1990s in Beijing, where the protagonist, Qi Lei (played by Jia Hongsheng), is a student and an artist. Disillusioned with his life and in pursuit of the perfection of artistic expression, Qi Lei plans a series of symbolic “burials,” performance art pieces depicting his death, one for each season. As a student, brother, and friend, Qi Lei’s ennui is almost unbearable not only to himself but to the viewer as well: these scenes are sparse and feel dry, cold, and uninhabitable through a general lack of motion, dialogue (though it exists, it often lacks passion or consequence), and music track. In contrast, Qi Lei as an artist (and his friends as artists as well), rather than setting the viewer at a distance, invites him in through outbursts of passion (e.g. breaking the wood blocks and destroying the prints) and through the two performance art pieces featured at length in the film.

¹² Credited in the film under the pseudonym 无名 Wú Míng (literally “Anonymous”)

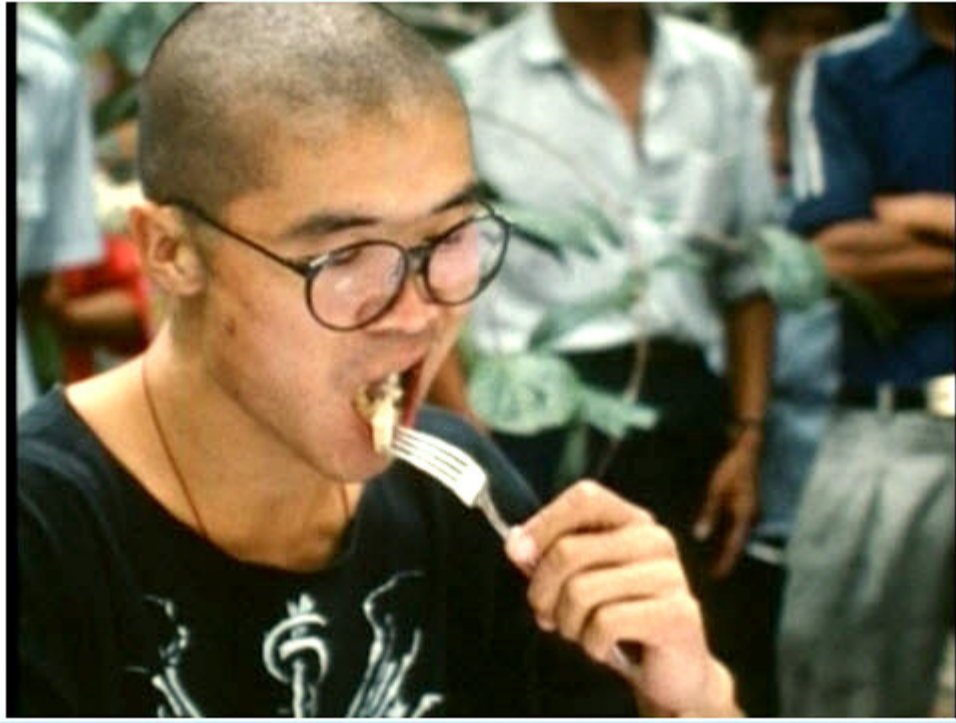


Figure 3: “Bald Head” eats soap as performance art [*Frozen*, Dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2000]

The first such piece is nothing more than two of Qi Lei’s friends each eating a bar of soap with a knife and fork, to express revulsion (fig. 3). No music plays. Many of the shots are close-ups of each of the two boys as they attempt to consume the soap, but additional onlookers fill the background. Despite this, the only diegetic sounds are those immediately related to the eating of the soap: the fork or knife clanging on the plate, a chair creaking under the uncomfortable shifting of one of the friends, and a growing array of gagging, groaning, and retching noises. Where the sparseness surrounding Qi Lei outside of his art establishes distance, the sparseness of the performance art piece draws the viewer in, probably much closer than is preferable. As pointed out by Deleuze and Guattari, not all images can provoke an affective response but instead, “... need pockets of air and emptiness, because even the void is sensation” (165). There is no avoiding the excruciatingly long and disgusting

spectacle of the eating of the soap as it seems to assault the ears, tongue, and viscera of the viewer. And there is no reassurance that it is “just a movie,” as the performance piece, for the viewer, is what it is, despite taking place before the rolling camera. Even in the context of the film, the viewer is confronted with the reality that the performer did indeed consume the soap in order to film the scene.

Likewise in Qi Lei’s Ice Burial piece, the viewer is asked to participate in more depth than simply the act of looking. Only the shuffling of Qi Lei and his audience provide auditory support to the scene; there is no dialogue (save for a brief interruption by youth officials who wish to stop the performance), and only intermittent, extremely sparse extra-diegetic music plays. In this scene again, the length of the scene causes some discomfort, as the viewer is forced to observe for several minutes the act of Qi Lei’s melting a slab of ice with his semi-clothed body. Throughout the scene viewer is made acutely aware of the length of time it would take for Qi Lei to melt such a large volume of ice with his body heat alone, for lengths of time only with his forehead, the nape of his neck, or his hands. From the time Qi Lei first seats himself on the block of ice to his being rushed to the hospital is an agonizing ten and a half minutes.

There is a heavily haptic quality to this second performance piece as well. Laura Marks describes haptic perception as “... the combination of tactile, kinaesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the surface of and inside our bodies. In haptic *visuality*, the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” (332). The haptic quality occurs, on the one hand, in a very obvious manner – Qi Lei’s constant bodily contact with the ice, as well as his and the others’

stroking the ice to shape it – and in a more subtle manner. For the subtler haptic quality, Marks again provides a basis of understanding, describing haptic looking as a process whereby the glance rests on the surface of the image, “more inclined to move than focus,” and often bypasses figuring the image in favor of feeling the surface (338). During the Ice Burial, Qi Lei is shown in close-up so tight, the viewer can see his pores, the stubble of his sparse facial hair, the dirt on his bare feet, and the skin that is growing blue as time passes (fig. 4). It is as though the viewer is invited to touch the ice, make sure it is real, and then touch Qi Lei as well in order to feel the effect of the ice on his body.



Figure 4: Extreme close-ups invite the viewer to touch Qi Lei [*Frozen*, Dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2000]

Qi Lei, then, exists as simply a person, but also as an artist, and because his performance pieces are intended to depict his death, as the absence of existence as well. Where *Farewell My Concubine* saw multiple representations of the concubine from Dieyi and Juxian all vying to inhabit that framework, Qi Lei as a single

individual has multiplied himself into three separate identities that coincide within time. This is the genesis of the virtual in *Frozen*.

Performance and Suicide

Through this first round of analysis, a thread of commonality is unearthed: each protagonist is a performer, and for each protagonist, performance becomes another device for giving rise to the virtual. Through performance, the line between the role and the real becomes blurred as they press closer together, blend traits, or change places. Deleuze refers to this tension between the virtual and the actual as the crystal-image. According to Deleuze:

There is a formation of an image with two sides, actual *and* virtual. It is as if an image in a mirror, a photo or a postcard came to life, assumed independence, and passed into the actual, even if this meant that the actual image returned into the mirror and resumed its place in the postcard or photo, following a double movement of liberation and capture. (68)

But what happens if the affective intensity, the internal multiplication, the folding and redoubling of the image becomes too intense for the “double movement of liberation and capture”? It was mentioned briefly in the introduction to this chapter that the protagonist of each film commits suicide in the end. Perhaps when the folds of meaning in which the virtual appear become too sharply creased and too numerous, the structural integrity of both the actual and the virtual are forfeit. When this idea is applied to identity, the damaging effects are understandable. The subject is unclear if

not in conflict, the folds of the virtual resonating with or interfering with the actual in a way that makes neither inhabitable. “Every sensation is a question, even if the only answer is silence” (Deleuze and Guattari 196). Suicide becomes that silence, that answer to a surfeit of sensation.

In the case of Ruan Lingyu, *Center Stage*’s interpretive reconstructions help to frame her in a way that emphasize the very fine line she continually walked between role and real. James Naremore asserts that, “Instead of treating performance as an outgrowth of an essential self,.... the self is an outgrowth of performance. ‘Performance,’ in turn, is understood in its broadest, most social sense, as the thing we do when we interact with the world—a concept embracing not only theater but public celebrity and everyday life” (14). Related to the scene described above, Ruan brings part of one of her roles into her real life as she plays “smoking as resistance” on her lover, Tang Jishan, as the two are alone in their bedroom, prompting him to ask her, as she inadvertently smirks, “That’s your true face, isn’t it?” (fig. 5-7). Similarly, Ruan can be seen practicing crouching, first during her conversation with Cai Chusheng about the feudal mentality of the posture, and later perched on a chair so she can silently observe herself crouching before a mirror. To better comprehend her role as a mother freezing to death with her child in her arms, Ruan throws herself into the snow, rubbing it on her bare arms to truly feel the cold, and pretending to cradle an infant in her arms.



Figure 5: Cheung-as-Ruan "performing" smoking-as-resistance in her real life [*Center Stage*, Stanley Kwan, 1992]



Figure 6: Cheung-as-Ruan filming the smoking-as-resistance scene of *New Women* [*Center Stage*, Stanley Kwan, 1992]



Figure 7: Footage of Ruan Lingyu's smoking-as-resistance from *New Women* [Center Stage, Stanley Kwan, 1992]

While these instances can be brushed off as an actress's neuroses, Ruan takes this proclivity for performance to the extent of watching herself closely in the mirror even as she eats the bowl of congee full of sleeping pills (fig. 8). Moreover, Ruan's "real" personality is also tinged with performance, apparent in the eerie composure and poise that she is almost never caught without. When her usual level of composure slips away on the night of her suicide as she openly flirts with and kisses (goodbye) each of Lianhua Studio's directors, is the viewer to believe that he is finally seeing the real Ruan, or is this just another, different kind of performance for her, a new role? One cannot be sure; the line does not seem to exist anymore. It is in these moments when, for the audience as well as for Ruan, the affective response generated by the virtual is particularly strong, as the viewer bears witness to her surrender to the role. It is as though Ruan no longer knows who she is and can only rely on what she has

most recently learned: when Wei Ming's life fell apart in *New Women*, she committed suicide.



Figure 8: Cheung-as-Ruan observing her own suicide in the mirror [*Center Stage*, Dir. Stanley Kwan, 1992]

Through his research, Stanley Kwan was able to understand to some extent why it was that Ruan found difficulty in separating herself from her roles. Hjort alerts us to a scene that merely alludes to it in passing in the film:

...show[ing] us the risks associated with a tightly knit group where intimate involvement on a regular basis easily leads to respect and friendship, but also, potentially, to a misplaced and inappropriate desire to give more than anyone has the right to demand, or to the momentary exploitation of personal knowledge justified by the shared goal of artistic perfection. (56)

Ruan was very much a method actress, and knowing this, and having known Ruan for some time, the directors did occasionally abuse their personal connections to her.

Parts were intentionally written to be parallels of significant feelings or events from

Ruan's own life, affording her portrayals a more genuine and poignant quality of performance. Naremore says of Hollywood actors trained by Lee Strassberg's Method¹³:

Strassberg's reification of the self was so crucial to his thinking that "Method" training often extended to a kind of psychological therapy. An actor, he wrote, "can possess technical ability to do certain things and yet may have difficulty expressing them because of his emotional life. The approach to this actor's problem must therefore deal first with whatever difficulties are inherent in himself that negate his freedom of expression and block the capacities he possesses." Not surprisingly, the Method-trained actors-many of whom adapted well to Hollywood-all had an introspective, neurotic style... (13)

In Ruan's case, introspection and neurosis may have only served to further convince the actress that she and the women she portrayed were no different. Because so many of her roles were deeply tragic, the inability to separate from their emotional content, and some of her own reworked pasts in some cases, may be part of what helped Ruan reach her breaking point.

A similar sort of immersion in a role was inflicted upon Dieyi by the opera troupe that raised and trained him. Because females were banned from performing in

¹³ "Method" with a capital M is here used to describe Lee Strassberg's specific, though many times evolved, method of evoking realistic performance from actors. Where this term is used with a lowercase M, similar tactics influenced by, but not necessarily conforming to, Strassberg's method are used to train or manipulate the actor.

opera troupes by the Qianlong Emperor in the late 1700s,¹⁴ the female roles in all Beijing Operas were played by men. The audience sees Dieyi at an early age and stage in his training, struggling to overcome his nature for the part of the nun, making consistent reversals in the line “I am by nature a girl, not a boy.” For these mistakes he is beaten, harassed by the other children in the troupe, and even symbolically raped by Xiaolou, who forces a smoking pipe into his mouth after he makes the same mistake in front of a financier. Truly, Dieyi was set on this path during his first day with the troupe by his mother. He appears there with ribbons tied in his hair and, in order to be accepted into the troupe at all, is symbolically castrated by his mother, who chops off his extra finger – an “extra penis” to his newly female self (Lau 23; fig. 9). Finally, Dieyi, after having performed well and thus having accepted himself to be female, is brought to a wealthy patron, the eunuch Zhang, where he is molested, if not raped by the old man.

¹⁴ The ban was officially lifted in 1912, though female performers began to take the stage in the late 1800s.



Figure 9: Douzi's symbolic castration by his mother [*Farewell My Concubine*, Dir. Chen Kaige, 1999]

After falling in love with Xiaolou, Dieyi seems sealed into the role of the concubine completely, during both his performances and his everyday life. When Juxian realizes that Dieyi covets Xiaolou, the two enter into an escalating exchange of behavior that becomes spiteful and arrogant, even destructive, befitting of a high-maintenance diva like Dieyi. He becomes what Manager Na calls a “classic consumptive heroine,” lying around in his bedroom looking thin and disheveled, strung out on opium. While Xiaolou seems to clearly distinguish his role from himself (saying to Dieyi, “I’m just a fake king. You really are Concubine Yu”), Dieyi cannot seem to find the real in himself or in those around him. After Juxian shows up and pleads with Xiaolou to keep his word and marry her, Dieyi accuses her of “overplaying the part.” Likewise, Dieyi excitedly gives Xiaolou the grand sword given to him by Master Yuan, to which Xiaolou indifferently replies, “But we’re not on stage. What would I want with a sword?” Xiaolou stands as a foil to Dieyi

throughout the film, able to separate his on- and off-stage selves, able to adapt to new political climates, and being the only one of the three main characters to survive the ordeals, though he loses much in the process (fig. 10).



Figure 10: Showing their adaptability to new political circumstances, Juxian (left) and Xiaolou (right) burn their possessions from the "Old Society" [*Farewell My Concubine*, Dir. Chen Kaige, 1999]

Perhaps part of what caused Dieyi to prefer the role of the concubine, besides his love for Xiaolou, is the ever-changing political turmoil during the decades in which the characters' adult lives are set. They must endure the Nationalist regime under Kuomintang control,¹⁵ the War of Resistance Against Japan,¹⁶ the Chinese Civil War,¹⁷ and the Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution,¹⁸ all periods of politically-couched extremism when loyalty was questioned fiercely and measured in

¹⁵ 1927-1937

¹⁶ 1937-1945

¹⁷ 1927-1950 (when hostilities ended, though no formal armistice was ever signed)

¹⁸ 1966-1976

different ways, and when the consequences for (even perceived or invented) disloyalty were exceptionally dire. In identifying so strongly with Concubine Yu, Dieyi is impervious to time. He need not respond to the changing times, for the temporality of Concubine Yu is fixed and unchanging. Dieyi knows his place within this role and this role only, and makes little if any attempt to alter, even on the surface, his views or behaviors in light of the instability around him (to which the others initially respond with outbursts of fear or haughty resistance, thereafter scrambling to keep up).

This becomes all the more evident when the Communists talk of the new proletarian Beijing Opera, directly threatening to separate Dieyi from his only source of identity by casting the concubine away as an obsolete relic of the Old Society. Dieyi can only respond through a truly affective argument that escalates to hysterics as he finally feels the line between role and real begin to slice through him. He can no longer hide in the role of the concubine. Denounced in a public criticism circle by members of his troupe, and then subjected to a bitterly personal diatribe by Xiaolou (which Dieyi is aware, no doubt, could have led to his execution at the hands of the Red Guard crowd), Dieyi feels this betrayal in his real self, further elucidating for him that he is not Yu. As he rises to turn against Xiaolou, his tone of voice and bursts of mania and resignation are intensified by the tilting of the camera on an angle as it pans (and over-pans, often passing over Dieyi and having to return in the opposite direction to center him in the frame), echoing the instability of his identity as it crumbles from beneath him (fig. 11). The concubine cannot exist in the New Society. Cheng-Dieyi-the-man has been obliterated by Xiaolou's betrayal, existing as a point

of fixity amidst the resonance and folding of the role/real impinging on one another in one of the most affective scenes in the film. With no defined self remaining, suicide is the inconsequential resolution to Dieyi's problems, and the perfect parallel to the suicide of the original Concubine Yu, though it does not come for eleven years following the incident because of the prohibition of "decadent" elements from the Old Society (traditional Beijing Opera) and thus his separation from Xiaolou; the concubine is supposed to die at her king's side, on his own sword.



Figure 11: The camera tilts and pans in replication of Dieyi's breakdown [*Farewell My Concubine*, Dir. Chen Kaige, 1999]

In *Frozen*, distinct from the other two films in that the suicide was premeditated (or was it?), Qi Lei resolves to make his fourth and final symbolic burial, the Ice Burial, appear to culminate in his actual death. He wishes for nothing less than perfection of artistic expression in his desire to, "[sacrifice] his life to show that he lived amidst murderers." Qi Lei exists at three levels simultaneously: the level of himself as an unremarkable person, the level of himself as an artist and thus the

wielder of affective influence, and at the level of his own non-existence. The ruse of his death by hypothermia is well-staged, publicly observed, and unknown to all but a choice silent few; even Qi Lei's girlfriend, Shao Yun, is unaware. The faking of his death allows Qi Lei to eliminate from vision the first two levels of existence, even though he still resides in all three.

He views his death and the reactions to it from a position of detachment, saying that death is a way of escaping from people, "Escaping their influence. And you don't influence them anymore. A horrible experience." He believes that he is in a unique position in viewing the world, neither causing nor receiving affect because nearly all of his connections to the outside world have been symbolically and effectively severed. But when he becomes restless at Lao Lin's countryside estate and returns to Beijing, he finds this to be false. From a payphone, Qi Lei calls his sister's house. Though he does not speak a word, she knows it is him and peppers him with worried questions. While "performing death" almost as if he were a ghost, he spies on Shao Yun through the window, her face multiplied in the multi-paned glass, echoing Qi Lei's multiple levels of existence (fig. 12). As she angrily resists Lao Lin's persistent touch inside the house, she turns and faces the watchful Qi Lei directly, startling him to step further into the shadows before he realizes that she cannot see him. But Shao Yun cannot help but to sense, to "feel" Qi Lei outside, groping for him in the darkness after he leaves. Even the void is sensation. Qi Lei's presence even in death is affective not simply because he can touch Shao Yun, but also because he can be touched back and must flee that touch to maintain his "death." When Shao Yun begins to feel his presence, Qi Lei becomes unsettled by the persistence of his

existences and at the same time is frustrated by the detachment of his non-existence: though Shao Yun feels him, and can touch him intangibly, she cannot touch him physically because he continues to “perform death.” At this point, Qi Lei’s non-existence can be seen to impinge upon his secret existences, rendering them both void until a single actuality can come to stand for him, culminating in Qi Lei’s true suicide (which goes largely unacknowledged by those who know him, as one cannot kill again that which has already ceased to exist).



Figure 12: Shao Yun, multiplied through the windowpanes, feels Qi Lei's presence, though she looks right through him [*Frozen*, Dir. Wang Xiaoshuai, 2000]

Conclusion

In the case of each of the three main protagonists, performance is a device by which the virtual, which is figured by the multiplicity of some aspect of the film, is manipulated and forced to a crisis point. Faced with this crisis point, the virtual in

each case can be perceived slightly differently. Ruan Lingyu identifies heavily with her roles, both through their intentional paralleling of her own life and through her tendency toward method acting. Performance tinges her everyday life as well, and with the combination of these factors, the role/real distinction begins to break down, allowing them to blend and trade places through the permeability. When the role and the real approach a certain level of similarity, however, the barrier dissolves completely and the two images of Ruan (as character and as Ruan herself, which were growing indiscernible) knot-up and are forced to accommodate. Ruan becomes the tragic figure of the roles she portrays, the instability of the virtual consuming the actual before being extinguished itself by Ruan's suicide.

Cheng Dieyi, at first forcibly made to identify with female roles in Beijing Opera, comes to emulate the role of Concubine Yu. While others around him maintain separate spheres, not allowing their on-stage personae to infiltrate their off-stage selves, Dieyi chooses to amplify his attachment to the role through his femininity. Through decades of political upheaval and socio-cultural reform, Dieyi refuses to acknowledge that he lives in a temporality other than that of Concubine Yu. In his case, the role eclipses the real, allowing Dieyi to live in a fictional time and social climate, largely unchanged by the events unfolding around him while others make hasty and frequent changes to avoid the dangers they know are ever-present. As a point of fixity in the face of the twisting virtual, Dieyi shuns the real in favor of the role until a time when neither identity is inhabitable. Though he chooses to fashion his death after Yu's, he does so knowing he was a flawed replica. He is left with nothing; he can be no one.

Qi Lei, already inhabiting the existences of an uninteresting person and a more dynamic artist, decides to multiply himself into a third existence, that of life beyond non-existence. A tension is present between the two initial images of Qi Lei, but this tension pales in comparison to the one he feels after successfully feigning his suicide through performance art. While he is recovering in isolation, he imagines his non-existence to be detached and devoid of the ability to influence or be influenced. The unsettling discovery he later makes is that he persists to some degree, even in non-existence. But worse than being unable to influence and be influenced is the notion of being able to do so only on a plane of detached non-existence that prevents Qi Lei from maintaining his previous existences, even in secret. He is filled with non-existence, and surrenders to it beneath a tree.

Through this analysis of the virtual, it is apparent that the notion of the virtual offers a multitude of affective opportunities to the viewing audience. The virtual arises when the actual multiplies itself internally, which can be seen to happen in a variety of modes. The emergence of the virtual in and of itself is quite often an affective experience to behold, but where these films truly make affective use of the virtual is in its extreme. The protagonists in each film exist amidst a twisting multiplicity, a point at which the normal description of “double movement of liberation and capture” is unsuitable or unsatisfactory. In the place of this double becoming, the virtual and actual images are tasked with resolving themselves in an intense but unique way in each circumstance, opening up a host of affective outcomes that are sure to make for many memorable scenes in the films.

CHAPTER 3

DISGUISE: INHABITING THE ROLE AND ITS IMPACT ON IDENTITY

Introduction

In cases of performance, there is generally an audience, and in most cases, that audience is clued in to the fact that the events being depicted are representations carried out by an actor playing a role. In the films described in the previous chapter, it was the actor playing the role who had trouble with this notion; those around him/her were able to separate the role from their conceptions of the “real” personage of the actor, while the actor experienced a troubling breakdown of identity. This chapter will explore scenarios of disguise, similar to performance in its portrayal of a role, but distinct in its transparency to the audience to whom the role is played. The performance and purpose of disguise are intended to be concealed, known only to a very privileged few (or in some instances, only to the performer).

In these instances of disguise, like performance, the characters struggle with the multiplicity of their identities. As with the previous chapter, the multiplicity of identities – the role being played versus the actual identity of the “actor” – is a source of the virtual. In this chapter, I would like to look at two recent films: *House of Flying Daggers* (2004),¹⁹ directed by Zhang Yimou, and *Infernal Affairs* (2002)²⁰, directed by Andrew Lau²¹ and Alan Mak, to investigate the impact of disguise on the character employing it. In my analysis, I intend to highlight exile and expendability as

¹⁹ Chinese title: 十面埋伏 Shí Miàn Mǎifú, literally “Ambush From All Directions”

²⁰ Chinese title: 无间道 Wú Jiān Dào, literally “The Non-Stop Path”

²¹ Andrew Lau Wai-Keung, not to be confused with Andy Lau Tak-Wah, who stars in both *House of Flying Daggers* and *Infernal Affairs*

two conditions that stem from disguise within these films, as well as discussing the problematic entanglements of authority in the creation and validation of identity.

In each of the two films, the conflict of identity occurs when the police and another organization engage one another through the exchange of undercover agents. As each agent, or mole, is placed into an exceedingly dangerous situation, he must go to great lengths to deliver a believable performance via commitments of time, sacrifice of his former identity (and all of the relationships that went with it), and in some cases even the compromise of his moral position or allegiances. In these films, the depth of disguise causes a conflict of identity – a conflict between the identity the person has always known himself to be, and the identity he has taken on to aid him in his mission. As an identity conflict, these circumstances become comparable to Freud’s observations of war neurosis, where “...the subject's ego is split in two, a division that results in a conflict.... between the soldier's old peaceful ego and his new warlike one... [which] becomes acute as soon as the peace-ego realizes what danger it runs of losing its life owing to the rashness of its newly formed, parasitic double” (Starks 188). The moles in these films come to realize how potentially harmful the disguises they have adopted are to their original identities. But in order to resolve the conflict of identities, they must fully embrace the devices of their adopted disguises or reject them all together. It is this condition that becomes a powerful source of affect.

Disguise and the Virtual in *House of Flying Daggers*

To examine this phenomenon first in *House of Flying Daggers*, some background information on the two groups and their respective moles is required. Police captains from Feng Tian County have been given ten days to assassinate the new leader of the House of Flying Daggers, an underground alliance set on toppling the corrupt government that has developed under an ineffectual Tang Dynasty emperor. To this end, Captain Jin (played by Kaneshiro Takeshi) is sent to fake the rescue of Mei (played by Zhang Ziyi), a blind showgirl from the Peony Pavilion believed to be the blind daughter of the former leader of the Flying Daggers. By gaining her trust and posing as a sympathizer to her cause, he hopes to lead the government forces to ambush the Flying Daggers. Unbeknownst to Jin, Captain Leo (played by Andy Lau), a member of the Flying Daggers, has been posing as a police official for three years in order to provide security to the Flying Daggers and lead the general into a similar ambush.

Both of these films showcase characters who – either by a genuine shift in their allegiances, or by self-preservation via the Freudian division of the ego mentioned above – experience a conflict of identity that becomes harmful to them. Jin's identity as a police captain and a playboy are challenged when he takes his role too much to heart and falls in love with Mei. To further complicate this scenario, he must maintain his disguise even when other government forces – who are only aware that he assisted Mei's escape, without being informed of his undercover status – attack him en route to his infiltration of the Flying Daggers. Despite his identity as a police captain, he finds himself forced to kill other soldiers in order to save his own life and preserve the ruse he has created for Mei's benefit. In this way, his identity

conflict resembles Freud's war neurosis in that Jin must even more closely approximate a sympathizer of the Flying Daggers (e.g. aiding Mei, killing government soldiers) in order to save the Jin whom he recognizes as himself: the police captain. If he is recognized, it is likely that Mei or another of the Flying Daggers will kill him. If he tries to abandon his disguise, the government soldiers will hunt him regardless. For Jin, not only his life is at stake; he must succeed in his mission if he is to reaffirm his moral commitment and skill. He must be a Flying Dagger in order to be a good police official.

Similarly, Captain Leo has taken up the ruse of a police official for three years, in which he loses much and also endangers his life through the threat of being discovered. Closely following his failure to protect the former leader of the Flying Daggers from the government forces, Leo assigns Jin to release, seduce, and aid his former lover, Mei, and must follow, warn, and rescue them as they escape towards the headquarters of the House of Flying Daggers. While this is noticeably painful for Leo – who, when sensing Jin's feelings for Mei, sternly advises Jin, "Don't turn a game into reality and ruin our plan" – he remains committed to his disguise. Only after he is reunited with Mei, who is undeniably in love with Jin, does Leo seem to lose sight of who he is, forcing himself on Mei. However, a dagger in the back (thrown by Nia, the leader of the Flying Daggers, in Mei's defence), serves to remind him of his allegiances. He is told to leave the dagger in place and return to his position within the police – the dagger now becoming another layer to his disguise, Nia telling him, "You will be more convincing with a dagger in your back."

This level of authenticity is characteristic of other aspects of the film as well. Beyond mere physical disguise, Jin's actions must be performed to perfection in order to satisfy Mei that he is a sympathizer and can be trusted. This is taken to an extreme, as every detail is tended to in spite of the fact that Jin believes Mei to be blind. Even the first clashes with his fellow police officials are precisely calculated so that the men are struck by Jin's arrows as they close in on Mei, but only through their clothing, leaving them unwounded (fig. 13, 14). This attention to detail is reciprocated by Mei, who performs the disguise of blindness to excess, groping at her surroundings and often identifying with sounds and smells (fig. 15); even when their lives are in danger, Mei does not break her cover in Jin's presence, or even in circumstances where he is not, but could suddenly become, present.



Figure 13: Jin's fellow police officials are convincingly struck by his own arrows to fool Mei (center) [*House of Flying Daggers*, Dir. Zhang Yimou, 2005]



Figure 14: Jin's arrows are convincing, but not fatal, removed after Mei has left [*House of Flying Daggers*, Dir. Zhang Yimou, 2005]

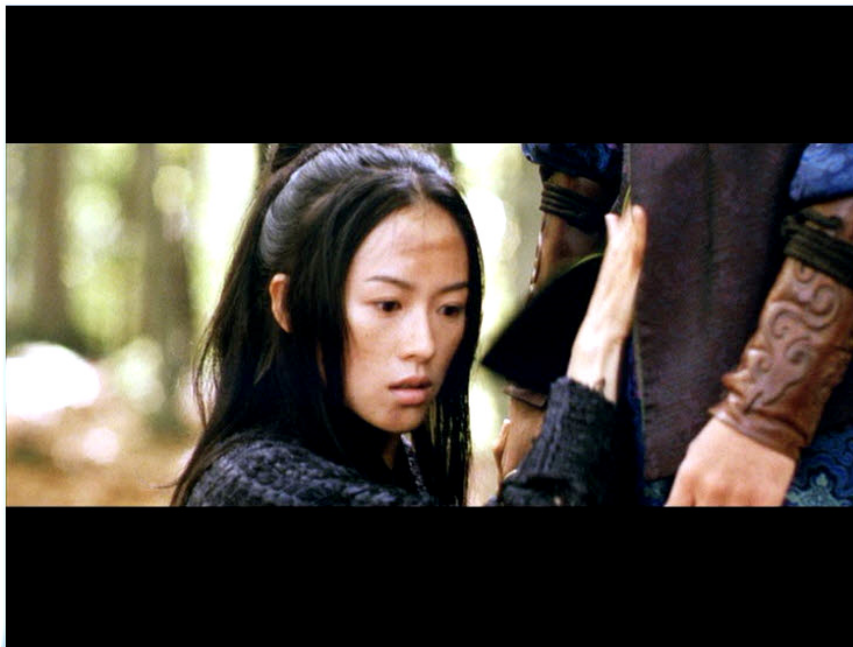


Figure 15: Mei examines Jin by hand to ascertain his strengths and physical appearance [*House of Flying Daggers*, Dir. Zhang Yimou, 2005]

This degree of commitment to disguise carries through much of the film and contributes to the multiplicity of identities, allegiances, and motives that play into the

literal translation of the film's title, "Ambush From All Directions." After Mei exposes her martial arts prowess and Jin takes up the disguise of Mei's rescuer, the viewer is confronted with the feeling that any one of the characters has the potential to be much more than he or she appears. It is this utter inability to predict their actions or allegiances that causes an affective response for the viewer in response, this time, to a strangeness of characterization. Truly, in *House of Flying Daggers*, each significant character has a striking moment of multiplicity. For Leo, Mei, and even the madam of the brothel (who turns out to be Mei's superior in the House of Flying Daggers), this moment of multiplicity occurs when the character is unmasked. Mei goes through three such unmaskings: first, when she breaks the guise of showgirl to reveal her martial arts skills; again when it is revealed to Jin that she is not actually blind²²; and lastly when she (perhaps unintentionally) reveals to Leo that she loves Jin.

In each such unmasking, the viewer cannot be sure if the new information is to be trusted, having been deceived before. Because some new pieces of information are contradictory to others, it is not possible to create a composite sketch of the character. Instead, it is necessary to process each possible rendition of the character, creating a sort of schizophrenic multiplicity that is difficult to resolve and that leaves room for an incredibly diverse collection of potential responses to any given situation. This source of the virtual lends, simultaneously, a familiarity and a strangeness, a sense of predictability and a sense of chaos. The elements of strangeness and chaos

²² Which occurs one hour and thirteen minutes into a film that clocks in at just shy of two hours in length.

are particularly affective for viewers used to being coddled by formulaic storylines.

Lawrence Shaffer argues that:

"....film might be somewhat threatening were it novel. But instead it is tautological. Even when we see a film the first time, genre expectation, iconographic conventions, familiarity with the actors all provide the security of ritual. When a film has already been seen, the feeling of cozy warmth is absolute. Film is addictive because of all human needs and of all film's satisfactions, recognition is foremost. (5)

When the self is multiplied across dissimilar personalities, motivations, and mindsets, this satisfaction of recognition is stripped away, leaving behind it a raw affective suspense.

For Jin, however, the virtual is an even stronger presence. Owing to the fact that there is an alliance between Leo and Mei, Jin alone has been performing to an informed diegetic audience. Therefore, the potential for him to be unmasked in similar fashion to Mei is lacking. Instead, the moments when the virtual can be sensed for Jin coincide with the moments in which his disguise becomes believable. This first occurs when the scope of Jin's mission overtakes the scope of those "in the know," leading to his being attacked by his own men and having to fully take up the mantle of the Flying Daggers sympathizer, as mentioned above. Once Jin has killed other government soldiers, it becomes questionable whether the viewer can still categorize him as a police official, or whether Jin can still see himself as one. If Jin were to be killed during his mission without leading the government forces to successfully ambush the Flying Daggers, would he even be remembered as an

undercover official on a dangerous mission, or would he be remembered for killing his own men and helping an operative within the House of Flying Daggers, effectively a traitor? Here, actions and motives collide, causing the “infoldings” and “redoublings” of the virtual to “knot up,” but it is when Jin manages to turn the interference into resonance, to blend his own motives into believable renditions of his disguise’s actions, that the virtual becomes a source of affect (Massumi 2002: 133).

Exile and Expendability

In *House of Flying Daggers*, the initial identity conflict is also the source of two other complications of identity: exile and expendability. I have already described Jin’s predicament: to be the best police official, Jin must cease to be a police official and instead “become” a rival. In effect, Jin becomes an exile, carrying with him the values and traditions of his “home culture” even after being expelled into a foreign situation. I find Lutz Koepnick’s discussion of the condition of exile to be a fitting description of its ties to the concept of the virtual. Koepnick says:

For most exiles today, dissimilar times and spaces appear in uneasy proximity. Far from being subjected to processes of surgical separation, modern exiles are forced to expose mass-mediated images of past and present onto each other without ever realizing any fulfilling sense of closure or continuity. In this respect, the condition of exile resembles a hall of mirrors in which continual doubling and refraction undo any meaningful integration of here and there, old and new. In this unsettling state of half-involvements and half-

detachments, time becomes space, the past bedevils the present, and the figure of the uncanny, of the Doppelganger, emerges as a matter not simply of aesthetic experience but of everyday challenge. (81-2)

Koepnick's description echoes the multiplicity, (temporal and special) distortion, and the uncanny in Massumi's undertaking of the virtual. Embodied by Jin, the fleeting moment of the virtual and the feeling of exile coincide with the efficacy of his disguise, creating a strongly affective moment where Jin's encounter with the exilic quality of the virtual leaves him with two choices: the identity of the police official (which he can only claim in vain) and the identity of the Flying Dagger sympathizer (which he knows himself not to be).

Effectively, Jin cannot occupy either identity, a condition that renders him expendable to both sides. While Leo and Mei intended from the beginning to use Jin to further their plans, Jin is taken aback at the attitude of those on "his side." After being legitimately attacked by government soldiers, Jin confronts Leo:

Leo: He [the general] said we need real blood to draw the Flying Daggers out.

Jin: Even if the blood is mine?

Leo: Jin... the soldiers' lives, and our lives, are worth nothing to him.

This intensifies the feeling of dislocation and exile: where he at first merely felt removed from his original identity, he is then essentially betrayed and disowned by those with whom he used to belong. Leo and Mei experience similar feelings of estrangement and dislocation – Mei's as she rejects Leo (and the Flying Daggers) in favor of Jin, and Leo's as his jealousy consumes his commitment to his mission – leaving each side's once-key conspirators in positions of vulnerable powerlessness.

Realizing this in the face of the inevitable clash of each group's assembled forces, Jin best articulates this point to Mei, saying, "You and I are just pawns on a chessboard. Nobody cares if we live or die."

Assuming a disguise and successfully portraying a role thus proves harmful to the notions of identity held by Jin, Leo, and Mei. These three characters began the film as powerful agents for their respective groups, only to become dislocated operatives unable to fully inhabit either their former identities or their assumed disguises. In their exile, they become disposable, interchangeable members of the faceless masses used to further the objectives of each side. What they think will be a temporary substitution ultimately becomes the sacrifice of their identities, lacking the glory of having sacrificed for a greater purpose. While only Mei dies as a result of this condition, neither Leo nor Jin can return to exactly the same identity they once inhabited.

Disguise and the Virtual in *Infernal Affairs*

Though the time period and location are different, the identity conflicts in *Infernal Affairs* are remarkably similar to those in *House of Flying Daggers*. The Hong Kong police seek to shut down a local triad run by Hon Sam (played by Eric Tsang) through implanting a talented cadet, Chan Wing Yan (played by Tony Leung) into the world of crime, eventually leading to his infiltration of Sam's triad. At the same time, Lau Kin Ming (again played by Andy Lau), another cadet from Yan's class at the police academy, is a member of Sam's triad, sent to aid and abet them from the inside. Each

cadet excels at his disguise, with Ming being promoted to inspector and Yan becoming a principal member of Sam's group.

The viewer quickly learns that Yan has been undercover, posing as a criminal, for nearing ten years and has been part of the triad for three of those ten. Owing to the opening montage, we recall that Yan and Ming were in the same cadet class when Yan was "expelled" and sent undercover; thus, Ming has been working undercover for Sam for ten years as well. Each mole commits to his part: a montage shows Yan's many arrests (some made by Ming) and his mug-shot (fig. 16) against Ming's successful police operations and promotions (fig. 17). This allows the men to gain the trust of their adopted "bosses," gaining responsibility and insider information that is transferred to their original sides, and culminating in a botched cocaine deal that alerts each side to the fact that it is not the only one to have sent in a mole.



Figure 16: Yan's mug-shot, taken after one of many arrests while working undercover [*Infernal Affairs*, Dir. Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002]

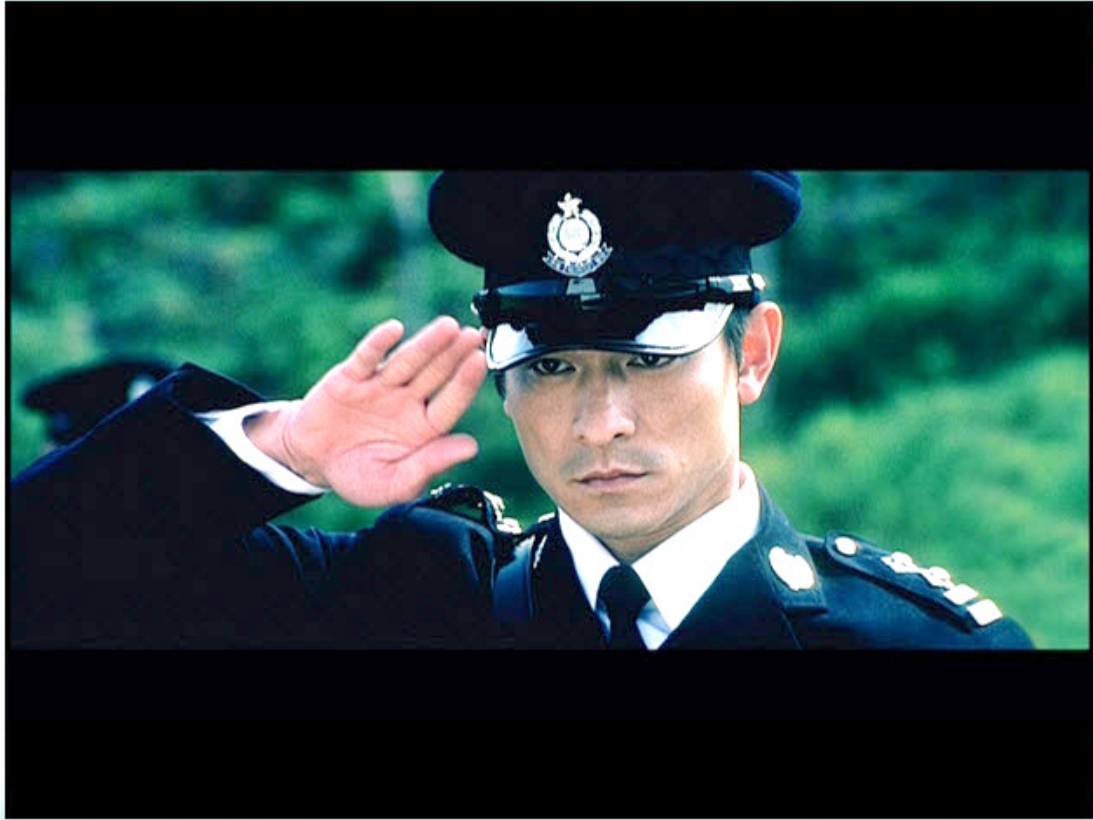


Figure 17: Ming rises through the ranks from cadet to inspector [*Infernal Affairs*, Dir. Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002]

Furthermore, due to the degree of their immersion in their respective roles, each mole is somewhat tainted by his adopted lifestyle. Towards the beginning of the film, Yan meets with Superintendent Wong on the roof of a building, and it is clear from their exchange that Yan's undercover life has made him aggressive and impatient. As a result of Yan's being arrested on assault charges with a growing frequency, Wong feels it may be necessary for Yan to start seeing a psychiatrist, badgering, "Are you really going nuts? Have you forgotten you're a cop?" and gently threatening to erase Yan's file, leaving no trace of his true identity. Still, Yan is quick to remind him of the complexity of the situation, anxiously replying, "What do you

want me to do? Remind myself I'm a cop every day? Shouting 'Drop your gun, I'm a cop' even in my dreams?"

This quick rooftop exchange brings to light many of the identity conflicts Yan faces. Though he is a police officer, Yan's career began – before even graduating from the police academy – by going undercover. After ten years, his entire experience of being an officer consists of committing crimes, associating with lowlifes, and being arrested. Without doubt, what Yan has portrayed is wholly incongruous with what he intended to become, yet, like Jin in *House of Flying Daggers*, Yan must become Sam's trusted accomplice as part of the requirements for his becoming a dedicated cop. Moreover, Yan cannot merely “go through the motions” of living the life of a criminal. In order to be believable, Yan must personally perpetrate the crimes, be arrested, and take the risks associated with that lifestyle. Were he for a moment to step out of character (“even in [his] dreams”), he stands a chance of exposing himself as an undercover officer, jeopardizing his mission and his life. Yan faces a conflict of identity in that he has almost entirely embraced the role of the criminal and has failed to thwart Sam, while at the same time knowing that he is supposedly a police officer.

The stress of disguise does not suit Yan, but Ming finds himself on the other side of the moral fence, experiencing disguise differently than does Yan. While the dangers of infiltrating the police force are still relevant – prison time aside, if Ming were exposed as a mole for the triad, he could reasonably expect the triad to make an attempt on his life – he does not experience the same moral and emotional discomfort felt by Yan. Whereas Yan is conflicted, anxious, and angry at the man his mission asks him to be, Ming enjoys the perks of posing on the side of justice: a marriage, a

new apartment, rooftop golfing with his superiors, promotions, and prestige. While walking on the right side of the law, Ming cannot publicly commit crimes (though still acting as an accomplice for Sam), providing him with a sense of freedom that Yan's conscience could never allow Yan.

Becoming an Identity

To build on this, I would like to take a closer look at the impact of disguise on the identities of the two moles. Deniz Göktürk quotes cultural theorist Stuart Hall in saying, “identities are about questions of using the resources of history, language and culture in the process of becoming rather than being: not ‘who we are’ or ‘where we came from,’ so much as what we might become, how we have been represented and how that bears on how we might represent ourselves” (qtd in Göktürk 105). For Ming, this represents the chance to fully inhabit the life of the police inspector and all of the trappings that go along with it. The viewer catches Ming in a prolonged moment of transition, in Deleuzian double-becoming. The two versions of Ming coalesce, but they are irreconcilable versions of one another and cannot coexist at length.

Inspector-Ming slowly and cautiously climbs out of the “mirror,” leaving triad-Ming to take his place. The “liberation and capture” (Deleuze 68), itself being a source of affect – as Ming cannot fully occupy either identity while in transition, effectively leaving him in limbo – also takes place at a gradual pace (though not in process for the entire film, Ming's attempt at transition is by no means immediate) that produces a strangeness of temporality. Ming's extended transition leaves the viewer at a loss to

predict his next move, as his motivations are no longer clear.

This theory of identity is much more threatening to Yan because, once “where [he] came from” is disregarded and replaced by “how [he has] been represented,” he is placed in a position of exile, unable to fully align himself with either side of the law. Police officer or not, Yan has spent ten years intentionally transgressing the law, a fact that clouds his understanding of his own identity. When asked by the psychiatrist Dr. Lee if it is true that he is really a cop, Yan replies, “It was true. But I’m not so sure now.” If Ming can be seen to be slowly crossing a line separating “good guys” from “bad guys,” Yan straddles the line, unable to cross fully towards “good” and unwilling to cross fully towards “bad.” He remains in the moment of coalescence, persists on both sides (or perhaps on neither side) of the dichotomy, again limiting the viewer’s ability to classify him as “good” or “bad,” even in a piecemeal way. His views of himself, his motivations, and his goals seem to slide haphazardly to and fro across the line: desperate to restore his identity after the death of Superintendent Wong, he is just moments away from relief when he discovers by chance that Ming is the mole, recklessly taking matters into his own hands in an attempt to apprehend Ming.

Both the disguises themselves and their lasting ramifications on the identities of the two moles are different. Indeed, Yan and Ming at times appear to be polar opposites of one another. Yet at the same time, the two are undeniably similar, further confusing the already-distorted boundaries of their identities. This is most evident in following the evolving descriptions of the protagonist in the novel written by Ming’s fiancée, Mary. Mary attempts to write a novel about a man with twenty-eight

personalities, beginning by noting the interesting dilemma of his situation (“A man with twenty-eight personalities.... That means he starts role playing the minute he wakes up. He is no longer certain which personality is the real him”). As she continues to write, she begins to simultaneously pity and reject the character, noting, “The more I think about it, the more pathetic the main character appears.” Through Mary’s narration, there is hope that the viewer might be told how he should feel about the moles in the face of each man’s moral ambiguity. Nevertheless, though Mary tries to reason her way through the moral disorder of a man with undefined identity, stopping to consider that “Even though he is good, he has done bad things,” she ultimately concludes (about her protagonist as well as about Ming): “I can’t finish my novel. I don’t know whether he’s good or bad. I think only he knows.”

“Even though he is good, he has done bad things”: this description can potentially apply to both men. Yan is “good” in that he is an undercover police officer, in that he is part of a concerted effort to stamp out major crime in Hong Kong, and in that he has sacrificed much in order to do so. But in the line of duty, he has had to do “bad things” – literally the committing of crimes – and this places him in a space of moral ambiguity. Still, Ming has done “bad things” by being involved with the triad, but perhaps Mary holds out hope that Ming really is a good guy, that the Ming whom she knows as a police inspector, as well as her husband, is not a complete fabrication. This similarity between seeming opposites intensifies the conflicts of identity for both Yan and Ming, layering interference upon interference, along with attempts at achieving resonance, until their identities tangle in themselves and in each other. This incidence of the virtual comes to a head on the rooftop where Yan used to secretly

meet with Wong. As Yan disarms and prepares to arrest Ming (fig. 18), the viewer cannot help but wonder: who is arresting whom? Is a cop arresting another cop? A criminal arresting another criminal?



Figure 18: Yan (back) disarms Ming (front) in a rooftop arrest [*Infernal Affairs*, Dir. Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002]

Impact of Authority on Identity

Crucial to the affective quality of the rooftop arrest scene is the knowledge that Ming is the only person who knows for certain that Yan is the undercover officer. For ten years, Yan has relied on authority to corroborate his true identity when the time should come. The “truth” of Yan’s identity rests in the authority of one password-locked file, accessible only to Superintendent Wong and to Yan himself. By the climax of the film, there is no authority left behind Yan’s assertions. Principal Yip, who knew of Yan’s bogus expulsion from the academy, is the subject of a funeral

procession as the film takes up the present timeline. Superintendent Wong has been killed (a particularly affective scene, as the viewer and Yan alike are stunned to witness the elimination of Yan's boss and the living key to his identity; fig. 19). The slow-witted Keung from Sam's triad, after revealing to Yan that he knows Yan to be the mole, dies of a gunshot wound. And Ming, having realized that Yan knows his own identity, strips Yan of his leverage by deleting the file.



Figure 19: Yan (right) stares in horror as Wong (left) dies and takes the truth about Yan with him [*Infernal Affairs*, Dir. Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002]



Figure 20: Ming's badge shows that identity can stem from authority, even if that authority is corrupt [*Infernal Affairs*, Dir. Andrew Lau and Alan Mak, 2002]

The two men rely on authority to substantiate their own identities: Yan's reliance on the authority of the locked file to prove his original identity is mirrored by Ming's reliance on the authority of his badge to prove his assumed identity (fig. 20). While Yan wishes to reclaim his lost identity, Ming actively seeks to destroy the authority that verifies his original ties to Sam's crime syndicate. Ming uses his authority as the informant to double-cross Sam during an ambush by the police, killing him. He then uses his assumed authority as Wong's replacement – given authenticity by his use of Wong's cell phone and by appropriating Morse code as a means of communication with Yan – to gain the trust of Yan (successfully, until Yan recognizes the envelope containing the personal information on all of the members of Sam's gang). When Yan is then killed by another of Sam's moles in the police force, who seeks solidarity with Ming, Ming's only recourse to protect his new identity is to kill that mole as well, to erase all knowledge that he was ever in alliance with Sam.

Exiting the elevator with his badge in plain sight, Ming manages to end the film with his chosen identity intact²³.

Through selective elimination of authoritative elements over both his and Yan's identities, Inspector-Ming is finally able to step out of the mirror, eliminating the double who supposedly steps in in his place. Though the traditional modes of reinstating his identity are destroyed, Yan does manage to successfully restore his name after his death through his relationship with another figure of authority: the psychiatrist, Dr. Lee. Yan divulges his true identity to Dr. Lee near the end of his mandated sessions (during which he sleeps in a chair while Dr. Lee plays solitaire on her computer, no real analysis or therapy taking place), saying, "Tell you a secret, but don't tell anyone. I'm actually a cop," to which she sarcastically replies, "So am I." Dr. Lee represents a locus of authority in that, police file or not, she has the ability as a mental professional, to locate Yan's true identity beneath the layers of disguise and conflict. Though initially not taking him seriously, Dr. Lee later proves Yan's undercover status and clears his name, partially rectifying the corrupt altering of identity by using her authority to set half of the record straight.

Conclusion

The rival moles in *House of Flying Daggers* and *Infernal Affairs* illustrate the complexity of disguise. For each of these men – Jin, Leo, Yan, and Ming – donning a disguise is not as simple a task as merely playing to an uninformed crowd. Rather, it

²³ It must be noted, however, that in the final installment of the *Infernal Affairs* trilogy, Ming's unstable identity catches up with him, causing him deep inner conflict that results in a severe psychotic break.

can demand sacrifice of one's relationships, morals, and identity with no guarantee that they will be restored when the deception is no longer called for. Disguise leaves the door open for conflict of identity, which in turn invites feelings of exile, individual expendability, and authority's interference with identity.

For Jin, disguise renders him in exile, faceless and nameless, belonging to no side, like the Wind, from which he takes his assumed name. Unable to access his identity as a police official – by virtue of an order from on high to kill him if seen – he must transgress his moral bearing by aiding the Flying Daggers and fighting his own men to the death. He must become his own enemy if there is to be any chance of restoring his original identity. He must seek to manipulate the multiplicity of his identities into a resonant, rather than an interfering, pattern. Beyond this, though the plan called for him to seduce Mei and gain her trust, he actually falls in love with her and sends his allegiances and his understanding of himself into conflict. Caught between worlds, Jin becomes expendable: his relevance to either side of the battle seems temporary, rendering him a less valuable asset to both sides.

Three years in disguise leave Leo heavily disillusioned. After failing to protect the former leader of the House of Flying Daggers from assassination, he sets a trap for the general by sending Jin on an undercover mission to infiltrate the Flying Daggers. As Jin and Mei each deviate from the plan by letting true feelings develop between them, the temporary sacrifice of Leo's relationship with Mei becomes permanent. Leo discards his identities as a police official and as a Flying Dagger to selfishly reproach Mei, wounding her as she tries to leave with Jin and indirectly killing her by causing her to bleed to death in an attempt to save Jin.

Yan, like Jin, faces the exile of being trapped between worlds. He also must forsake his commitment to the law, perpetrating crimes in order to gain the trust of Sam and relay any useful information back to the police. Where Jin's conflict is tangled in his relationship with Mei – nearly reducible to a choice between being the police official *or* being Mei's lover – Yan's conflict is more internal, as not even he is sure of how to classify himself anymore. He appeals for the help of authority (first in Superintendent Wong, then in Ming, and lastly in Dr. Lee) to restore his identity, which is only successful posthumously.

Conversely to Yan, Ming is desperate to legitimize his new identity rather than his original identity. Finding his disguise too tempting and the trappings of his new life too much to his liking, Ming seeks out the same sources of authority – and destroys them – to preserve his disguise. If Jin and Yan are exiles trapped between worlds, and Leo rejects both worlds to pursue a tangential mission, Ming seeks to transition fully, leaving no trace of his former self behind. He defies the Deleuzean double-becoming by leaving the mirror and leaving no one behind to step into it and fill his void.

The virtual perceived in each man's conflict of identity is slightly different in its source and its manifestations. Nonetheless, the emergence of the virtual in each case is a testament to the instability caused by the multiplicity of identities in conflict, and by the difficulty had in resolving those conflicts. In the case of each character (though not each film, as Ming's demise came later), the burden laid upon identity by the donning of a disguise is more consuming and more harmful than perhaps any of them expected.

CHAPTER 4

CINEMATIC DOUBLING AND THE ARTICULATION AND TRANSFORMATION OF IDENTITY

Introduction

In the previous chapters, I examined the virtual and its implications on identity in cases where a single self was in conflict in some way, having damaging effects on identity. Here I intend to investigate cinematic doubles as another wellspring for the virtual, in a slightly different way than performance-related manifestations of the virtual (including the performance of disguise) were discussed in the preceding chapters. Returning to *Center Stage*, I will investigate the many layers of characters created by the interesting modal-temporal situation of the film, in particular Ruan Lingyu, from whom at least five manifestations arise. Additionally, I will introduce Lou Ye's *Suzhou River* (2000)²⁴, a Chinese adaptation of the Hitchcock film *Vertigo* (1958) in which the actress Zhou Xun plays two separate characters, to the bewilderment of the protagonist and the viewer alike. In then taking a closer look at the two films, it will become apparent that the doubling of characters is accompanied, in each case, by a broader doubling throughout the film. *Center Stage* accomplishes this through shifts in temporality and mode, as coded by Kwan's representational color scheme. *Suzhou River* achieves a doubling effect through its relationship to *Vertigo*, making use of their similarities as well as their differences.

Turning first to a discussion of the cinematic double, I quote Lucy Fischer's description of the prevalence of the double in many different facets of life:

²⁴ Chinese title: 苏州河 Sūzhōu Hé

As many historians have noted, the theme [of the double] is quite ancient and can be found in various primitive rituals and superstitions. In certain societies, for example, when twins are born, either one or both are slain, for fear of their embodying [*sic*] evil spirits. The double theme appears as well in archetypal myths and legends. There is the fable of Narcissus, for instance, with his haunting duplicate mirror-image, or the legend of Romulus and Remus, the twin founders of Rome. Even fairy tales reveal a similar fascination with the *doppelgänger*. (24)

In much the same way as a role was able to intrude into the real identity of a character in the films discussed in Chapter 2, the presence of a double in cinema allows for the confusion of identities, plotlines, and temporalities. Once again, Massumi's notion of sampling, of the interference or resonance of these doubles, is useful in providing insight to hint at the emergence of the virtual. In this case, Deleuze's crystal image is useful, if problematic, in understanding the cinematic double, as the double allows for "...an image in a mirror, a photo or a postcard [to come] to life, [assume] independence, and [pass] into the actual..." (68) with the added complication that both the image and the actual are, in this case, real.

Amid the prevalence of the doppelgänger in literature and film, Fischer notes that the theme of the double has traditionally been "read as a symbolic discourse expressing psychic conflicts wherein dual characters represent facets of the unified self" (25). In the cases of 1940s melodrama studied by Fischer, the double manifests as twin sisters who, though they look identical, are meant to represent the dual facets of femininity: one sister who is honest, docile, and proper, and another who is

manipulative and sexually forward if not aggressive (28). It must be noted that neither *Center Stage* nor *Suzhou River* makes use of the standard tropes of the double.

Through the creation of multiple representations of the same characterization in *Center Stage*, and nearly identical but separate characters in *Suzhou River*, these usages of the cinematic double are able to impart messages and bear meanings that might not otherwise be possible.

Pervasive Multiplicity in *Center Stage*

As mentioned in Chapter 2, *Center Stage* combines interviews and documentary scenes with historical footage from several of Ruan Lingyu's silent films, all of this scattered within a more traditional biopic intending to recreate the life of the actress. This unique mixed-style format creates a film "in which multiple duplications in both the cast and the scenarios induce a kind of vertigo of déjà vu [*sic*], cross-reference, and pure confusion," to borrow a phrase from Oliver Harris (7). Because of the mixed styles, many other aspects of *Center Stage* take on double (or multiple) layers, including temporality and characterization, elements that are interconnected and indivisible from one another. For this reason, I will examine the film as a whole for its doubling effects rather than separating it into doubling of character and broader doubling in the film, as I will later do with regards to *Suzhou River*.

If *Center Stage* functions like a biopic, its purpose is to illustrate the life and career of Ruan Lingyu, to recreate her identity. Stanley Kwan's choice to mix the film stocks and color-code the scenes is an attempt to combine authenticity and creative

reconstruction to recreate what Kwan calls the “best possible available account” by demonstrating his research methods (in the form of interviews with those closest to Ruan), supporting his reconstructions with historical footage, and framing the remainder of the film as unknowable, but probable (Hjort 63). Set in the 1930s, both the interpretive restorations and the historical footage are meant to represent that same time period, the latter being the actual product of the actress’s endeavors. The documentary scenes, on the other hand, are set in the 1990s, featuring not only the cast of the interpretive restorations as themselves, but also the cast of the historical footage – in other words, the individuals being interpreted and restored. The inclusion of this final class of footage allows the multiplicity of color-coded film stock to ripple into the film’s temporality as well. The 1930s make two appearances in the film, one authentic and one recreated, in addition to the 1990s documentary footage, which tinges the interpretive restorations with an awareness of the time period in which they were really created.

Taken together, these layers of color-coded film type and temporality already provide the viewer with an overload of information to process. However, as I discussed in Chapter 2, Kwan freely shifts between and overlaps modes and temporalities, allowing an established scene to transition into another color scheme, imbuing it with new meanings and nuances. To reiterate a specific instance of this that was described earlier, one such scene occurs while Maggie Cheung-as-Ruan Lingyu is shown in the mode of interpretive restoration being coached on emoting Wei Ming’s death scene in *New Women*. After a few takes, Ruan is shown to have connected with the emotion of the character’s situation, performing the scene to the

director's satisfaction. As the scene ends, Ruan buries herself beneath the sheets of the bed in which she is lying, seemingly overcome by the emotion she has managed to tap into. As the camera zooms on the softly sobbing mass under the sheets, the scene, which had been in full color, fades to blue. This suggests, through employing the color-code designated for documentary footage, that just as Ruan Lingyu was overcome by emotion while playing the part of Wei Ming, Maggie Cheung connected to the part of Ruan Lingyu in a similar fashion (fig. 1).

This scene (and others like it that were referenced in Chapter 2) showcases the potential for the virtual in using such a fluid combining and overlapping of types of footage. With one shift in color, the scene transitions in type, meaning, temporality, and characterization. What was once a “best guess” at recreating a piece of Ruan Lingyu's life in the 1930s (as portrayed by Cheung) becomes a glimpse at the filmmaking process in the 1990s as Maggie Cheung becomes caught up in a role she is playing. The virtual can be detected in each instance of doubling, as new meanings overlay, interfere with, or resonate with the original ones.

Stemming from the multiplicity of modes and temporalities are the varying characterizations that occur throughout the film. Examine, for instance, the pairing of Ruan Lingyu and Maggie Cheung. On the surface, this is a character/actress pairing that is in no way extraordinary. But owing to the ever-shifting nature of this film, several additional characterizations arise out of the same two women:

1. Maggie Cheung as herself in the blue-coded interviews and documentary footage;
2. Maggie Cheung portraying Ruan Lingyu in the full-color scenes;

3. Maggie Cheung portraying Ruan's portrayal of any of her characters in the full-color scenes;
4. Ruan Lingyu as herself, posing in stills from the historical footage;
5. And Ruan Lingyu portraying any of her characters in clips from the historical footage.

A mounting sense of multiplicity is amplified by the obviously numerous combinations that can be pieced together from two individuals, but this is a phenomenon not reserved for Cheung/Ruan alone. Rather, this is shared with many of Ruan's contemporaries, who appear in all three modes of footage as well, making it hard for the viewer to immediately tell, in some cases, which version of a characterization he is actually viewing. It is an all-too literal interpretation of Deleuze's crystal image at work, as not only the double-becoming is undone, but the virtual steps out of the mirror to stand next to the actual more than once, until no fewer than five "actual" women stand next to each other in the case of Ruan Lingyu. This technique lends a transcendental feeling of embodiment, showing how characterizations, emotions, and meanings can travel across time and identity, influence one another, and remain relevant.

The prevalent multiplicity in *Center Stage* crosses from filmic mode into meaning, temporality, and characterization, making for a dizzying mise-en-abyme of film-within-film, an array of combinations, doublings and redoublings in which the virtual is nearly inevitable and identities are irreducible to a single self. The most striking instance of this occurs when many of the characterizations stand side-by-side-by-side within the film, the "double movement of liberation and capture" instead

a portal for mass liberation. These filmic modes can be thought not only to represent the sources and means by which Stanley Kwan attempted to piece together the fallen actress, but also the multiple voices, memories, and interpretations it takes to even approach a representation of her life and identity. Only by combining and reinforcing identities and characterizations from all reaches of the various modes and temporalities can Ruan Lingyu transcend.

Lou Ye's Referential Homage to Hitchcock

The presence of the virtual in *Center Stage* emanates from both a self-contained referentiality (showing the research process as well as allowing the actors to appear as themselves within the context of the film) in addition to drawing from external sources (Ruan Lingyu's silent films) and incorporating them directly. *Suzhou River*, while self-contained as a film, is adapted from British/Hollywood director Alfred Hitchcock's *Vertigo*. Additionally, where the cinematic double in *Center Stage* stemmed from multiple individuals playing (or being) the same role or roles, in looking at *Suzhou River*, the focus shifts to an opposite dilemma: how can the characters and filmgoers navigate a diegesis in which the replication of what *appears* to be the same individual carries multiple identities?

Before addressing the doubling of a single actress across disparate roles, the context of the broader film doubling must be clearly understood. In his "remake" of *Vertigo*, or perhaps more aptly called a "referential homage," to borrow a term from Jerome Silbergeld, Lou maintains significant themes and narrative elements from the

original while adding his own twists. This borrowing and altering is a process Silbergeld describes as following the tradition of ancient Chinese painters and calligraphers, who chose to work in the style of another artist while attempting to develop the material through their own creativity (13).

The films share many of the same devices: the hero charged with protecting the girl; his failure/betrayal, leading to the girl's imagined death; the girl's reappearance; and the failed hero's obsession with both her disappearance and her seemingly impossible return. However, in some ways more telling than the two films' similarities are their differences, Lou Ye choosing to diverge from the original in a way that allows the intricacies of the plot and psychologies of the characters to aid in Lou's critical discussion of Hitchcock's cynical *film noir* tone and his stance on obsession, such that the two films deliver messages in very different tones.

Before exploring the divergences of *Suzhou River* from *Vertigo*, it is important to first establish the ways in which the two films are similar. The narrative of *Vertigo* follows John "Scottie" Ferguson (played by Jimmy Stewart), a former police officer with a debilitating fear of heights who is asked by an old college acquaintance, Gavin Elster (played by Tom Helmore) to follow his wife, Madeleine (played by Kim Novak). Gavin tells Scottie of his suspicion that Madeleine is possessed by the spirit of her great-grandmother, Carlotta Valdez, and that he fears she will commit suicide as Carlotta did if she is not shadowed. In taking on this task, Scottie and Madeleine fall in love as he attempts to help her explore her past and free herself from the presumed possession. However, Scottie's acrophobia prevents him from saving Madeleine, who appears to have jumped from the top of the mission tower at San

Juan Bautista. Scottie is devastated by Madeleine's imagined death, even reaching a catatonic state that requires a stay in a psychiatric facility. Upon his release, he frequents Madeleine's former haunts, eventually discovering the remarkably similar-looking Judy (also played by Novak). The plot continues from here, but the events that unfold from this point are better left for the section dealing with the films' divergences.

In comparing *Suzhou River* to *Vertigo*, I start again with the male protagonist, Mada (played by Jia Hongsheng), a motorcycle courier charged with "entertaining" (read: babysitting) Mudan (played by Zhou Xun), the daughter of a bootlegger who prefers to spend his time in the company of prostitutes, and delivering her to her aunt's house. The two become close, and (despite Mada's reluctance) fall in love. Mada's involvement with the petty criminals Xiao Hong and Lao B. lead him to kidnap Mudan for ransom. In a fit of rage over her betrayal by Mada and the cost of the ransom ("I'm that cheap?" she screams), she jumps from a bridge into the polluted Suzhou Creek, vowing to return as a mermaid and find him. Though he dives in after her, Mudan is never found and Mada spends several years in prison. A number of years after his release, he searches for Mudan, even going door-to-door to inquire as to her whereabouts, before eventually stumbling upon, again, the remarkably similar-looking Meimei (also played by Zhou).

Stylistically as well, there are a number of similarities between the two films, some more obvious than others. Among the most obvious are the nearly identical scenes of each film's girl-turned, Judy and Meimei, each in front of her dressing table, in a pink-and-green color scheme, illuminated by the neon sign just outside her

window (Silbergeld 13). Scenes like this, unremarkable in isolation, lend a strange familiarity to *Suzhou River* because of their iconic reference to *Vertigo*, instantly heaping assumptions and sensibilities onto the former. *Vertigo* and *Suzhou River* share a *film noir* sensibility: Scottie as the cop-on-the-slide; the pessimistic view of what Hitchcock seems to view as a universal human tendency toward neurosis and criminality (Silbergeld 18); the cast of smugglers, kidnappers, murderers, prostitutes and the like who eke out a living in the seedy back-alleys of Shanghai; the despondent narrator. Additionally common to both films is a feeling of nausea caused by filmic technique. Hitchcock replicates nausea in Scottie's vertigo scenes through a pull-back/zoom-in technique that skews the perception of spatial relationships as the camera appears to lurch into a deepening space. Likewise, Lou uses the graininess of the videographer's handheld camera and the swells of the river to imply a nausea more akin to being seasick, occurring as the videographer introduces the Suzhou Creek to the audience (Silbergeld 21).

These common threads set the stage for contrast in numerous aspects of the films. At the most fundamental level, the stars of the two films are of a different ilk. Hitchcock, with a predilection to make heavy use of the emerging star system, preferred to use big-name actors such as Stewart and Novak. While Jia Hongsheng and Zhou Xun had both previously appeared in cinematic productions, they had nowhere near the same type of presence, or the same type of specifically-maintained and controlled image as, for example, Novak²⁵ (Wexman 35). In a sense, *Vertigo*'s

²⁵ Wexman notes, "In the case of Kim Novak, control over her image was exercised not just by Hitchcock but more importantly by industry mogul Harry Cohn, president of Columbia Pictures, who arranged to have her constantly watched, forced her to live in her studio dressing room and eat only food prepared by the studio chef, and called her 'the fat Polack'" (35).

other important “star,” carefully cast into the role and contributing beauty and character to the overall film, is San Francisco. Hitchcock, on a number of scouting expeditions, created scenes to take place in all the most iconic locales: “the Golden Gate Bridge; the Embarcadero; Ernie’s, the city’s best-known restaurant; the art museum; a forest of giant sequoias; hilly streets; scenic oceanside highways; and cable cars,” even going so far as to place the climax of the film at the mission at San Juan Bautista, now a museum and tourist attraction (Wexman 36).

Though it takes place in an equally dazzling city with its own array of well-known landmarks, *Suzhou River* gives barely a glimpse of the tourist’s Shanghai. Instead of the Huangpu River, the Bund, the city skyline, and the Oriental Pearl Tower (which seeps through the overcast cityscape only when Mada and Mudan sit deliberately gazing at it), *Suzhou River* takes place amongst the city’s seedy bars, the polluted canal, factories, and abandoned warehouses. The polluted water, in a way, comes to stand for Shanghai’s (and China’s) corruption: a literal and figurative pollution the city’s residents cannot and do not try to avoid. Just like the many workboats, houseboats, and waterfront apartments that come into contact with the polluted water, the characters come into contact with corruption, criminality, and moral malaise. Mada works as a motorcycle courier, a job for which some degree of illegal smuggling is implied; Mada, Xiao Hong, and Lao B. kidnap Mudan for ransom (in the process of which Lao B. kills Xiao Hong, takes the ransom money, and is never mentioned again); Meimei’s mermaid act is a kind of corruption of her image – objectifying herself (in the form of a very Western icon, no less) for patrons of the bar; Mudan’s father is a bootlegger of buffalo grass vodka and whiles away his time and

money on prostitutes; the videographer is essentially a commercial voyeur and has Mada beaten up by thugs for pursuing Meimei. Just as the people have responded to the murky water by learning to live with its presence, they have learned to live with, or even benefit from, the prevalent corruption.

If Hitchcock's casting choices were intended to lend artistic nuance to the characters (e.g. the way the public image of Kim Novak was knowingly incorporated into the roles she played), then perhaps Lou eschews the use of "star power" to strip characters and scene of any meaning outside of that which was created for the film, as if to say, "Forget what you think you know about Shanghai. I'll show you Shanghai." In this way, Lou uses the contrast between the two films to hold even the identity of the setting in question, a factor that will mirror the cinematic doubling of the characters to be discussed below.

As the narratives begin to unfold, the two stories diverge almost immediately in the moral characters of the two male protagonists. At *Vertigo*'s start, Scottie, a police detective, is pursuing a criminal in a rooftop chase. Over the course of the film, Scottie descends from this moral high ground as upholder of the law. His disability forces him to leave the police force (after refusing to take a desk job); his obsession with the living Madeleine alienates him from his friend and former fiancée, Midge Wood (played by Barbara Bel Geddes); the imagined death of Madeleine is so devastating that he spends several months in a mental health facility; and finally, the discovery of Judy, and Scottie's slow reconstruction of Madeleine through Judy, leads him to recreate the circumstances of the imagined death, ending in the actual death of Judy/Madeleine. At the same time, he becomes more distant from reason and

reality, unable to see his moral slide as it progresses. He is involved by virtue of being asked to protect Madeleine, and when he fails at this, his identity as a protector (a policeman) is once again challenged. His obsession causes him to overcompensate and become increasingly involved with Judy, reconstructing Madeleine through her, analyzing his failure, and hoping to conquer it.

On the other side of the coin is Mada, the smuggler/kidnapper/emotionally-distant voyeur whose vices and criminal connections place him at a moral starting point much lower on the scale than Scottie. But rather than a parallel slide from this position on the scale, Mada's narrative is one of redemption. Upon seeing Mudan's reaction to his betrayal of her, Mada quickly dives into Suzhou Creek after her, coming up empty-handed. He repays his debt to society by spending time in prison, but it is after his release that he devotes himself to finding Mudan and setting things right. Mada begins the film by carrying the identity of the voyeur. He is uninvolved and distant, doing what he is told, and betraying the girl he reluctantly loves because it is easier than standing up to the higher criminals who use him. But the connection he shares with Mudan allows his identity to be shaken, much like Scottie's, calling him to action and reforming him completely.

While both male characters experience a challenge to their identities as they know them, Scottie's is much more devastating; in contrast to Mada, Scottie is not reformed and recreated. In this way, not only are the male protagonists' moral trajectories headed in opposite directions, but their involvement with the imagined reincarnations of the disappeared girls (Judy, Meimei) is of a different quality as well. Reading it alongside his vertigo-inducing acrophobia, his nightmares, his previous

catatonic state, his shattered identity, and his refusal to accept Madeleine's death despite having "witnessed" it, Scottie's pursuit of Judy is depicted as obsession that borders on (and crosses into) psychosis. This is a prime example of Hitchcock's tendency for a "pathology overcomes all obstacles" viewpoint and sets the stage for the rest of Scottie's and Judy's interactions, as he compels her, piece by piece, to become Madeleine again (Silbergeld 15). Even more telling of his clouded judgment is his ignorance to the fact that Judy *was* Madeleine; in his mind he is not merely asking her to play the role of Madeleine once more, but is transforming an unrelated stranger into his deceased love.

In contrast to this, while Judy clearly resembles Madeleine (for obvious reasons), she barely appears, to the audience, to be capable of being the elegant girl she resembles. Judy is a garish, slightly uncouth, and bordering on slutty (via her lack of a bra) middle-class girl from the mid-west (Silbergeld 23). How could this be the elegant, graceful, refined, and wealthy Madeleine, whose relationship to the painting in the art museum and whose frequent profile shots (calling to mind relief cameos on antique pendants and coins) secure her place as part of high culture (Wexman 35)?

Meimei, however, seems to the audience (as well as to Mada) to be an older, more mature, and more seductive Mudan. The similarities are almost unbearable: her physical resemblance is nearly identical, but for a change in hairstyle; she works in a bar like the one Mada brought Mudan to on her birthday; she performs as a mermaid, looking identical to the doll Mada gave Mudan as a birthday gift; she wears the same press-on rose tattoo in the same location on her body as Mudan used to; she lives on a houseboat on the Suzhou Creek, into which Mudan leapt after being betrayed by

Mada. Despite what seems like overwhelming evidence, Mada's reformed identity prevents his pursuit of Meimei from coming across as pathological obsession. Mada is devoted to righting his wrongs, and is desperate to find Mudan, but although he pursues Meimei, approaching her and her videographer boyfriend and appealing to them for assistance in unraveling the mysterious disappearance, he never goes so far as to try to transform her into Mudan. He likewise continues following leads to find Mudan, finally happening upon her when he hears of a convenience store outside the city that sells buffalo grass vodka.

Stemming from the male protagonists' interactions with the girls, but manifested in very different ways, are the actual deaths of the sought-after, previously-thought-dead characters. In each film, the initial girl (Judy-as-Madeleine, Mudan) undergoes a fall (or a leap) that is presumed to result in her death, but does not. It is not until each of the girls is rediscovered by the male protagonist (and in the case of Judy, it takes Scottie's deliberate and obsessive reconstruction of "Madeleine") that her death becomes real. But only in the case of Scottie does this death bring about a sense of blame. Because he reconstructs Madeleine, and because he compels Judy-again-as-Madeleine to return to the mission tower at San Juan Bautista, Scottie creates and sets the stage for Judy's death. Though it was an accident – Judy, startled by an approaching nun, walks backwards off the ledge and falls to her death – the blame still rests squarely on Scottie for forcing her into the situation. Unable to reconcile his own identity, his attempt to take comfort in the familiar identity of Madeleine also ultimately fails.

Mudan's death, on the other hand, is cast in the light of fate. After being reunited, Mada and Mudan are killed in a motorcycle accident near the bridge from which Mudan jumped. Despite the fact that Mada was driving the motorcycle and was under the influence of alcohol, no blame falls to him. Mada has not strayed from his reformed identity, his new purpose. He finds Mudan and presumably atones for his prior betrayal. Silbergeld even argues that, at least for Mada, there was no other way for the narrative to resolve:

Death is the only possible outcome: spiritually, psychologically, and cinematically, not as a tragedy but as a necessary fulfillment of the narrative. Mada is primarily a dreamer, and it is not his purpose to live out his life with a *real* female by his side. (29)

In this way, each male protagonist's moral trajectory, affected by the crushed former identity and combined with the kind and quality of his resulting obsession with the female-reincarnation, leads to the death of the female he pursues, but Hitchcock and Lou make it clear who is to blame and who is not.

One Actress, Two Roles

Perhaps the most significant divergence between the two films, however, is in each film's usage of the theme of the cinematic double. In both *Vertigo* and *Suzhou River*, dual roles are played by the same actress, causing confusion for the audience, as well as the male protagonist, as a girl who was presumed dead once again stands on the screen, with a different name and a rejection of any shared identity with the previous

girl. At the most basic divergence, only one set of double characters, Mudan and Meimei, actually *are* doubles. Through the letter she attempts to write to Scottie (and no sooner finishes than destroys), the audience learns that Judy was asked by Gavin Elster to “play” his wife, meaning the Madeleine with whom Scottie fell in love was, in fact, Judy all along.

Mudan and Meimei, regardless of their numerous and extremely specific similarities, are not the same girl, a fact that is both challenged and confirmed during the film. Beyond physical similarities, the two characters are shown in identical shots at different points in the film. Meimei in her dressing room and Mudan in the bathroom at Mada’s apartment, each sporting black underwear, each viewed through the unclosed door (fig. 21, 22). The videographer’s insistence on filming Meimei aids in setting up initial suspicions on the part of the viewer that Meimei is Mudan.

Shaffer points out:

Films are watched, photographs are looked at. “Looking” is considered intentful activity, adult scrutiny of an object. “Watching” is considered childish, passive, voyeuristic. Freeze frames and photographs within a film coolly alert the mind; we suddenly look intently, like intelligent adults, rather than watch for the next surprise, like idiot children. (3)

The videographer’s focus on Meimei forces the viewer to “look” at Meimei, confirm that he is in fact seeing Zhou Xun again, and scrutinize her for signs that these two separate identities might instead be one. But this is not to be, the two girls finally sharing diegetic space – when Meimei’s videographer boyfriend is asked to identify the bodies of Mada and Mudan after their fatal motorcycle crash – to definitively

prove this fact. The existence of Meimei independently of Mudan is, quite possibly, the key difference between the two films, giving Lou the perfect vehicle in which to deliver his message. I will return to this idea shortly.



Figure 21: Meimei in her dressing room, preparing for the mermaid show [*Suzhou River*, Dir. Lou Ye, 2000]



Figure 22: Mudan in the bathroom, in a shot that challenges Meimei's assertions that she is not Mudan [Suzhou River, Dir. Lou Ye, 2000]

First, however, I wish to discuss briefly the cinematic double across a small handful of films, to better ground the implications of the divergence in the doubles between *Vertigo* and *Suzhou River*. In *Vertigo*, the cinematic double is explained away as a plot device, an act. But in some cases – more interesting, and occasionally more problematic for the audience – are the cases in which the same actress portrays two separate characters, individuals whose relationship is not defined but whose interconnectedness is undeniable. To this effect, two other films made within a decade of *Suzhou River* (2000), and sharing some of the same sorts of social concerns, will help to illuminate the uniqueness of the doppelgänger scenario: *La Double Vie de Véronique* (1991), directed by Krzysztof Kieslowski, and *Run Lola Run* (1998), directed by Tom Tykwer.

La Double Vie de Véronique traces the chance interconnectedness between two girls: Veronika, living in Poland, and Véronique, living in France (both played by Irène Jacob). Though the girls look identical, have similar names, and share a passion for music, they consciously know nothing of one another. Still, Véronique somehow senses Veronika's death, but it is not until afterwards that she comes to identify – in a photograph she herself took from a train window in Kraków – her double. *Run Lola Run* chases Lola (played by Franka Potente) as she races through Berlin, trying to produce 100,000 Deutsche marks in twenty minutes to save her boyfriend Manni (played by Moritz Bleibtreu). When the first attempt to supply the money fails (with Lola shot in the chest by a nervous police officer), the film “resets,” in video-game fashion, to the start of her quest – not once but twice – until Lola achieves her desired

outcome. Though Potente only portrays one character, Lola, the characterization is unique in that the resets are not clean; the identity that is “Lola” exists in triplicate across temporalities and gains lived experience from her previous “runs” (e.g. learning how to take the safety off a gun, remembering to avoid obstacles in her path), becoming a more composite figure as the film progresses.

Through the creation of nearly identical but separate characters, these usages of the cinematic double are able to impart messages and bear meanings that might not otherwise be possible. Fischer notes that the theme of the double has traditionally been “read as a symbolic discourse expressing psychic conflicts wherein dual characters represent facets of the unified self” but goes on to emphasize C.F. Keppler’s assertion that the cinematic double can also be used to explore and resolve “The wider problems of [the artist’s] culture” (qtd. in Fischer 25). *La Double Vie de Véronique* and *Run Lola Run* can both be said to be discussions of chance, interconnectedness, and free will.

As mentioned previously, in *La Double Vie de Véronique*, the two girls share space in Kraków, where Véronique snaps a straight-on photograph of Veronika from the window of her train without taking conscious notice of their striking physical similarities. Still, when Veronika passes away, Véronique feels somehow incomplete and grows restless. The crucial difference between Veronika and Véronique is Véronique’s choice to step back from her musical career in light of health issues; it is at a choir rehearsal that Veronika abruptly and mysteriously dies. The idea of free will is even more obviously brought forth by Véronique’s relationship with Alexandre (Philippe Volter), the puppeteer and maker of marionettes. The ease with

which he seems to manipulate Véronique, further emphasized by the marionette he makes in her resemblance (taking the place of her lost double, Veronika), poses the question as to how much free will Véronique really does have.

A similar discussion of interconnectedness, chance, and free will occurs in *Run Lola Run*. Details as small as being tripped on the stairs at the outset of her second run have an effect all the way down the line, and each time Lola alters her plan, the ripple touches not only her own life, but the lives of many around her. These particular instances are shown using a flash-forward constructed of a montage of sequential snapshots, which have vastly different outcomes from seemingly insignificant variations in Lola's actions. In addition to details from her runs that Lola is capable of recalling in subsequent (but supposedly independent?) runs, she seems to have an awareness of these snapshot flash-forwards as well, declining to buy the bicycle from the man who rides alongside her as she runs because she knows it to be stolen, to cite an example. As with *La Double Vie de Véronique*, Lola appears to have a great deal of free will, able to reject the outcomes of the first two runs (in the first of which, she is shot, and in the second of which, Manni is hit by an ambulance while crossing the street) and start over. However, overshadowing her free will is the notion that her choices bear, through the intricate interconnectedness of the people and events around her, unforeseeable and sometimes profound consequences.

In *Suzhou River*, the same discussions come to the table. Interconnectedness finds its most potent nexus in Shanghai's bars, where at some time or another, all of the characters can be found. Mada takes Mudan to one on her birthday and later plots her kidnapping there with Xiao Hong and Lao B. And many years later, it is at the

same bar where he encounters Meimei, and outside of another that the videographer has him beaten up. It is by chance (one must assume, for what other reason could it be?) that Mudan and Meimei share so many traits. After all, the mystery is not left unsolved; Mada does find Mudan, proving that Meimei is indeed *not* the girl for whom he was searching.

In addition, both Mudan and, by the end, Meimei, exercise free will to escape situations in which they feel stifled: for Mudan, this is the kidnapping and betrayal by the object of her love and affection; for Meimei, this is the realization of the lack of substance in her relationship with the videographer. Silbergeld notes of their relationship that, “having witnessed true devotion for the first time, she grasps the limitations, the insincerity and even the *self*-deception (on both his part and hers) of their mutual attachment” (32). Already given to impulsive but short-lived disappearances, Meimei finds complete liberation in her revelation and leaves the videographer, leaving behind only a note that reads “Find me if you love me!” and knowing that he never will.

Meimei’s liberation in this manner is significant for two main reasons. First, it marks a significant altering of Meimei’s identity, mimicking Mada’s reform. Meimei crosses out of the position of the spectator, witness to Mada’s search and pursuit, but in no way a participant. For the majority of their interactions, Meimei regards Mada as something of a harmless stalker, speaking to him but not engaging with him. She is only slightly more involved than her nearly-invisible videographer-voyeur-boyfriend. After witnessing Mada’s devotion to Mudan, and realizing the purity and depth of their relationship in contrast to the alienating distance in her own, Meimei transforms

entirely. Rejecting her uninvolved identity, Meimei becomes Mudan's spiritual heiress and merges with the recently-lost identity of Mudan, coming to embody her innocence, purity, fidelity, and devotion (Silbergeld 17). Meimei was not Mudan, but she *becomes* her in spirit. Lung-Kee Sun offers an explanation:

Westerners perceive an individual as a system with clearly defined boundaries in which the emotional component is supposedly regulated by rationality in the service of the soul or the personhood. The Chinese, in their turn, perceive an individual largely as a "body" (shen or shenti)²⁶ to be made whole by the exchange of "hearts" (xin)²⁷ between two such "bodies"... In this sense, a Chinese individual, far from being a distinct and separate individuum, is conceivable largely in the continuum of "two persons." (2)

In this way, Meimei and Mada are each "made whole" through the exchange of hearts with Mudan, necessitating a change in identity that makes room for the continuum of two persons.

It is through this transformation, from nearly indifferent spectator to active, liberated spiritual heiress, that Meimei also embodies Lou's call to action, which brings me to my second point. Silbergeld notes that:

Just as a persistent criminality lent American *film noir* an existential despair in the years when the hard-won victories over the Great Depression and German totalitarianism gave way to stalemate in the Cold War, criminality and corruption in *Suzhou River* come at a time when modern China's loftiest hopes for social and moral reform have fallen by way of repeated Maoist

²⁶ 身 or 身体

²⁷ 心

deceits and the post-Mao phenomenon of “jumping into the sea” of free market capitalization. (33)

In his analysis, it is in the wake of rapid change and high expectations that this profound moral malaise is noticed²⁸. This, combined with the sense of surveillance that started with the Chinese family system and the clan and has continued in the modern government (leaving no sense of individual privacy despite increased personal freedoms), produces a pervasive corruption at all levels, along with a sense of collective passivity regarding this corruption (Silbergeld 38). What good is fighting it if everyone is involved? This is the sense the audience first gets from Mada, and later from the videographer boyfriend. Mada’s identity as a motorcycle courier is easily tainted by smuggling and kidnapping, and he seems not at all bothered by the implications of this (until he sees how deeply he has hurt Mudan). Mada, too, is a passive voyeur, staying up nights in his apartment watching tapes (fig. 23), and spying on Meimei through her cracked dressing room door.

²⁸ It should be noted that *La Double Vie de Véronique* takes place soon after the collapse of the Soviet Union, and that the two girls represent Eastern and Western Europe, adding another, decidedly political dimension to Véronique’s ability to perceive a sense of “loss” when Veronika passes away. Likewise, *Run Lola Run* might share some of the same tensions, taking place in Berlin less than ten years after the fall of the Berlin Wall.



Figure 23: Mada, as the passive voyeur, spends late nights watching tapes [*Suzhou River*, Dir. Lou Ye, 2000]

Mada's concerning vices are nonetheless redeemed by his insistence on finding Mudan and mending their relationship. But the truly problematic voyeur, the videographer boyfriend, comes to stand for the type of moral malaise Lou wishes to condemn. Viewed within the context of his involvement in the film, the videographer, in a way, has no identity. The videographer stands at a distance, nearly always behind his camera, whether to make a living or in his personal relationships. As the film progresses, it becomes increasingly clear that he prefers mediated experiences to anything real or tangible, and that he prefers to watch than to engage. When Mada comes to him and tells him about Mudan, the videographer remains off-screen (but for the occasional arm reaching for an ashtray), the camera taking a seat between the two men to mediate the experience even as they sit together in person. Even when his anger mounts over Mada's pursuit of Meimei, he calls on others to act on his behalf, arranging for Mada to be beaten up by the Happy Tavern's bouncers (Silbergeld 35).

The videographer represents the kind of malaise and impersonal passivity that Lou views as an obstacle to romantic freedom and self-expression, manifested in an individual who lacks an identity by choice. Emboldened by witnessing Mada's and Mudan's romance ("Things like that happen only in love stories," she remarks), Meimei climbs out from under the passive umbrella and challenges her boyfriend, as Lou challenges the audience, to do the same. Whereas Meimei's previous identity was challenged and replaced as a result of her ordeal, for the videographer, her challenge is merely another option he chooses to discard.

In contrast to the dark and abrupt ending of *Vertigo*, *Suzhou River* uses Meimei to put forth the notion that her moral character – now imbued with fidelity, devotion, and purity in an arena of cynicism and passivity – is more important than her identity ever was; this moral character was passed from Mudan to Mada, and from the couple to Meimei (Silbergeld 17). The social relevance of this is clear. Sun states, "Utterly this-worldly, the Chinese notion of 'transcendence' is the horizontal movement of feelings from a single body to a greater number of bodies, so that 'individual' coarse impulses are refined into social concordance" (Sun 13). Mudan's spirit passes to Mada, and is brought by him to Meimei, who in turn brings it to the videographer. By virtue of the unique situation of the cinematic double, Lou gives Mada and the videographer the opportunity to see the effects of their distanced (or lacking) identities and almost allows Mudan and Meimei to fuse, or at least allows Meimei to see her missteps by witnessing her own imagined love story and death. Mada and Meimei both experience the virtual, rattled by the challenge to their

identities, able to sense the interference caused by the doubling of the Mudan-Meimei character.

However, it would be out of synch with the whole of the film for the ending to be entirely upbeat and optimistic. Having received the call to action, the videographer, who has been called into active participation during the unfolding of events (e.g. coming to identify the bodies of Mada and Meimei), retreats to the safety of isolation, preferring it to the notion of reforming himself, searching for Meimei, and having a more genuine relationship with her. He says of her departure, “I could run after her, look for her like Mada... and then this love story of mine might go on. But I won’t because nothing lasts forever. I’ll just take another drink and close my eyes and wait for the next story to start” (Silbergeld 43; fig. 24). In the end, the optimistic call to action remains tempered by his ambivalent narration and lack of expectation, further pointing to the pervasiveness of the vice of non-action.



Figure 24: The videographer, unseen but for his limbs, prefers to have another drink and wait for life to come to him [*Suzhou River*, Dir. Lou Ye, 2000]

Conclusion

When one thinks of “cinematic doubles,” there are a host of typical manifestations that spring to mind: twins – in some cases identical, but in other cases representing different facets of a unified self; comedic accidents, clones, cases of disguise or mistaken identity. In this chapter, I have instead chosen to concentrate on two films that showcase more atypical employment of cinematic doubling, both in their characterizations and through the broader scope of the films themselves. Not merely a gimmick, the doubling in these films allows them to bear meanings that might otherwise be problematic. The multiplicity of this cinematic device, while not as damaging to the self in these examples as performance and disguise are in the previous chapters, still inherently allows for conflict (or at least confusion) of identity.

The unique temporal-modal condition created by Stanley Kwan in *Center Stage* is such that a shift in the color-coded system of filmic representation cannot occur in isolation. As each mode has its own temporality – the historical footage being rooted cleanly in the 1930s, the interpretive restorations being a 1990s attempt at recreating the 1930s, and the documentary scenes adding 1990s research credibility – a shift in something as seemingly inconsequential as color scheme can hurdle the scene through time and back again, altering meaning, purpose, and context in the process. Inevitably intertwined in this, the film’s characterizations, rather than being hurdled or transformed, instead multiply and co-exist in the broader scope of the film,

cross-referencing and supporting one another, coming to resemble each character's glance into an imperfect hall of mirrors.

Rather than giving rise to conflict, this utilization of multiplicity serves as a commentary on the problematic nature of the articulation of identity. *Center Stage* strives to approach (knowing it cannot achieve) a faithful representation of the life and career of Ruan Lingyu, herself an unstable identity. Through his usage and coding of different types of information, Kwan makes note of both the credibility and the lack inherent in his account of her life. The multiplicity that results from the shifting modes and temporalities bleeds into the domain of characterization and results in a collection of representations of the same character, each able to lend her own interpretation of the identity of Ruan Lingyu. Only when each is allowed to speak, and when taken as a composite sketch, does Kwan feel he is providing the most accurate account he can hope to achieve.

Suzhou River sees a manifestation of the double on multiple levels as well. At the level of the film itself, *Suzhou River* draws from its roots in *Vertigo*, manipulating the similarities and differences between the two films. Similarities in characterization and plot, as well as the duplication of similar scenes, help to root *Suzhou River* in a dialogue with *Vertigo*, but it is the differences between the films that generate multiplicity. Where a faithful remake soothingly follows the original, *Suzhou River* instead meets, diverges from, and crosses over *Vertigo* to leave the viewer to contemplate the director's selective differentiations. Lou Ye uses differentiations like the moral positions of the male protagonists and the contrasting tones of the films'

endings to critique Hitchcock while establishing his own message about the vice of passivity.

The differentiation worth the most note is the manner in which one actress is cast in two roles in each of the films. *Vertigo* sees Novak as both Madeleine and Judy, but only occurring as a plot device in which Judy is hired to *play* Madeleine.

Grounding the idea of the cinematic double across similar uses in *La Double Vie de Véronique*, *Run Lola Run*, and *Suzhou River*, the kind and quality of the doubles, as well as the meanings they carry, are shown to be quite different. *Suzhou River* instead allows for Meimei and Mudan to exist independently of one another without explanation. Repeatedly challenging and reaffirming their separate identities throughout the film, they finally fuse as Meimei forfeits her passive, disenchanted self. Profoundly impacted by the challenge to her identity by Mudan, Meimei transforms herself, embodying Lou's call to action and further exploiting the multiplicity that she shares with Mudan.

The multiplicity across films, temporalities, modes, meaning, and characterizations in the films discussed in this chapter is perhaps the most obvious example of the virtual's ties to identity confusion. Where the virtual appears in the folds of an image multiplying itself internally, the two films provide many such folds. Additionally, an exaggerated look at Deleuze's crystal image helps to illustrate the strangeness of this multiplicity. Where the crystal image sees the "image" exit the mirror to be replaced by the formerly actual self, the mirror in *Center Stage* unleashes a sizeable cast of actual selves, while the one in *Suzhou River* seemingly allows the deceased Mudan to exit the mirror within the reformed Meimei, as the disenchanted

former Meimei steps in. The presence of the virtual, as shown in this and the preceding chapters, can have a significant impact on identity. In these cases, the breaking of the rules of the virtual and the crystal image are no less significant.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

Throughout the preceding discussion of selected Chinese films, I have focused on various conflicts of identity and not only their ability to destabilize the self, but also their potential for harm, greater understanding, or transformation. Chapter 2 took up the topic of performance, which challenges the self by the temporary inhabitation of an alternate identity or identities. For many performers, this challenge is easily resolved through a clear discrimination between the role and the real, and the ability to transition between them at will. However, *Center Stage* highlighted Ruan Lingyu's difficulty in making this transition. An undefined boundary exists between Ruan's real life and her roles. Real-life rehearsals such as "smoking-as-resistance" and crouching before a mirror tinge her real life with qualities of her characters. Adding to that the creation of roles that deliberately sought to exploit real events and emotions from her life, Ruan ultimately finds herself unable to stabilize the boundary that would shield her identity from her roles, committing suicide in mimicry of her final role when the context of her life began too closely to approximate the context of that role.

A similar set of conditions surrounds Cheng Dieyi, who is forced into, and at the same time willingly accepts, the role of the concubine in the Beijing Opera troupe in which he is raised. His coercion stems from the symbolic castration needed for him to be accepted to the troupe, as well as the consistency of his role (spanning his youth as well as his adult life) and his rape by the wealthy eunuch who commissioned the troupe that made him famous. Still, Dieyi's long-term inhabitation of the role of the concubine is not merely one stemming from a failure to delineate between the role

and himself. In the face of his stardom, his homosexuality, and the politico-cultural instability around him, Dieyi chooses to remain in the role, an identity whose traits, purpose, and even demise are already laid out. As these factors – his stardom, his homosexuality, and the politico-cultural instability – become problematic for him, Dieyi, like Ruan Lingyu, commits suicide in mimicry of his role.

For *Frozen*'s Qi Lei, performance art is an outlet. To make a social statement, Qi Lei orchestrates a series of performance art pieces, each depicting his suicide by an element of nature: water, earth, fire, and ice. When curiosity leads him to take the last performance piece farther and feign his suicide to see the effects of his non-existence, he multiplies himself into both existence and non-existence. While his existence persists, he must keep up the guise of death and non-existence. Finding the isolation unbearable and seeing no way to return from his self-created limbo, he commits suicide in actuality.

Shifting slightly from the acknowledged act of performance to the concealed performance of disguise, Chapter 3 examines the long-term effects of full commitment to a role on four undercover agents. In *House of Flying Daggers*, police official Jin and underground rebel Leo infiltrate each other's organizations. The credibility of each of their disguises underlies the effectiveness of their missions and keeps them momentarily safe. But the long-term effects of fully immersing themselves in the role of the enemy is ultimately harmful to each man's identity. Jin, being forced to aid the enemy and kill his own men as he is hunted by them, is left in a position of exile, betrayed by his own kind and unwilling to completely align himself with his enemies. It is not until he falls in love with Mei that his allegiances

shift and he becomes willing to sacrifice his identity for his former enemy. Similarly, Leo sacrifices his relationship in order to undertake his mission, only to find that his sacrifice would be permanent. With this, he denies all allegiances and selfishly punishes his former lover. Each man, once staunchly supportive of his respective side and cause, is dislocated by way of his disguise and undergoes a transformation because of it.

The same type of plot is visited in *Infernal Affairs*: the police and a Hong Kong triad each send in a mole to infiltrate the other. As with *House of Flying Daggers*, the effectiveness of the disguise necessarily employed by each mole hinges on its believability; to expose themselves would sacrifice the mission and could be fatal for either of the moles. This level of commitment requires that each mole behave in line with the side he wishes to infiltrate. For Ming, this becomes desirable, as the perks of his adopted disguise tempt him to sever ties with his former self and transition fully into his assumed identity. For Yan, however, the disguise he adopts is at odds with his morality, leading him to question the means by which he is to fulfill his mission, as well as the effect this will have on him. If a man's identity is constituted by what he does rather than who he used to be, in light of his many necessary transgressions of the law, Yan cannot be sure that he is still the "good" police officer. In effect, the two men rashly scramble to occupy the "good" spot in the good/bad dichotomy, to reconstruct their identities, and to manipulate authority in order to achieve the desired identity.

Chapter 4 departs from the theme of performance in favor of an examination of cinematic doubling in *Center Stage* and *Suzhou River*, both in characterizations

and in the broader scope of the films. Returning to *Center Stage*, I investigated the ways in which the mixed-mode presentation of the film carries with it the potential to mix temporalities, meanings, and even characterizations. In this way, for example, Maggie Cheung's portrayal of Ruan Lingyu is additionally supplemented by each woman as herself, and each woman playing the characters from Ruan's film roles. The multiplicity that is pervasive in this film demonstrates the many voices, modes, and representations it took Kwan to craft a recreation of Ruan Lingyu's identity.

Considering another type of cinematic doubling, *Suzhou River*'s creation as a referential homage to *Vertigo* serves to solidify its presence as a double in and of itself. As a double, it bears with it aspects of style, device, and characterization from the original, even going so far as to recreate the minute details of some scenes. Yet, as an imperfect double – as Lou has chosen to borrow and adapt the work rather than remaking it – it is nearly as striking for its divergences as for its similarities.

Paramount among these divergences is the device of the cinematic double, casting Zhou Xun in the roles of both Mudan and Meimei. Unlike in *Vertigo*, there is no tidy explanation for these two exceptionally similar girls who puzzle the viewer and the male protagonist. Through the mystery surrounding Mudan and Meimei, as well as the divergences from the original *Vertigo*, *Suzhou River* is able to enter into a critique and propose a call to action to combat the vice of passivity that pervades the film.

This thesis aimed to explore these identity conflicts and their possibilities (or lack thereof) for resolution by drawing on the concept of the virtual, as described by Massumi, and the crystal image, as described by Deleuze. As each of these identity conflicts occurs, the multiplicity of identity approaches the virtual, the identities

twisting and knotting, folding in on themselves, and either resonating or interfering with the original identity in a way that is handled differently in each scenario. In some cases, it became necessary for the virtual and the actual to combine, trade places, or transcend in order to resolve the conflict. These theories are a means by which to supplement more typical examinations of film and contribute depth to an academic understanding of contemporary Chinese film. My hope is that this approach will promote a more enriched analysis of various aspects of the cinematic experience that too often go unnoticed and to open the door to the uses of Western film theories on Chinese films without the limiting factors of genre or generation.

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