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Ang Lee as an Auteur of Passion, Love and Faith in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Lust, Caution, Life of Pi*

Chang Xu
School of Foreign Studies, Zhaoqing University, Zhaoqing 526061, China
Email: 156392156@qq.com

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Abstract

This paper takes Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000), Lust, Caution (2007) and Life of Pi (2012) as its corpus and analyses representative scenes from the three films in order to examine how Lee, working within the framework of auteur theory, handles three thematic pairs, namely life and death, love and hate, and the conflict between human beings and nature, through plotting, mise-en-scene and characterisation. A close reading of the scenes shows that Lee consistently subordinates spectacle to aesthetic restraint and to the audience's own reflection, so that the formal choices of the films carry a personal vision instead of merely serving the plot. The paper further argues that Lee's authorship is defined less by a fixed visual signature than by a recurring concern with repressed emotion and with the fragility of belief, and that this concern is what unites the three works. It concludes that auteur theory remains a productive lens for Lee's cinema, provided that authorship is understood as a process of negotiation between personal conviction and the original literary sources.

Keywords

Autuer Theory; Film Studies; Ang Lee

1. Introduction

Ang Lee is Taiwanese-born American film director, screenwriter and producer. Lee explored the relationships and conflicts between tradition and modernity, Eastern and Western in his earlier films, such as The Wedding Banquet, Pushing Hands, and Eat Drink Man Woman. After entering to Hollywood, Lee also deals with repressed, hidden emotions in many of his films, including Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, Brokeback Mountain and Lust, Caution. In his latest film Life of Pi, he tackles the problem between human and nature.

Lee has won the Academy Award for Best Director twice: for Brokeback Mountain (2005) and for Life of Pi (2012). He also won the Academy Award for Best Foreign Language Film for Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000). He is renown as the first

director of Asian descent to win an Oscar, Golden Globe, and BAFTA for Best Director, and as the only director to win both the Golden Bear and Golden Lion for multiple times.

I intend to analyze Ang Lee's Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000), Lust Caution (2007), and Life of Pi (2012) under the umbrella of the Auteur Theory in this essay. Through going into the details of the scenes and the director's own comments and explanations on the movies, I tempt to further understand how Ang Lee tackles the problems of life and death, love and hate, and the conflicts between human and nature as an Auteur in the following parts: Unleashed Hidden Beast in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon; Acting and Performing in Lust, Caution and Conflicts between Human and Nature in Life of Pi.

2. Unleashed Hidden Beast in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon

In the Qing dynasty, Li Mu Bai, a revered swordsman from the clan of Wudang, decides to end his warrior career by giving his sword which named Green Destiny to his aristocrat friend Sir Te in Beijing as a gift. His longtime good friend Yu Shu Lien, a female warrior, transports the sword for Li Mu Bai to Beijing. In Sir Te's mansion, the sword has been stolen. Yu Shu Lien suspect the thief is the daughter of Governor Yu, a Manchu aristocrat, because she is shown to the sword by Yu during her visit to Sir Te's place. Jen Yu's governess is Jade Fox, who killed Li Mu Bai's master longtime ago.

Being repulsive to her arranged marriage, Jen Yu flees away from her ongoing wedding ceremony with Green Destiny regardless of her own lover Lo tempting her to escape to the west together. Li Mu Bai and Yu Shu Lien come after Jen Yun. Jen visits Yu Shu Lien and has a dispute with her. They have a nasty fight and Jen goes away. Li Mu Bai comes after Jen into a bamboo forest. He regained Green Destiny and throws it into the waterfall. When Jen dives into the lake, she is rescued by Jade Fox. In the cavern, Jade Fox drugged Jen. Shu Lien and Mu Bai found Jen. Fox attacks them with poisoned darts. Mu Bai shields the darts with his sleeves for the others and avenges his master's death by killing Fox. But he is attacked by a dart.

While Jen is away to seek an antidote for the poisoned dart, Mu Bai finally confesses his affection for Shu Lien. Jen doesn't made it to save him. Mu Bai dies in Shu Lien's arms. The Green Destiny is eventually returned to Sir Te. Jen reunited with Lo later in Mount Wudang. The next morning, Jen asks Lo to make a wish. He complies and wishes for their going back in the desert. All of a sudden, Jen leaps over the cliffs.

One of Lee's characteristic of his direction is that he never excesses the techniques at the price of sacrificing the aesthetic value. Especially in such an ancient martial art movie, he endorses the Chinese philosophy that emphasizes on not to exercise the major content to its most. In others words, Lee is conscious of how to leave space in the cinematography, like those Chinese painters and calligraphers did in their classic works. He believes that the space left will give more weight to the

audience reflection on the film. The interaction between the film itself and the audience is on top of his priority.

2.1. Scene 1 Yu Shu Lien's Four Minuets' Fights with Jen Yu

Lee makes an effort to transcend the physicality of martial art by precisely using the mid-full- shot on the four minutes hard-core fighting scene between Jen and Shiu Lien. At the beginning, being in a stalemate after a few moves, Jen and Shiu Lien start the official action. Ang Lee explains his use of shot. "I use a medium- full shot, so you can see action and have space to see the weapons moving around. A shot this size is difficult for actors. A closer shot, they can do a little bit and it feels like a lot, but full body, they've got to be really good (Abele)." The medium- full shot is able to capture their every move and the movements of their weapons as well. If the director uses close-up, the fluency of the fighting will be considerably reduced. The constant switch of cuts between the characters are inevitable. But in this scene, the audience watch their fights with the beats of drum and the echoing of horn in the background music. The flow of movements between the two actresses is hence created. "They don't just go up and fight. And the pose tells you what clan they came from. It's a conversation with body language (Lee)." Jen's governess Jade Fox said to her once "It's the Giang-Hu fighter 's life style, to kill or be killed." Giang-Hu is the public sphere for the fighters. Like an unleashed beast, Jen stole the sword Green Destiny to fight for her own freedom. Hew longing for freedom exceeds everything. Her fearlessness in Giang-Hu makes her the hidden dragon.



Figure 1. Major fight between Jen and Shiu Lien

"For me, this is an aesthetic choice, the detachment to an overhead. These are beautiful shots. Here the actors are having a conversation using their body language, as opposed to the closer shots where you see the excitement of weapons banging and facial expressions. Intermittently we detach to a top shot, and that makes you aware of the gracefulness. Also, there's a chance to use stunt people. It's a woman on the right, a man in a wig on the left (Abele 2007). " The overhead shot is not common in traditional Chinese martial art movie. It allows audience to have an overview of their musicality in the physical competence.



Figure 2. Jen Yu fights with Yu Shu Lien, over

2.2. Scene 2 Fight between Li Mu Bai and Jen Yu in the Forest of Bamboo



Figure 3. Li Mu Bai and Jen Yu fight in the bamboo

When talking about the choreography of the martial art, Lee said"I didn't allow them to do all the fantastic things they wanted to do. I still care for drama, character development through action, and aesthetics. What I did was stretch the genre (Abele 2007)." The circumstances of the fighting scenes in the movie are by all means intense and fierce. Nevertheless, Lee presents them in a subtle way.

The fighting scene between Jen Yu and Li Mu Bai against the backdrops of bamboo forest is delicately delivered under such a philosophy. After Jen hurt Shiu Lien, Li Mu Bai pursues Jen into the bamboo. They fly among the thick bamboo, clinging on the branches. The music to this scene is cello. Lee blends the shots with slow motion and close-up of Jen and Mu Bai to reinforce the grace of the movement in spite of their actual speed. In terms of martial techniques, Mu Bai is superior to Jen. He accuses her of being dishonest and learning the tricks of Wudang in a wrong way. Jen resolves to break through all the boundaries of the oppressing society and refuses to be the prentice of Li Mu Bai.



Figure 4. Li Mu Bai throws Green Destiny to the lake

This scene is shot in the Yellow Mountain, one of the premier mountains in China. The water takes up the majority of the negative space. The murky greenness of the water echoes with the Green Destiny and the thick bamboo. All together they form a sense of mystery. Lee makes the frame appear as the paintings of Chinese landscape again. The notion of the martial art of the clan Wudang, resembles the visual effect that the scene presents: in the green softness of hides the vigor.

2.3. Scene 3 Final Scene of the Movie: Jen Yu Jumped off the Cliffs

Li Mu Bai scarifies his own life to save Jen Yu. Jen didn't bring the antidote for Mu Bai in time. After Li Mu Bai's death, Lo "Dark Cloud" fins Jen standing on a balcony on top of Mountain Wudang overlooking the cliffs. She ask Lo to make a wish. Lo closes his eyes and wish they could go back to the west together. Jen leaps to the abyss with the same cello music in the scene of fighting in bamboo forest, leaving Lo gazing at her with tears. Jen's move echoes with the tale that Lo told her long ago in the west. The hero in the tail jumps off the cliffs to make a wish. Because his heart is of honesty and of purity, his wish comes true.



Figure 5. Jen leap to the abyss

Ang Lee leaves the ending of the story open. He sticks to his belief that the film should avail the audience's own interpretation to the film. Nobody could say Jen is definitively dead, especially at the end of story she is already an excellent figure in martial art. Whether she resumes practicing the techniques of Wudang and rightfully uses Green destiny as Li Mu Bai wishes remains unknown to the audience.

Lee confirms in many interviews that making Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is to realize his childhood dream. Giang-Hu is actually a mimicry of the real society. Everyone in the society is a fighter. One could have immense power if the beast inside his nature is unleashed as Jen Yu. The unleashed passion could leads to entirely diverging ways. Lee let the audience have their own judgement on what kind of person could be the real fighter.

3. Acting and Performing in Lust, Caution

Lust, Caution is a Mandarin-language erotic thriller, based on the short story by Chinese author Eileen Chang. The tragic love story is set in 1942, Shanghai, Japanese-occupied China, during The World War II. Mrs. Mak walks into a café, makes a phone call to her so called "brother" in Hong Kong.

After finishing the phone call, she reflects how her story got her here several years ago. In 1938, Mrs. Mai was Wong Chia Chih. Her father left her and escape to England because of the ongoing WWII. As a freshman at university in Hong Kong, she meets Kuang Yumin, her fellow student. They work together in the drama society. While playing a leading role in a play by which the society aim to inspire patriotism, Wong Chia Chih finds her calling. So does Kuang. Kuang tempts the core members of the drama society to carry out a risky plan to assassinate the top Japanese collaborator, Mr.Yee. Each of the students play a part in the plan. Wong is designed to be Mrs. Mak. Being transformed herself inside out, she is supposed to approach Mrs. Yee, therefore to win her trust and then lure Mrs. Yee into an affair. Their practice proceeds well until an inferior accomplice of Mr. Yee discovered and got killed by the group.

Having emigrated from Hong Kong to Shanghai, Wong reencountered Kuang in 1941. Kuang involves her in a complex plot to kill Yee, who is to date the head of collaborationist secret service in the puppet government. She decides to resume her role as Mrs. Mak. It is so close that the Communist espionages are able to assassinate Mr. Yee when he accompanies Wong Chia Chih to the jewelry shop. Wong in the last minute told Mr. Yee to run. He got out and signed the paper for the execution of Wong and her colleagues that night.

3.1. Scene 1 Mah-Jongg Scene When Wong Reconnects with Mrs. Yee at the Table

Mrs. Yee and Mr. Yee have no children. She is well aware of her husband's affairs. They have given tacit consents to this issue. When they play Mah-Jongg with Wong Chia- Chih, Mr. Yee feeds Wong with the pieces of Mah-Jongg that she needs to win. Mrs. Yee understands her husband's intention without difficulty. She glances at his husband who is sitting on her opposite. Mr. Yee responds with knowing approval by glancing back.



Figure 6. Mrs. Yee

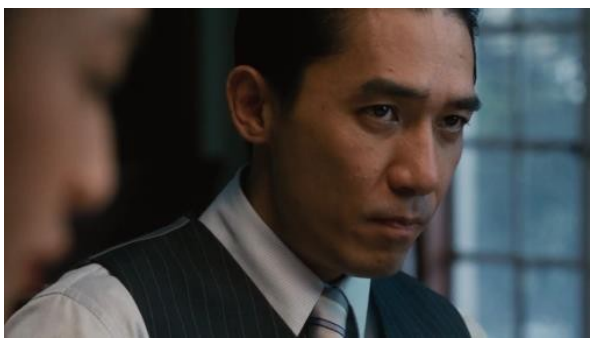


Figure 7. Mr. Yee's interactionwith Mrs. Yee during the Mah-Jongg playing scene

The exchange of information between Yees' is completely by the subtle facial expressions. The couple says nothing on the affair from beginning to end. Their instant consensus indicates that this kind of affairs happen quite often in their household. Ang Lee doesn't tell such details about the Yee's through the dialogues between any other characters. The audience read the undercurrent by watching the slight change of the Yees' facial expressions. Aiding and abetting, Mrs. Yee is the one who connects the two antagonists of the movie. She engages herself in acting as a loving wife whilst Mr. Yee exercises his power on women. The practice between the husband and wife is not merely for Mr. Yee's recreation. More importantly, he uses sex as weapon to obtain information from the enemy, for the women who approach him have every chance to be a spy from any other side of the war.

3.2. Scene 2 Wong Chia Chih's Sex Scene with Mr. Yee

In their destructive relationship, Mr. Yee never let go of his suspect on Wong Chia Chih. During their love-making, she glanced at Mr. Yee's gun. He instantly followed her sight. This is a scene that gives a hint on the fact that they both are well aware of their hidden agendas. Yet nobody asks or tells. Both of them are acting and performing in their relationship. Sitting astride on Mr. Yee, Wong Chia Chih immediately grabbed the pillow beneath his head. Trying to distract him from the gaze at the gun, she then put the pillow on the upper half of Mr. Yee's face, seemingly

trying to push him to the edge of smothering. For a man who is extremely alerted and cautious like Yee, this is the moment he let down his guard and surrendered to Wong Chia Chih. Different from the fact that previously Mr. Yee dominates their relationship, Wong conquered him by sexuality. It's a turning point in the movie. They are drawn to their deepening immoral love.



Figure 8. Mr. Yee glances at his gun



Figure 9. Mr. Yee's face is half covered by the pillow

There is a Chinese phrase wei hu dzuo chung. The tiger, in Chinese the “hu”, kills a person. The ghost of the person thereafter willingly serves the tiger to lure more prey into the jungle. Wei hu dzuo chung means to play the jackal to the tiger. In
Lust, Caution, Ang Lee explicitly points out “In the story Zhang has Yee allude to this phrase to describe the relationship between men and women. Alive, Chia Chih was his woman; dead, she is his ghost, his chung. But perhaps she already was one when they first met, and now, from beyond her grave, she is luring him closer to the tiger... (Lee 2007)”
Lee further extends the meaning of wei hu dzuo chung in Mr. Yee's case. Yee has taken over the intelligence department in the puppet government when Wong reentered into his life. In his interview in the DVD bonus, according to the actor Tony Leung, who plays the role of Mr. Yee, Yee leads a hell life as a living dead. Mr. Yee's job is to kill people whoever might be against the puppet government. He keeps his emotion deep down inside as a highly self-loathing individual. He identifies himself as

the prostitute of the Japanese to Wong. In the movie, in the Japanese tavern scene, before Wong Chia-chi sings to him, Mr. Yee said “I bring you here because I know better than you how to be a prostitute.” Wong sings a song about how solid a couple's bond is despite of the change of the circumstances. After Wong's singing, his tears dropped, then he wiped them off. It is a significant moment for the cruel and emotionless character to show his profound vulnerability. He cries as he acts as a chung for the tiger, the Japanese government. The things he does might be against his will, but he has no choice. He knows his future is damned by the war for his service for the puppet government. He and Wong's fates are more entwined with their escalating illegitimate ardor for each other.



Figure 10. Mr. Yee wiped his tears

Eventually every main character in the story turns out to be actors or actress.

3.3. Scene 3 Mr. Yee ‘s Going Home

Wong Chia Chih led Mr. Yee to take a return to the jewelry shop to fetch the ring which she placed an order on previously. The Communist spies are all ready to get Mr. Yee on the scene. When saw the huge diamond ring, Chia Chih fluttered and tried to take off the ring. Mr. Yee said “Don't take it off.” She hesitates for a few seconds. Finally she said “Go!” It is the last sentence Wong Chai Chih said to Mr. Yee.



Figure 11. In the jewelry shop Wong tells Mr. Yee to go

She finally surrendered to the immoral love which is fraught with struggles by retreating herself from the duty as a Communist spy. Mr. Yee returned home that night. He goes straight to Wong's room, sits on her bed in the dark. Mrs. Yee said someone came earlier to take away a few things of Wong and something from his office. Mr. Yee told her to say nothing and to continue playing Mah-Jongg. She left. When heard the toll, he knew Wong Chia Chih is dead. He shut his eyes for a second, then stands up.

His face is half covered in shadow, with tears in his eyes. He exits the room, but stopped at the door, with his back to the camera. One final time, he turns his head around for a second, then left. This is the end of their distorted love and passion.



Figure 12. Mr. Yee's half face covered in the dark in Lust, Caution



Figure 13. Mr. Yee final glance at Wong Chia Chih's bed in Lust, Caution

When asked does he need to interpret the historical context of Lust, Caution to his foreign crew, Ang Lee's response is of affirmation: "They need to fully understand (the film). To make a film like this, the techniques for making Chinese films are not enough. (In the west,) they have film noir which includes witty lines that we don't have. I put a lot of melodrama and romance in the first half of the film which doesn't suit film noir. They come to make a movie with me. Hence, they have to consider my interpretation. For instance, I use Hames Schamus to reinforce the (power of) dialogue. There is few bicker in Chinese language.

Eileen Chang herself is highly westernized. She is a cineaste. In my point of view, she used at least three movies for reference. The novel is written in terms of cinematography. For instance, she uses shadow and intercut. I think it is feasible to make a film (on this novel) because I study films. It just needs restoration." Ang Lee extends the story written by Eileen Chang which is of only 30 pages to a lengthy movie of two hours and a half. The great substance of suspense and thrill, the intensity of sexuality, the desperation of distorted love under an oppressive society.

If we look at Ang Lee's disposal of expression the theme of love, the fragility in it is easy to be seen. Wong's ultimate breakdown against her duty, Yee's tenderness towards Wong etc. "The second premise of the auteur theory is the distinguishable personality of the director as a criterion of value. Over a group of films, a director must exhibit certain recurrent characteristics of style, which serve as his signature (Sarris). In Lust, Caution, Lee tries to tell a tragic love story regardless of moral boundaries.

4. Conflicts between Human and Nature in *Life of Pi*

The story of Life of Pi.is told in a retrospective first- person narrative from Pi, a then 16-year-old Indian boy. He is the only survivor in the sinking of a freighter on the way from India to Canada. After the freighter is attacked, he finds himself on a lifeboat with an orangutan, a hyena, a wounded zebra and a Bengal tiger. Young Pi suffers a lot in the journey with the tiger. He questions his belief in God and the

meaning of life. Pi told two version of the story to the writer.

The novel under the same name is regarded as the most impossible sci-fi to make into a movie. Lee explores the artistic horizon of applying 3D effects and pushes the boundary of how this technology can serve the movie's artistic vision. In 2013, Life of Pi earned 11 Academy Award nominations, including Best Picture, Best Director, Best Adapted Screenplay and Best Visual Effect. He later won the Academy Award for Best Director.

At the end of Life of Pi, Pi told a completely shocking version of the story according to the requirements from the staff into the investigation of the accident which their company can understand. Pi said, the Cook was resourceful to keep them alive shortly after the accident. One day, sailor broke his leg and got infected. Cook let sailor die and used him as bate to get tuna, Pi's mother accused him his brutality. Mother let him go first. Pi saw cook killed her mother and threw her body in the sea. Sharks came to her body. Pi killed the cook. He accused that "He brought the evil out of me." He ask the writer which story he prefers. The writer chose the first one in which Pi went through the journey with the tiger. Lee explores the artistic possibility of applying 3D effects and pushes the boundary of how this technology can be applied to broaden the movie's artistic vision. He shot the original scenes on the sea in a large tub. The tiger is created in 3D effects as well. He dedicates more than one hour of the movie to depict how Pi survive, on one hand taming the tiger, one the other hand depending on it, during his prolonged journey on the sea. He said "I am not that kind of person who shout at people to make them listen to me. My concentration influences the people I work with…Sometimes it is not what I tell them, it is my faith that convince the actors and actresses. My faith in them to devote to the character, to believe in the hallucination, the aura. In their (Indians') own terms, it is cause and effect, a kind of serendipity… It couldn't be told by words (Chai 2012)."

5. Conclusion

In Lee's own perspective, he acknowledge the fragility in his own nature make him to look at the problems of life and death, love and hate, human and nature in a rather humble way. He appreciates the subtlety of creature by firmly holding his faith on making his movies. The limitation of Auteur Theory on Ang Lee's films is, though Lee indeed has a distinctive characteristic on aesthetics, he himself prefer the audience's reflection prevail upon the script or the story. "The politique des auteurs consists, in short, of choosing the personal factor in artistic creation as a standard of reference, and then of assuming that it continues and even progresses from one film to the next. It is recognised that there do exist certain important films of quality that escape this test (Bazin 1957)." In the three films I select to study, Ang Lee put considerable efforts to jump out of the frame of the original stories, although the cinema literacy in these three films does inherit the legacy in terms of themes.

In Ang Lee's films, he aims his ambition at subtly provoking thoughts instead of guide

audience through the storyline. “I think it is better for films to provoking something in the audience's mind, rather than making a statement or telling you a story. I think this is of much more significance (Golden Horse 2013). ”

He often talks to the foreign actors and actresses, “Neither you or I am important. What matters most is the audience's imagination! If you put too much into your acting, there is no need of the audience's engagement. When they are on the halfway of understanding, they feel they know more than the actor/ actress or more than the role. This is the moment that they are mostly involved. I think it is the most valuable quality of films. We are not artists who the audience look up onto. What the audience have in mind is the thing I care most.” It's a brilliant notion that, for the demure Auteur who values audience's interaction with his cinema, to let the audience have their own reading of the movie.

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