The Aesthetics of Fantastic Realism:

A Study of *Wuxia* Film

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Abstract

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Abstract: By referring to André Bazin's and Siegfried Kracauer's theoretical frameworks of film realism, the paper constructs an analysis of how such theories postulate a narrow array of possibilities for creative filmmakers like King Hu, Wong Kar-wai, Zhang Yimou and Hou Hsiao-Hsien. The study commences with an analysis of Hu's aesthetic as the pioneer who deconstructed the *wuxia* genre by tracing its roots to the traditional Beijing opera. Wong, Zhang and Hou, who came after, built upon Hu's stylised aesthetic and further intensified it to create their own idiosyncratic visions of existence. Significantly, as the paper argues, the aforementioned visionary filmmakers transcend restrictive theoretical frameworks like Kracauer's and Bazin's realist aesthetic.

Keywords: Aesthetics, Realism, *Wuxia*, Hu, Wong, Zhang, Hou

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Dedication

To film lovers.

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Introduction

As Peter Gravestock (2006) argues, "[t]he 1960s marked a turning point in the depiction of [the] *wuxia pian* […] when the Shaw Brothers, one of Hong Kong's premier film studios, sought to redefine and redesign the genre." (p. 106) He further notes that before this period, "the martial arts performances in Chinese films closely resembled the stage-bound, acrobatic choreography of Beijing Opera and were primarily presented in static long shots and long takes." (p 106) It may be partly suggested that this stylistic re-visioning of the *wuxia*[1] genre presented by the Shaw Brothers was a reactive exercise towards the success of Japanese samurai films, which featured high technical skills and amassed a wider range of audiences. In fact, in comparison with the pre-1960s *wuxia* films, the Shaw Brothers' productions can be said to incorporate more fast cuts and more shots. In visual terms, these productions had something else which was different. They were in colour. One of the most prolific film traits that the Shaw Brothers possessed was their emphasis on capturing the realism of combat action sequences. A question which may arise from this hypothesis is that in a genre imbued with the fantastic martial arts skills of its characters, how can action be intermeshed with realism?

André Bazin (1945) argues that cinema's intrinsic realism lies within two grounds. The first is the objective record of the real, meaning that what the camera captures photographically, is deemed to be the real. The second, according to Bazin, is the cinematic reproduction of the real using deep-focus photography and the long take. Siegfried Kracauer (1960) even further notes "that films may claim aesthetic validity if they build from their basic properties; like

[1] The *wuxia* genre in Chinese fiction depicts the stories and adventures of martial arts heroes in ancient China.

photographs, that is, they must record and reveal physical reality." (p. 37) Therefore, a film is real because, just like a photograph, it is the correct reproduction of that part of the real to which it refers to. Although partly valid, Kracauer's and Bazin's critique postulates a narrow array of possibilities for creative filmmakers like King Hu, Wong Kar-wai, Zhang Yimou and Hou Hsiao-Hsien. Indeed, if we were to filter their *wuxia* films through Kracauer's and Bazin's belief that what the camera captures are manifestations of physical reality, we would inevitably misconceive as actually real their depiction of violence on screen. Significantly, the aforementioned visionary filmmakers transcend restrictive theoretical frameworks like Kracauer's and Bazin's realist aesthetic as the paper shall argue.

In Chapter 1, "Behind King Hu's Mask: The Roots for *Wuxia*'s Paradoxical Vision of Existence", the paper analyses the importance and the influential mark left by Hu on filmmakers to come after him namely Wong, Zhang and Hou. Although arguably not receiving the appropriate recognition and appreciation Hu truly deserves, the chapter analyses how he manages to be a pioneer who deconstructs the *wuxia* genre by tracing its roots to the traditional Beijing opera. As a main point of departure, the chapter delves into his *Come Drink with Me* [Dà Zuì Xiá] (1966), to give an initial outlook of Hu's cinematic vision and then analyses other films of his, namely *Dragon Inn* [Lóng Mén Kè Zhàn] (1967) and *A Touch of Zen* [Xiá Nǚ] (1971) to showcase how Hu's aesthetic progressed further to the extent of setting a wide array of cinematic possibilities for filmmakers to come.

In Chapter 2, "Floating and Drifting in Ruins and Fragments: Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* [Dōng Xié, Xī Dú]", the paper analyses how Wong bends the martial arts films' conventional rules and presents the audience with a *wuxia* film that operates within the parameters of a postmodernist vision. Through appropriation of Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* [À la

Recherche du Temps Perdu] (1913-1927) and his Bergsonian concept of 'pure' time, and the Deleuzean concept of the crystal image, the chapter analyses the thematic significance of time and memory as agents which imbue Wong's characters in *Ashes of Time* with quintessential post-modernist life anxieties and crises in terms of illusion and uncertainty.

In Chapter 3, "Colour Me Synaesthetic: The Use of Colour and Realism in Zhang Yimou's *Hero* [Yīng xióng]", the paper analyses how Zhang, through his use of colour and the inversion of the Bazinian spatial-temporal ontological framework of realism presents his own idiosyncratic vision of existence by means of re-creating the colour epic film. Through Nietzsche's three registers of historical practice and their Deleuzean critical interpretation appropriated to the epic film, the chapter analyses how Zhang builds on Hu's treatment of the conventional hero and infuses Hollywood stylistics with it. The chapter analyses in depth the fight sequence between Nameless and Sky and argues how Zhang, through the cinema of the non-event, manages to depict a highly stylized sequence, underpinned by bloodless violence, which takes more the form of a dreamy balletic dance.

In Chapter 4, "Long, Lush and Languid Takes: Silent Stillness in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *The Assassin* [Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng]", the paper analyses how Hou, like Wong, conceives a *wuxia* film that goes against the grain of the genre and through the aesthetics of stillness manages to make the film operate like a Tang painting. With particular reference to the opening sequence of the film and Hou's use of the offscreen space, the chapter delves into how Hou imbues his film with avian imagery and symbolism to depict Yinniang as an avian assassin who lurks everywhere, even in her absence.

Chapter 1: Behind King Hu's Mask: The Roots for Wuxia's Paradoxical Vision of Existence

"Man is least himself when he talks in his own person. Give him a mask, and he will tell you the truth." -

Oscar Wilde

The Critic as Artist

1.1 : From Opera to Film, from Dancing to Fighting

Although King Hu's influence on the *wuxia* genre and on filmmakers such as Zhang Yimou is undeniable, I tend to share James A. Steintrager's (2014) view that "King Hu has never enjoyed widespread recognition as a figure of 'world cinema'." (p. 99) He argues that the reasons for this lack of recognition and appreciation vary, yet a major reason seems to be that Hu's cinema is one of paradoxes, where he combines "features usually kept separate'' (p. 99). Hu tends to intermesh, as Steintrager states, "high with low in terms of genre, straightforward characterization with complex situations and motivations, and action sequences with visual and temporal stoppages." (p. 99) Unlike the filmmakers before him, Hu deconstructed the *wuxia* genre by mainly tracing its roots in the traditional Beijing Opera and further, through his own stylised means of editing, camera movement, choreography, and the cinemascope frame, intensified action cinema and the audiences' viewing experience. (Grasso, 2006) Therefore, to fully understand Hu's auteuristic stylisation of the *wuxia* genre, one must investigate its source, the Beijing Opera.

As a main point of departure, we must address the importance of a film such as *Come Drink with Me* [Dà Zuì Xiá] (1966) which can be considered one of the first films to initiate a wide array of possibilities in the medium and the *wuxia* genre. As Stephen Teo explains, *Come Drink with Me* reveals Hu's intention of appropriating this subgenre "to realize that [Chinese] opera could be cinematic and that its stage mannerism could be applied as a distinctive cinematic style." (1998, p. 20) In other words, by experimenting with what Teo called "the utmost utilization of film language," (1998, p. 20) with *Come Drink with Me*, "Hu was working towards his own method of interpreting 'realism' with a stylised kind of fight convention." (Teo, 2015, p. 115) Significantly, it is Hu's interest in Beijing opera that influenced his camera

movements and his use of montage techniques in a way which sets the audience in a situation where they experience a comparable synchronisation between viewing the 'fighting' occurring on screen and observing dance movements on stage. Like in the traditional Beijing Opera style, Hu often edits his fights to the percussive drums of his traditional score, namely cutting on movement when a drumbeat is heard. As a matter of fact, it may be argued that these rapid cuts, on both movement and music, intensify the fight sequences' dynamicity without interrupting the 'dance/fights' fluidity. The result is fantastic action and a good example of this is the opening inn sequence when Golden Swallow catches the coins with the chopstick. (Refer to Figures 1-5)

Figure 1: "Bandit throws coins at Golden Swallow," King Hu, Come Drink with Me *[Dà Zuì Xiá], 1966.*

Figure 2: "Golden Swallow's speed," King Hu, Come Drink with Me *[Dà Zuì Xiá], 1966.*

Figure 3: "Golden Swallow captures the coins with the chopstick," King Hu, Come Drink with Me *[Dà Zuì Xiá], 1966.*

Similarly, in the same sequence, Hu encapsulates Golden Swallow's swift skill in how she throws three chopsticks at the same time and hits the coins. (Refer to Figures 4-5)

Figure 4: "Golden Swallow throws three chopsticks at the same time," King Hu, Come Drink with Me *[Dà Zuì Xiá], 1966.*

Figure 5: " Three chopsticks each with coins," King Hu, Come Drink with Me *[Dà Zuì Xiá], 1966.*

To a certain degree, it may be argued that Hu's cutting is intermeshed into the choreography, mainly because it is as violent to the audience's eye as the very action they are cut on. Significantly, it is through this 'violent' cutting, that Hu achieves fluidity. By transforming Beijing opera dancing into martial arts and by breaking it down to single movements, Hu manages to unify his action both on a figurative as well as a literal level and the inn sequence, once again, can be deemed as a perfect example that encapsulates this notion. In one particular moment, Hu breaks down the action into four successive fluid shots, each capturing Golden Swallow's intense skilful defence. In the first shot, she throws the alcohol into the bandit's eyes (Refer to Figure 6), in the second shot she reaches for her dagger (Refer to Figure 7), in the third shot she avoids a blade (Refer to Figure 8), and in the fourth shot she slashes a man (Refer to Figure 9). These four disconnected shots become, through Hu's knowledge and filmic adaptation of Beijing Opera and editing, one single graceful movement. (Grasso, 2006)

Figure 6: " Golden Swallow throws the alcohol into the bandit's eyes," King Hu, Come Drink with Me *[Dà Zuì Xiá], 1966.*

Figure 7: "Golden Swallow reaches for her dagger," King Hu, Come Drink with Me *[Dà Zuì Xiá], 1966.*

Figure 8: "Golden Swallow avoids a blade hit," King Hu, Come Drink with Me *[Dà Zuì Xiá], 1966.*

Figure 9: "Golden Swallow slashes a bandit with her dagger," King Hu, Come Drink with Me *[Dà Zuì Xiá], 1966.*

In an interview with Charles Tesson in *Les Cahiers du Cinéma*, Hu made a paradoxical remark when discussing *Come Drink with Me*. (Grasso, 2006) He stated that "[he] didn't want to use real martial arts [or in other words] what [is] call[ed] real kung-fu", as he claimed that he had "seen it in tournaments, [and] didn't find it very beautiful and [...] didn't understand a thing about it." (Tesson, 1984, p. 22) Following this logic, naturally, the question thus arises by itself, in the sense that how can a filmmaker with no interest in martial arts revolutionise martial arts cinema? The answer may be partly traced in what Grasso argues, when he states that for Hu, "action" occurring on the screen, never amounted to an action movie and the kung-fu, in *Come Drink with Me* and also in his later films, namely *Dragon Inn* [Lóng Mén Kè Zhàn] (1967) and *A Touch of Zen* [Xiá Nǚ] (1971), was never conceived as actual confrontation, but rather as a dance, as a performance. This statement particularly converges with how Teo (2000) describes Hu's audiences as viewers "thoroughly engaged in the pleasure and spectacle of martial arts." (The Hero's Destiny section, para. 3)

True to Hu's own admission that "[he has] always keyed [his action sequences] to the notion of dance […] to emphasize the rhythm and tempo, instead of making them more 'authentic' or realistic" (Rayns, 1975, p. 11), his inclination shifts more towards the stylised motions and movements of the operatic stage rather than the more accurate technique of trained martial artists. Hence his choice of casting fell upon actors like the leading actress, Cheng Pei-pei, and the action choreographer, Han Ying-chieh, in *Come Drink with Me* because of their background in Beijing Opera. As Tony Rayns (1975, p. 11) claims, Hu has always stressed that one should "tak[e] the action part of [one's] films as dancing rather than fighting [and always] keyed to the notion of dance." Therefore, such a critical argument, once again, may validate the hypothesis that what makes the action sequences in Hu's films so intriguing is the fact that his "filmic fights" are quintessentially performances. (Grasso, 2006) They are

dances which, like Beijing Opera masks, are shaped and choreographed to look not only literally but figuratively and structurally like fights. In fact, *Come Drink with Me* can be said to be an adaptation of the Beijing Opera, *The Drunkard Beggar* [Jiu gai].

The intertextual Beijing Opera mask is notably one of the central notions that depict Hu's cinematic paradoxical vision of existence, that of one thing made up to seem like another. Through the character Golden Swallow in *Come Drink with Me*, such a hypothesis can be backed up due to the fact that this character depicts the dual persona motif, one which is very much common not just in Chinese cinema but also in Japanese cinema and which still manifests in more recent present films such as Tony Bancroft and Barry Cook's *Mulan* (1998) and Niki Caro's more recent 2020 live action adaptation of the same film. It may be argued that Hu's *Come Drink with Me* was the first to popularise gender roles' transcendence in *wuxia* cinema whereby the characters are imbued with identification confusion, and hence, this further strengthens the importance of such a film and moreover of Hu's major contribution to fantastic *wuxia* cinema.

To compare and contrast with Japanese cinema, it is important to note the importance of a film such as *An Actor's Revenge* [Yukinojō henge] (1963) where Kon Ichikawa appropriates the Kabuki theatre's *onnagata*[2]. Ichikawa intermeshes the two main Kabuki schools; the stylistic *aragoto*[3] of Edo Kabuki with the stylistic *wagoto*[4] of Kansai Kabuki to depict the main character, Yukinojo, a fighter who retains his feminine charm in a revenge tragedy of love. In comparison, Hu dresses his characters with figurative masks, each to his own, appropriated from Beijing opera and mirroring the traditional characteristics of the *wuxia* genre. *Come*

[2] A male actor in Kabuki theatre who performs female roles.

[3] A style of Kabuki acting distinguished by the use of exaggerated, dynamic movements and dialogue.

[4] A style of Kabuki acting that emphasises realistic gestures and dialogue.

Drink with Me depicts several types, namely the drunkard, the military man, and the gang boss, among others. From one end, Hu's appropriation may be argued to serve as an economical technique to further develop each and every character. In fact, audiences familiar with *wuxia* mask tropes can immediately identify the characters' predetermined trajectories and behaviours. (Grasso, 2006) What is interesting though is much like the fights being performances, none of these characters are what they appear to be. Drunken Cat, for example, is a character that appears to be an inept drunkard, yet later reveals himself to be a Kung-Fu master. The same can be said for the Jade-Faced Tiger, who, at face value, appears as a delicate, effeminate man yet later turns out to be a malevolent assassin. The abbot, as well, a seemingly peaceful Buddhist monk, is revealed to be a malicious Kung-Fu master who murdered his own teacher. Consequently, the film features Golden Swallow, the female disguised as the military man. (Grasso, 2006)

1.2 : The Chionesque Acousmêtre

As opposed to the Metzian aural critique that the audience "tend[s] to forget that a sound in itself is never 'off' [and it is either] audible or it doesn't exist" (Metz & Gurrieri, 1980, p. 29), Hu's conception of sound may be argued to make much more sense through the Chionesque "added value" critique. According to Chion (1994), the audience experiences a greater sensibility to the interworking of sight and sound where the "expressive and informative value with which a sound enriches a given image [...] 'naturally' comes from what is seen, and is already contained in the image itself." (Chion, 1994, p. 5) Significantly, in Hu's cinema, one of the most crucial elements is his use of non-diegetic music and sounds, where it may be argued that, its main function is very different from what it predominantly served in classic Hollywood cinema. Noël Carroll (1988) affirms that the role of sound is one with which the narrative specifies the feeling and then is intensely characterised by the music. Carroll defines the emotions expressed by non-diegetic music as typically "inexplicit, ambiguous, and broad" (Carroll, 1988, p. 220) and the reason he gives is mainly due to the fact that music lacks a definite cognitive quality. For him, it is the purpose of the dialogue, the images and the plot, that convey a rather more precise reference to the otherwise ambiguous expressiveness of the soundtrack. He further suggests that the function of music in most Hollywood cinema is often rooted in an interdependent relationship between two distinct symbolic systems. Carroll coins them as "movie" and "music". The former is made up of dialogue, images, and plot and further indicates what a given scene is about while the latter intensifies the emotive quality of that scene. (Carroll, 1988)

Just as Héctor Rodriguez (1998) points out, a single clear line of demarcation cannot be drawn in terms of the use of sound between Hu's cinema and Hollywood cinema. In fact,

Rodriguez partly argues that in films such as *The Valiant Ones* [Zhong lie tu] (1975) and *Raining in the Mountain* [Kōngshān líng yǔ] (1979), Hu does in fact at times employ Westernised symphonic music, most notably during climactic sequences to intensify what Carroll (1988) describes as the emotive quality of the scene. Rodriguez (1998) further expands his argument by stating that a relationship between the "music" and "movie" differs in one important aspect. He points out that "there is a range of visual and aural parameters that, instead of complementing the music, are employed as musical values in their own right." (Rodriguez, 1998, p. 81) This premise can be deemed fitting to Hu's cinema when referring to aspects that, in classical narration, would normally belong to the movie code, yet in Hu, are intermeshed into the music code. Rodriguez clinches his argument by commenting on Hu's treatment of the human body as a "concrete plastic unit [that is] combined with other stylistic devices, including diegetic sounds, operatic scores, sweeping tracking shots, and brilliantly jolting zooms." (Rodriguez, 1998, pp. 81-82) On one hand, he argues that in a film like *The Valiant Ones*, the sound of clashing swords and the character's agitated sighs and screams function as concrete musical elements that parallel each discrete bodily action or cut. On the other hand, Hu's use of nervous and equally rapid music accompanied by rapid cuts simultaneously works with images of characters furiously running or galloping as can be seen in various moments throughout *A Touch of Zen* namely during the rapid bamboo forest sequence. (Rodriguez, 1998) (Refer to Figures 10-12)

Figure 10: "Nervous sounds mirroring nervous characters running," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 11: "Rapid sounds play just as characters rapidly run," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 12: "Hu cuts as rapid as his characters' running," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

In terms of sound and music, Hu's filmic conception of Chinese opera in cinema is a reformulation of what used to take place on the theatrical stage, which served as "a synthesis of dance, song, and drama." (Teo, 1998, p. 20) In Beijing opera, this synthesis is realised by musicians and actor-singers who often rely on their interaction and communication. Hu's reformulation of this synthesis, however, is a directorial manipulation and to a certain extent an auteuristic one. True to Linda Hutcheon's theory of adaptation as that which is "repetition, but repetition without replication" (Hutcheon, 2006, p. 7), Hu appropriates Beijing opera conventions to his idiosyncratic cinematic ends. For example, the use of various musical instruments serves a dual purpose where firstly, they define traits of a character's personality and emotional state, and secondly, as stated earlier, are an aural complement to the actors/singers' facial expressions and movements. In comparison, for hundreds of years, Beijing opera had been popularly known for its display of Chinese martial arts that served

entertainment purposes, and the *luógǔ*[5] percussion patterns, among others, often accompanied such displays to enhance their dramatic quality.

Figure 13: "Sha Yuan Shan playing the sanxian," King Hu, The Fate of Lee Khan *[Ying chun ge zhi Fengbo], 1973.*

In *Come Drink with Me*, film composer Chow Lan-Ping employs both the *gǔbǎn*[6], which served as the leading instrument of Beijing opera percussion ensemble, and the *timpani*[7] to

[5] The *luógǔ* is usually used in Beijing opera amongst other operas. It usually sets the basic rhythmic background for dialogue, songs, choreography, and martial arts. The *luógǔ* helps in depicting the environment, describing the characters and commenting on their actions. Furthermore, the instrument can be used to create sound effects such thunderstorm or waves.

[6] The *gǔbǎn* consists of a small drum and clapper. These can either be played together or individually by a single player, commonly found in traditional Chinese music.

[7] The *timpani* are hemisphere drums, with a membrane called a head, stretched over a traditional large copper bowl. These emerged from drums used in the military and by the end of the 18th century became fundamental in classical orchestra.

aurally re-create a motive pattern that is close to the pre-existing *luógǔ* percussion patterns. It may be argued that Hu's *wuxia* films involve only the representational nature of such musical sound, and this invented pattern recurs occasionally in the film's several combat scenes to demonstrate dramatic intensity. Hu's encounter with Chinese operatic materials and conventions creates a filmic world where such instruments are not encountered in their literal sense but further denote other specific possibilities mostly integral to the medium of film. One specific example central to Hu's paradoxical vision of existence is the filmmaker's intermeshing of the human body with other stylistic devices namely diegetic sounds, music, film editing and cinematographic techniques to create a fresh reminiscent viewpoint rather than a duplication of Chinese opera performance. In Hu, a notable example can be found in *A Touch of Zen*, precisely the moment when Yang invites Gu to the house where the music and Yang's singing become the Shakespearean "food of love" (Shakespeare, 1602/2001, 1.1.29) where inevitably both characters proceed to make love.

The acousmêtre has not necessarily stopped at *wuxia* films but rather arguably served as a means of inspiration to other national cinemas, namely Hollywood, where filmmakers such as Martin Scorsese incorporates this notion of intermeshing the human body with music. In *Taxi Driver* (1976), Scorsese opens the film with a series of intense drum pounding notes crosscut with an eight-bar melodic sighing of a solo saxophone to depict the lonely melancholy of Travis Bickle who is trapped in pathological loneliness. Apart from recalling Hu's intervention of combining the human body with musical cues, Scorsese, in the aforementioned opening sequence in *Taxi Driver*, may also be reminiscing the opening sequence of Masaki Kobayashi's Japanese film *Harakiri* [Seppuku] (1962). This sequence features a framed samurai armour displayed with revered admiration and symbolising the feudal system by means of Kobayashi's hierarchal camera shot tilting from up to down, yet

which in visual terms, is paradoxically smothered in fog, as is Scorsese's taxi in *Taxi Driver* to denote complete emptiness. Kobayashi's is a lifeless armour devoid of anything human which is furthermore aurally undermined and undercut by an atonal, electronically created sound that, by conventional and natural hearing, seems inappropriate and out of place yet stylistically imbues the visual image with a paradoxical alien atmosphere.

To deepen our analysis of instrumental dualism and strengthen our argument that these similar paradoxical visions of existence between Chinese *wuxia* films, Japanese films and other national cinemas is by no means accidental, we need to delve deeper into the notion of instrumental dualism as used in Japanese films by filmmakers who adapted and reconceptualised Japanese theatre in its different forms, be it the *Noh*[8] or the *Kabuki*[9] into filmic representations. A filmmaker such as Akira Kurosawa in *Ran* (1985) employs Japanese instruments such as the *shinobue*[10] flute that contributes to many of the film's musical cues where mainly, this relationship is established at the opening credits sequence, as Tōru Takemitsu's music intermeshes icy string compositions with penetrating piercing shrills of the *shinobue* flute and atmospheric percussion, to depict a reflective sense of the tense scene of mounted soldiers seemingly keeping an uneasy watch. Consequently, the scene is revealed to be a boar hunt. Visually, Kurosawa adapts the *Nohkan* flute and personifies it as the boar's silent shriek after being bowed and killed and then cuts unerringly to the film's title to exemplify its acousmêtric effect. In Hu's *A Touch of Zen* this can be traced from the very single opening credits where Yang is absently present through the acousmêtre of her singing and

[8] *Noh* theatre originated in the 14th century and consists of music, dance and drama.

[9] *Kabuki* is a type of classical dance-drama of Japan, which is characterised by heavily stylised performances, extravagant costumes, and detailed make-up.

[10] The *shinobue* is a high-pitched sound Japanese transverse flute.

later, arguably, through the bell chimes (Refer to Figures 14-16) whose sound penetrates and strikes the deadly silence like a ghostly assassin. Hu heightens the tension by his rapid cutting.

Figure 14: " Reaction to alarming bell chimes," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 15: "Yang absently present in the bell chimes," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

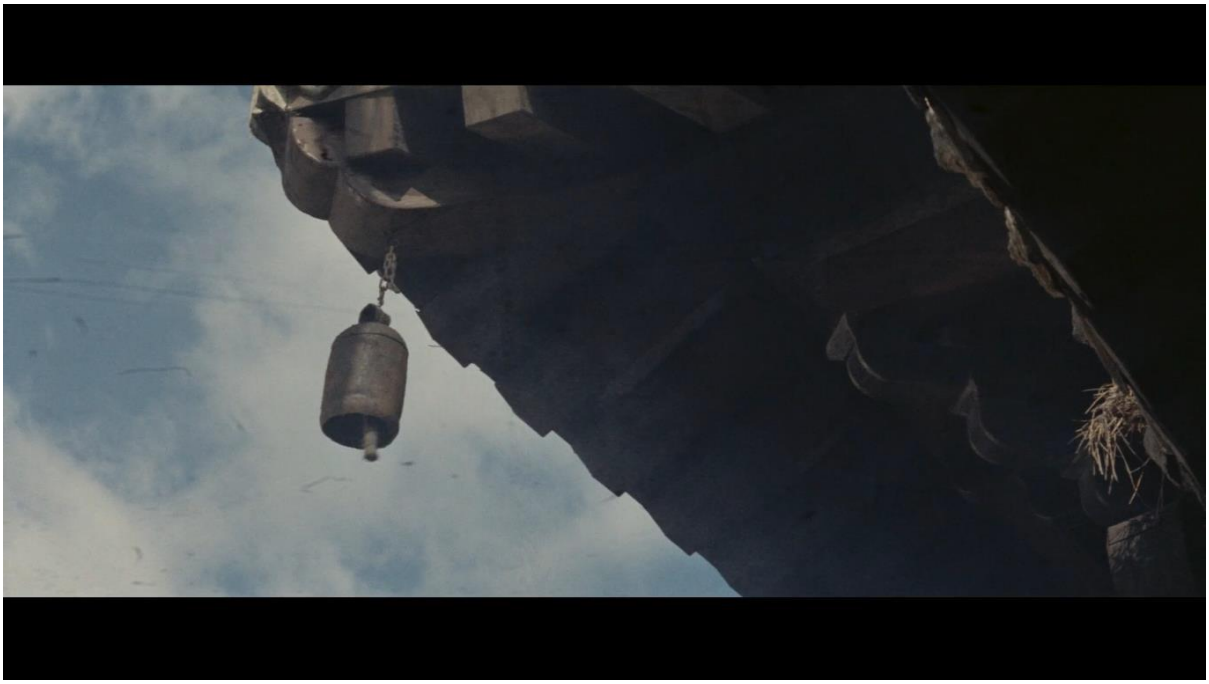

Figure 16: "Yang's acousmêtre," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

1.3 : Wuxia's Roots for a Synaesthetic Experience

As Elizabeth Wichmann (1991) claims, much of the visible and aural devices that, in a Hollywood context, would function to particularise the music, in Hu, operate as musical values assembled into one rhythmic pattern. In fact, this approach corresponds to the conventions of Beijing opera, which are often characterised by an intimate parallelism between music, gesture, and voice. For instance, in Beijing opera, a single head movement, can correspond to a simultaneous percussive sound in order to produce a single rhythmic effect, a technique that Sergei Eisenstein has described in a somewhat similar context, as "monism of ensemble" when analysing "[t]he sharpest distinction between *Kabuki* and [Moscow art] theatre". (Eisenstein, 1977, p. 20) He defines this as an experience where movement, sound, voice, and space, are not an accompaniment of a parallel to each other but are rather treated as equivalent elements. Eisenstein equates this sensation to Japanese calligraphy, as a "fusion" image of varied senses in "a non-differentiation of perceptions, the well-known absence of a sense of 'perspective'." (Eisenstein, 1977, p. 26) This "non-differentiation of perceptions'' is derived from the equally proportional nature of sense organs which, like Japanese holistic theatrical elements, synthesise into a number of brain induced stimulants in an effective way which Eisenstein coins as a form of synaesthesia.

As David Bordwell (2008) argues, Asian theatre was also an important source of Eisenstein's theory of expressive movement. Insisting on cinema's specificity as an art form, Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s sought to revolutionise performance and define modes of expression uniquely suited for the screen. This notion, as Bordwell writes, was appropriated by Asian filmmakers years later. He notes, for example, Eisenstein's criticism of *Kabuki*'s reliance on "transitionless acting" (Eisenstein, 1988, p. 148) by means of sudden switches

from one posture to another. In Hu, as was pointed out earlier, these sudden switches are mirrored through his sudden editing cuts on movements in line with Eisenstein's criticism of *Kabuki*, where actors perform a slow movement as a montage of "[a] breaking-up into shots." (Eisenstein, 1977, p. 43) This notion can be traced in other genres, namely the Western, where in a film such as Sam Peckinpah's *The Wild Bunch* (1969) and to a similar degree in Walter Hill's *The Long Riders* (1980), both directors present slow motion in the midst of their violent sequences. In Peckinpah, the audience can clearly see the bullet penetrating the bodies and blood splattering in slow motion which challenges the reproduction of daily motion and movement captured in cinema. This uninterrupted interval depicted in *Kabuki* and further in Eisenstein's films scatters the mimetic mode of perception cinema into a sensory realm, notably of a deep sense of touch.

As Kracauer (1960) notes, the music, even silence, determines the selection and the rhythmic configuration of the visuals. Taking into consideration that what Kracauer is saying is valid, therefore, I tend to agree with critics such as Peter Rist (2007) who states, that the music contributes to the dance and musical-like nature of Hu's cinematic opera, which is more painterly and poetic rather than novelistic or dramatic. In *A Touch of Zen*, precisely at the moment when Yang enters for the first time, Hu appropriates what Chion describes as "silence [that] is never a neutral emptiness" (Chion, 1994, p. 57) and intermeshes it with Eisenstein's concepts of counterpointing and reinforcing. As Stephen Teo (2000) observes, Yang's silence and fixed stare have the effect of reinforcing Gu's impression of her as a ghost. It is as if Gu's desire to see ghosts the night before is suddenly fulfilled. As Teo also points out, Gu is not the only character who has this desire or a need to see. At the end of the sequence when Gu ventures into the night, Hu's camera pans to a shadowy figure lurking in the corner,

revealing it to be Ouyang Nian. The camera lingers on his figure in medium shot, cloaked in shadow, reinforcing our earlier perception of him as a voyeuristic malevolent spirit.

1.4 : Painterly Filmic Opera

Lau Shing-hon (1981) compares Hu to cubist painter and filmmaker Fernand Léger, whose cinema similarly emphasises motion and rhythm. Lau pivots his analysis on Kracauer's description of a familiar scene in Léger's *Ballet Mécanique* (1924), a film of a pulsing kaleidoscope of images set to an energetic soundtrack. The sequence depicts a woman climbing a set of stairs. Lau recalls Kracauer's words that "[b]y an editing trick, she is … made to trudge up and up an endless number of times …" (Kracauer, 1960, pp. 184-185), like the Camusian myth of Sisyphus, and that through Léger's montage, the emphasis shifts to a particular rhythm and eradicates the reality of the woman executing the action. Therefore, as Lau (1981) argues, based on Kracauer's criticism, "she turns from a concrete person into the pale carrier of a specific kind of motion." (Kracauer, 1960, pp. 184-185) True to Lau's observation, Hu often directs rapid, percussive successions of images showing multiple characters executing similar movements in a series of nearly identical images that stylise the denotative material by building "a self-sufficient sequence of rhythmical movements." (Kracauer, 1960, p. 184) In connection to this, Bordwell coins Hu's action grammar as "the glimpse". (Bordwell, 2008, p. 430)

Bordwell (2008) presents an argument pivoted on the film techniques that Hu uses to capture the fantastic movements in his fight scenes. Hu displays the conventions of the Chinese *wuxia* film with characters fighting with or without weapons and in possession of extraordinary powers of speed and strength who can sometimes defy gravity. It may be argued that nowadays, with the aid of digital special effects, a filmmaker can capture fantastic images depicting flying characters in extended long shots, as in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [Wòhǔ Cánglóng] (2000) and Zhang Yimou's *Hero* [Yīng xióng] (2002). Yet for

Hong Kong filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s, like Hu, this technology was unavailable or at its very inception.

Another way to display these feats was through the use of the Soviet 'constructive montage' which suggests characters' various interactions without displaying all relevant visual elements in the same frame. For the sake of the argument, this type of montage would depict a scenario whereby a character leaps in the first shot (Shot A), hovers through the air in the second shot (Shot B), and lands in the final shot (Shot C). Arguably, this approach is easier to film rather than a single, faked long shot. The strong, thin wires keeping the fighters in the mid-air for long shots were arguably introduced from the 1980s onwards. Therefore, Hu couldn't use it, and instead, his only technological support were trampolines hidden on a set. Bordwell argues that Hu's solution to the problem of flying sword fighters involves a unique approach to film technique. He further notes that Hu managed to depict his fighters' fantastic moves by suggesting that they are able to move too quickly and unpredictably for the camera to catch. Interestingly, this was also the argument put forward when displaying the exquisite technique of Bruce Lee. Jafarzadeh, et al. (2013) wrote that "[t]he most important factor which makes *wuxia* films distinguishable from kung fu films is flying which is only seen in *wuxia* ones [and] [g]enerally, *wuxia* lets dreamlike movements while kung fu focuses on real battles on. the ground." (p. 788) Such a claim is problematic in a number of ways. Firstly, whilst on a generic level, the claims are valid, yet I tend to say they are partially valid. In Lo Wei's *The Big Boss* [Táng Shān Dà Xiōng] (1971), which is universally deemed as a kung fu film, there is a sequence where Cheng Chao-an, played by Bruce Lee, like a fly, jumps over a fence to find a group of hungry dogs waiting to attack him. As light as water, he manages to jump into thin air, escape, and avoid these dogs. It appears somewhat unrealistic and "dreamlike", for a human to do such actions "on the ground". (p, 788) Golden Swallow's

swift skill with the chopsticks, as previously discussed, anticipates in fact a sequence from *The Big Boss*, where Cheng Chao-an, with three knives in one hand, manages to throw them and kills three opponents at one go. Again, this fantastic skill combined with fantastic action poses the questions whether it is correct or not to set a line of demarcation and say that a film such as *The Big Boss* is inclusively and exclusively a kung fu film with no other filmic traits bestowed upon it by other *wuxia* and/or other genres. I think the answer is no.

1.5 : Shifting the ABC shot pattern and the Jump Cut

Bordwell (2013) contends that Hu accomplishes the problem of flying sword fighters by re-shifting the constructive-montage formula of the launch/leap/landing, by cutting each shot to a minimum, thereby, providing multiple, rapid flying shots, and directing the audience's eye by shifting the centre of interest from one shot to another. Hu depicts odd camera angles, abrupt cuts, and unusual empty frames. His characters often run, jump, and land, yet in an ecstasy of frames, or right on the screen's edge. They dodge in and out of sight, blocked either by props, or by Hu's framing which hides their impulsive movements.

Let's consider this example from *Dragon Inn* when Tsao attacks the group defending General Yu's family. Hu captures him launching his jump in low angle (refer to Figure 17), a very conventional way of filming this, yet instead of giving the audience a clear image of Tsao in mid-air, Hu captures Tsao sliding down the left frame edge (refer to Figure 18), vanishing for an instant (refer to Figure 19), then bouncing back up, already doing a somersault, and on his way to strike his antagonist Hsiao (refer to Figure 20). To imply his elusiveness, the framing even fails to keep up with him, hence depicting fantastic characters doing fantastic action.

Figure 17: "Tsao launches his jump in low angle," King Hu, Dragon Inn *[Lóng Mén Kè Zhàn], 1967.*

Figure 18: "Tsao slides down the left frame edge," King Hu, Dragon Inn *[Lóng Mén Kè Zhàn], 1967.*

Figure 19: "Tsao vanishes for an instant," King Hu, Dragon Inn *[Lóng Mén Kè Zhàn], 1967.*

Figure 20: "Tsao bounces back up, already somersaulting, on his way to strike his adversary Hsiao," King Hu, Dragon Inn *[Lóng Mén Kè Zhàn], 1967.*

Hu excels in transmuting and shifting the ABC shot pattern. Similarly, in another example, during one of the final fight sequences of *A Touch of Zen*, between the corrupt official Hsu and the Shaolin monk Hui Yuan, in a ten second shot, Hu‘s camera pans from a close-up showing Hsu’s intent to an over-the-shoulder shot (refer to Figure 21) with Hui Yan placed at the centre with beams of light from behind him. Hu then cuts to a shot of the monk’s neck from behind taking over half the frame, while Hsu appears as a miniscule figure over his shoulder (refer to Figure 22). Hu keeps this shot for five seconds, allowing the audience to contemplate both the odd disproportion and the physical distance between them. Commander Hsu attacks the serene Hui Yan, the Chan monk (refer to Figure 23), by leaping a huge distance and coming down directly in front of the monk. Hu captures this with a formative filmic principle; the jump cut (refer to Figure 24). Hu directs Hsu to advance several feet instantly, in order to rapidly appear larger in the frame. Yet, in the next 16 frames, Hui Yan blocks his advance (refer to Figure 25) and punches him in the forehead (refer to Figure 26), sending him sprawling back against a tree (refer to Figures 27-29).

Figure 21: "Over-the-shoulder geometrically aligned shot," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 22: "Empowering Monk and Miniscule Hsu," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 23: "Commander Hsu attacks the monk," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 24: "A jump cut making Commander Hsu leap a huge distance and coming down directly in front of the monk," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 25: "The monk blocks Hsu's advance," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 26: "The monk gives Hsu a resounding punch in the forehead," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 27:"The powerful monk's punch," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 28: "The monk's punch sends Hsu sprawling back," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 29: "Hsu back against a tree shaking off the counterstrike," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Hu makes the audience experience the powerful sensation of the punch rather than the punch itself. He directs his camera to linger uncut for the next twenty seconds on Hsu shaking off the counterstrike. By doing this, Hu creates a scenario whereby his audience registers the full effect of not only the Monk's powerful punch but also his film cut. To make Hsu approach the Monk rapidly, Hu creates a setup whereby different shots may be argued to be not so strictly matching. In fact, Hu moves the Monk's head and shoulder away from the audience, yet makes the compositions appear graphically very close, giving the impression that what is on screen is a single camera take with some frames cut out. What we as critics and audiences ask is where did Hsu go between these two shots? The answer is in the jump cut. Through formative principles of film language, Hu has created an artistic directorial impression of how speed and ferocity can be displayed on film. (Bordwell, 2013)

Hu uses the jump cut again in the final confrontation. He frames Hui Yan, the Chan monk, to the far left of the frame (refer to Figure 30), and Commander Hsu to the right left of the frame (refer to Figure 31), again to filmically display the physical distance between the two. Hsu once again, in lightning speed, attacks the Monk (refer to Figure 32) yet once again is stopped by a punch on the forehead from the latter (refer to Figure 33) which sends Hsu back to almost the starting position.

Figure 30:"The Abbot monk framed to the far left of the frame," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 31: "Commander Hsu framed to the far right of the frame," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 32: "Hsu once again, in lightning speed attacks the Monk," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 33: "Hsu is once again stopped by the Monk's punch," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 34: "Front view of the Monk's powerful punch," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 35: "Side view of the Monk's powerful punch," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 36: "Hu's fast motion defines the Monk's powerful punch," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Figure 37: "Commander Hsu sent back to almost the starting position," King Hu, A Touch of Zen *[Xiá Nǚ], 1971.*

Hu's strong awareness of cinematic technique makes his work a legitimate heir, rather than a literal copy, of stage norms and conventions and it is for this reason that his style can be rendered as both operatic and cinematic, as both traditional and modernist. As Rodriguez (1998) rightly notes, this approach sharply differs from a view put forth by some critics and historians in China and the West, who have described the cinema as "an intrinsically alien cultural apparatus inherently rooted in the norms and concerns of ""Western realism." (p. 84)

The fact that Hu's *mise-en-scène* appears to be filmically operatic and balletic still needs to be used with discretion. As critics, our interest in the dance and acrobatics' spectacle of the actual Beijing opera, is normally directed towards a number of movements which are in some way or another a display of muscularity, which in turn raises the performance to an expectation of skill display to a knowing audience. But Hu is arguably interested in the kinetic

plasticity of physical action, not just the performers' bodily movements. He is interested in the movement of the cinematic frame in relation to the geometric values of the *mise-en-scène*. This is another instance where filmic realist theory fails to account for Hu's aesthetic tendency to abstraction whereby, he provides no occasions for performers to display their martial skill, supplying instead, as argued, offscreen trampolines and invisible wires to 'fake' some of the more spectacular somersaults and flips as discussed in the sequence above. This is a common practice in Hong Kong and Taiwan martial arts filmmaking. Conversely, Thai films like Prachya Pinkaew's *Ong-Bak* (2003), are marketed as films where no wires are used, hence foregrounding their Kracauer type of realist filmmaking and promoting Tony Jaa's martial art skills.

If in Hu's case what we, as audience, are viewing is a "dance", it is one that purifies motion from any reference to the performer's bodily skill. Therefore, it is in this context that the comparison to Lèger's "mechanical ballet" takes on its full force. Hu's use of Chinese operatic conventions is not always literal but more often than not filtered through a sense of constraints and possibilities which are integral to the medium of theatre. The result is Hu's own search for specific cinematic equivalents to the artistic concerns of Beijing opera. Thus, as Rodriguez (1998) rightly points out, Hu has, for instance, observed that the "physical limitations [of the theatre] are too great to do justice to the movements and the rhythms of operatic tradition, whose project can in fact be more adequately fulfilled by the more flexible medium of film." (p. 84)

Hu's appropriation of operatic norms is, for instance, selective and inconsistent. While Beijing opera performance calls for strict and minimal scenography in which individual objects may be used for a variety of figurative purposes, Hu's films tend to use objects in a more

lifelike, rather than in an overtly “symbolic”, manner. In addition, his cast does not consistently adhere to the strictly codified rules of stage performance. These inconsistencies bring out the extent to which the Beijing theatre not only furnishes Hu with a set of raw materials, including actual scores, “action effects,” and story lines, but also supplies certain aesthetic functions that can be reproduced but also elaborated, remodified and transcended by means of specifically cinematic devices such as editing, camera movement, choreography, and the cinemascope frame, as clearly seen in Hu’s cinema. (Rodriguez, 1998, p. 84)

Chapter 2: Floating and Drifting in Ruins and Fragments: Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* [Dōng Xié, Xī Dú]

"The world is now but a bundle of fragments" -

W. B. Yeats

(*Four Years* - Chapter 21)

"[T]ime is out of joint" -

William Shakespeare

(*Hamlet* - Act I - Scene V)

2.1 : Drifting away from the Typical *Wuxia*

Wong Kar-wai's film *Ashes of Time* [Dōng Xié, Xī Dú] (1994) remains an important film when discussing *wuxia* cinema because, initially, even critical views were of a mixed nature with some even commenting about the film's intense elliptical vision that seems to disarm the film of any cohesive plot. A typical example is Lawrence van Gelder's (1996) film review, where he writes that Wong's film "offers intermittent blurs of action, streaks of flying figures, flashing steel, and rare spatters and gouts of moist crimson, all washing across the screen like hurried brush paintings." (p. 1) Although billed as a martial arts film, *Ashes of Time* may be said to have received similar criticism to what almost 20 years later, Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *The Assassin* [Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng] (2015) received, as shall be discussed in a later chapter. In this sense, Wong's *Ashes of Time* seems to look forward to Hou's film in terms of its untypical thematic reliance on moments of intense stillness. It may be argued that Wong's true intention was to bend the martial arts films' conventional rules and present the audience with a *wuxia* film that operates within the parameters of a postmodernist vision. In fact, Wong imbues his characters with quintessential post-modernist life anxieties and crises in terms of illusion and uncertainty.

With the exception of *Ashes of Time*, every Wong film is set in the city, in a Hong Kong that is paradoxically both recognisable and unfamiliar. As in the case of *Days of Being Wild* [Āfēi Zhèngzhuàn] (1990), it may be a Hong Kong distanced in time, which takes place in the sixties, or it may be a diametrically opposed image of Hong Kong, like the Buenos Aires of *Happy Together* [Chūnguāng zhàxiè] (1997) literally on the other side of the earth. As Ackbar Abbas (1997) argues, "the city remains in all cases the space of desire [and] in spite of its backdrop of mountains and deserts, the kind of perverse affective relations" (p. 48) that develop in

Ashes of Time can only be connected with city's space. The city, therefore, is not only a physical space, but also a psychic one and although *Ashes of Time* is a *wuxia* film set in an unnamed historical period, its mood and ethos can be undeniably classified as modern, and to a certain extent post-apocalyptic, with resemblances to T.S Eliot's *The Waste Land* (1922) and George Miller's *Mad Max* (1979). Wong imbues certain frames in *Ashes of Time* with empty space compositions and sequences filmed with harsh light, which at times is overexposed, an artistic choice he uses in other films, namely *Chungking Express* [Chóngqìng sēnlín] (1994) and *In the Mood for Love* [Fa yeung nin wah] (2000). With films rooted in deep, meaningful tones and visual metaphors, audiences, without relying on dialogue, can still feel attuned and understand the narrative. In Wong's *Chungking Express*, there is a moment when the main characters are facing separation. Without explicitly telling the audience this, Wong relies on colour, specifically a deep blue melancholic palette and a small aeroplane prop, suggesting the characters' long arduous departure from each other. (Torres, 2020)

Figure 38: "Wong's use of the deep blue melancholic palette," Wong Kar-wai, Chungking Express *[Chóngqìng sēnlín], 1994.*

One typical trope found in Wong's cinema is the issue of identity crisis where many of his characters, most particularly in *Ashes of Time*, are examples that incarnate what Baudelaire (1857) labels 'fluid existences', or incomplete and unfocused identities. Like water, the identity of one character flows in and out of another, creating a complex and intricate symbolic space, as in the case of Ouyang Feng and Hong Qi. In fact, it might be said that Wong's filmic world floats and drifts in ruins and fragments. He conveys this vision through the interplay of ontology, epistemology and aesthetics. Although these can be viewed as three distinct and separate entities, paradoxically, in fact, they are closely interconnected, and this is certainly true in the case of Wong's films. In order to truly understand the ontological, epistemological and aesthetic significance of Wong's *Ashes of Time*, one needs to pay close attention to his concept of narrative structure. For Wong, cinematic narrative is not

a mere continuous and unbroken unfolding of events in time for the world cannot be known in terms of its totality, putative unity or harmoniousness. His vision is one which depicts the narrative in terms of psychological and epistemological time rather than chronological time. Hence, the overlapping of the past, the present and the future. For Wong, it is through this fragmentation and disjointedness that one can truly grasp some mere understanding of the world. For him the reality of fragmentation is the fragmentation of reality.

This chapter will argue that Wong's *Ashes of Time* is a very important *wuxia* film whose contribution to the aesthetic growth of Hong Kong cinema is clearly undeniable. It might be true to say that Wong is not an easy filmmaker and therefore his films are much more difficult to engage with and understand but arguably that is one reason that makes him stand out from other filmmakers even amongst the New Wave Hong Kong filmmakers of his generation and those who came after him. His films seem to be so intrinsically connected to each other, in fact, that they can be viewed as an interrelated exercise in reflection and extension or as Jean-Marc Lalanne puts it, "[a] filmography [...] frayed at the edges, [with] each work the column of an unbuilt temple." (1997, p. 9)

2.2 : Together in Crystal Dreams

As Wimal Dissanayake (2003) argues, *Ashes of Time*, like many of Wong's films, "puts into play the memory of ruins and the ruins of memory" (p. 3), which adds to his vision of futility. Dissanayake furthers his argument by stating that Wong is not interested in depicting life on film as it should be but rather takes the artistic approach of "mapping life as it brushes against the senses and intellect." (p. 3) It would be a disservice to try and explicate the various and wide arrays of the film's possible interpretations and therefore in this chapter the analysis shall focus mainly on the film's problematic linkage of memory and time and how Wong defines the complexities in which memory constitutes and de- constitutes characters in *Ashes of Time.* Whereas a film critic like Dissanayake pivots his analysis on Wong's treatment of time mainly on the philosophies of Levinas and Derrida, this chapter shall argue how a text like Marcel Proust's *In Search of Lost Time* [À la recherche du temps perdu] (1913-1927) and his Bergsonian concept of 'pure' time, that which is a succession of emotions melting into and permeating one another, are an equally applicable means to better understand Wong's cinematic vision. This critical understanding can be further exemplified through what Deleuze (1989) defines as the 'crystal-image', that which is constituted by the "most fundamental operation of time" (p. 81). He further notes that "since the past is not constituted after the present [...], time has to split itself in two at each moment as present and past." (p. 81). In this context, Deleuze argues that time is made up of this split, and it is this time-split that we see in the crystal image. Further, it is in this sense that Deleuze is concerned with the ways in which time is conceptualised as memory. Considering this hypothesis, a number of questions may arise, such as, if one considers memory, that is, remembering the past, as a stream of consciousness, then where does one draw the line of

when the past begins and the present ends? The Deleuzean answer is a simple yet an ambiguous one. He points out that a clear line of demarcation between the two is difficult to draw, for they coexist in each and every moment of one's life. This is where Deleuze's concept intermeshes with the Bergsonian understanding of the *déjà vu*. According to this phenomenon, if we are in a place or situation, a flow of memory from our past merges with the present, in order to present and uncanny feeling of familiarity. Typical film examples of this scenario would be Alain Resnais's *Last Year at Marienbad* [L'Année Dernière à Marienbad] (1961) and Bernardo Bertolucci's *The Spider's Stratagem* [La Strategia del Ragno] (1970).

When things occur in our present, we instantly recollect things from the past. Therefore, what we experience in the present is unavoidably influenced by past recollections. Memory is formed not in the past but in the very present, which, in Deleuze's words, is "the recollection of the present, contemporaneous with the present itself". (1989, p. 79) As Rushton (2012) defines it, "every moment can be split into an actual present and a virtual past, one carrying the other along with it." (p. 82) The opening quotation from L.P. Hartley's novel, *The Go-Between* (1953) encapsulates this when it states that "the past is a foreign country: they do things differently there." (1953, p. 9) Hartley uses the present tense verbs "to be" and "to do" to describe the past. Losey, in his film adaptation, adapts and appropriates this intermeshing of tenses into film language in terms of the crystal image. This can be immediately traced from the opening credits sequence where Losey displays the filmic present of Leo in his sixties by means of a rain drenched window glass overlooking the past sunlit countryside of the summer of 1900 when Leo first arrived at the Maudsley Manor.

To strengthen our argument, it should be mentioned that Hartley focuses on the image of the "*Atropa belladonna"* or the deadly nightshade. Just as Ozu's '*ukigusa'* in *Floating Weeds*

[Ukigusa] (1959), the plant that floats aimlessly as if free and separated from time bound parameters, Hartley's nightshade possesses "no harmony, no proportion in its parts [yet] exhibit[s] all the stages of its development at once" (Hartley, 1953, p. 204), again mirroring the notion of the past, the present and the future encapsulated as one. Therefore, the crystal image involves this splitting nature of time; the indiscernibility of the actual and the virtual and their momentary interactions. As Deleuze points out, this indiscernibility is an "objective illusion" (Deleuze, 1989, p. 69). Therefore, it can be concluded that the intermeshing of the present and the past, as disclosed by the crystal image, is not an illusionary result occurring within the individual's mind but rather an objective fact. It is a process in which the virtual becomes the actual and the other way round. In this sense, therefore, we can conclude that a crystal image differs from a flashback, in which the latter, derived from memory, is brought up by a subject, usually as a response or to reveal something in the present, while the former, is a product of an unattributable past and present. It is the product, whereby the actual and the virtual are entirely reversible.

In Wong's *Ashes of Time*, the crystal image can be clearly traced in the recurring dreams which materialise twice in the film. The first dream in Wong's theatrical cut of the film begins with Ouyang's voice-over saying that "[he] had a recurrent dream […] of the peach blossoms in [his] hometown" (Kar-wai, 1994, 38:42) while sleeping on a table. Wong starts with the crossfade to depict the dream which commences with a shot of a woman standing under the trees beside a beautiful lake where a stone is thrown causing ripples. Wong cuts to a close-up and fixes his camera on the water ripples increasing in size… and then crossfades again on Ouyang sleeping on the table. After this very brief intercut, Wong crossfades again to a long shot depicting a desert landscape beside a lake where an individual is rapidly riding a horse

away in the opposite direction of White Camel Mountain. Suddenly, Wong cuts and the narrator awakes with his eyes wide open. (Refer to Figures 39-45)

Figure 39: "Ouyang's voiceover of a recurrent dream while sleeping on a table," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

Figure 40: "Wong's crossfade that starts the dream," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

Figure 41: "The woman standing under the trees beside a beautiful lake," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

Figure 42: "Wong's camera in a close-up fixed on the water ripples increasing in size," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

Figure 43: "Another crossfade to Ouyang sleeping on the table," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

Figure 44: "A crossfade to the desert landscape," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

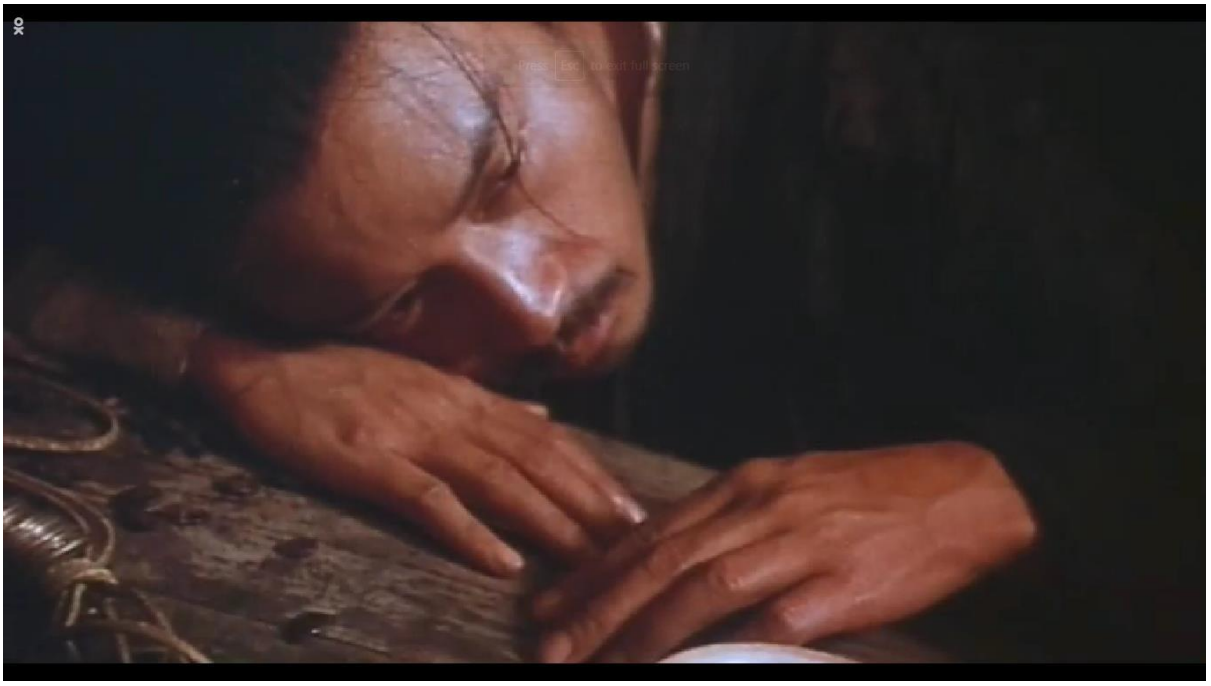

Figure 45: "Wong cuts, Ouyang awakes," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

In the second recurrent dream, the same lake appears, but this time, the pivotal images become the ones reflected on the lake's surface. Ouyang descends into a bizarre *mise-en-scène* after drinking a half bottle of the 'Wine of Forgetfulness' given to him by his deceased lover. At this moment, lying down asleep with his eyes closed, he feels his lover's tender hand touching his body (refer to Figure 46). Wong places the couple in a seemingly horizontal plane, drifting on water like Ozu's floating weeds (refer to Figure 47), with their bodies shining, sometimes bright and sometimes dark, caused by a light which mimics the flickering water-ripples. In contrast to the visual aesthetics that emphasise the couple's horizontal embrace, Wong's camera pans, in a long take, to a vertical inversive reflection from the water which fills the whole frame to show Ouyang's lover walking away from him (refer to Figure 48). In contrast with the first recurrent dream, this sequence ends with the same reflected frame of a person riding away (refer to Figure 49). The difference is that Wong films the second sequence from the lake's reflection and the riding direction is headed towards home. The recurrent dream episodes are a kind of mirroring that display Ouyang's ambiguous psyche of a past self who runs away from home and a present self-meditation of a suppressive past, a present dilemma, and a future homecoming. This is Wong's artistic and aesthetic rendition of what Hartley evokes with the deadly nightshade; a past, a present and a future encapsulated into one.

Figure 46: "Ouyang feels his beloved's tender touch of her hand on his body," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

Figure 47: "The couple drifting on water like Ozu's floating weeds," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

Figure 48:"The lover walks away from Ouyang," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

Figure 49:"Recurring reflections riding away," Wong Kar-wai, Ashes of Time *[Dōng Xié, Xī Dú], 1994.*

2.3 : Triumph of the Absurd

As Dissanayake (2003) points out, the English title of the film clearly indicates the significance of time, with all its multitude of philosophical interpretations, as a useful starting point to understand *Ashes of Time*. What is interesting though is that the Chinese title, *Dōng Xié, Xī Dú,* roughly translated as Malevolent East, Malicious West, focuses more on the concept of space. This is also fitting to our initial understanding of the film since much of *Ashes of Time* is purely devoted to exploring the complex nature of memory and desire, arguably intermeshed with the concept of time. It may be argued that by combining both interpretations from the English and Chinese titles, Wong was subtly hinting at the transcultural tropes happening in Hong Kong cinema. In better words, the synthesised combination of Western and Eastern conventions.

Like Samuel Beckett's play *Waiting for Godot* (1953)*,* Wong's filmic form can be said to stem Albert Camus's philosophy of the Absurd, which states that, while fundamental meaning might exist in the universe, human beings are not capable of finding it due to a form of mental or philosophical limitation. Hence, humanity, as personified by Vladimir and Estragon in Beckett's play and to a similar extent and effect by Huang and Ouyang in Wong's *Ashes of Time*, is doomed to face the Absurd, or the absolute absurdity of existence in the lack of an intrinsic purpose. Wong's *Ashes of Time* features intense moments of action juxtaposed with long periods of inactivity and waiting. In fact, it may be argued that Wong's characters in *Ashes of Time* are juxtaposed products of both Beckett's absurdist theatrical ghosts, who "spend the whole film waiting, frozen in pretentious and languid postures" (Lalanne, 1997, p. 13), and Sergio Leone's lonely characters, filmed almost always in close-up.

Even in aural terms, Wong's music is characterised "to bring out an unstated emotion". (Martinez, 1997, p. 30) In fact, it is interesting to note that for *Ashes of Time*, the filmmaker commissioned composer Frankie Chan, a former martial arts choreographer, to write a score inspired by Ennio Morricone's spaghetti western music, rather than the Chinese music traditionally used in Beijing opera as discussed in the previous chapter on King Hu. Wong makes it a must to depict a soundtrack, which as David Martinez (1997) notes, is not "just used for purposes of illustration, [but also] establishes a constant dialogue with both the audience and the characters." (pp. 30-31) In no way does this imply that Wong refuses to use culturally or historically coded music, or music that caters to the so-called local "Chinese" flavour, but rather he opts for this rendition of music to create his own way of cultural references, one which is more critical of modern times rooted in globalisation rather than localisation. Furthermore, such musical selections "represent different cultural influences that, juxtaposed, demonstrate the degree of heterogeneity of the references affecting the films, to the point where they defy simple cultural labels." (De Carvalho, 2008, p. 208)

Therefore, in contrast, even though Wong's use of Latin American songs in his *In the Mood for Love* and in *Days of Being Wild* might be historically authentic, they do not represent the cultural code normally related to them, but rather, Wong's own creative artistic vision of 'past-ness' rendered as stylistic creation. Considering that these well-known songs signify different meanings for different cultures, Wong is actively establishing relations that transcend national, cultural and generic borders.

In terms of connection with Beckett, a crucial common denominator found in Wong's films is the element of boredom but as Abbas (1997) argues, "[i]t is not the boredom of nothing happening", as in Beckett's *Waiting for Godot*, but "the nervous boredom of not knowing

what is happening, of losing the thread." (p. 46) Abbas furthers his argument by stating that "[t]ime weighs heavy not because it is empty, but because it has gone through strange loops." (p. 46) hence validating Wong's non-linear narrative dimension. It may be said that one of the film's strengths is Christopher Doyle's camerawork in managing to depict memorable moments of prolonged stasis and visually capturing what Abbas describes as agonising "heavy weight/wait" (p. 61) of dead time, a silent killer clearly felt by many of the film's characters, a notion which can be deemed as an inspiration to Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *The Assassin*. In Wong's *Ashes of Time,* the desert, the main setting of the film, is punctuated with wind and sandstorms with several frames and images purposely blurred to capture the intrinsic chaotic turmoil within the human.

2.4 : Time and Memory

It may be argued that no other filmmaker since Alain Resnais, Jean Luc-Godard and Andrei Tarkovsky has been so deeply attuned to the impact of time on memory, sensation and emotion. In fact, Wong's films feature a great number of moments when watches, clocks and calendars are part of the film frame, which serve not only as part of the design but also as essential elements that contribute to the symbolic significance of his film's narratives. As Dissanayake points out, the question of time is deeply inscribed both in the context and style of *Ashes of Time*. Ouyang Feng, the film's protagonist, constantly refers to almanacs and calendars, and further makes numerous references to seasons and time during his voice-overs, which seemingly appear as spoken diaries recounting time passages. Simultaneously, Wong presents a fragmented vision of time's understanding and calibration. A typical example in *Ashes of Time* would be the moment in which during the voice-over narration we hear, "day six (insects awaken) [followed by] day four (first day in spring)". (Kar-wai, 1994) Similarly, day 15 is alluded to twice: once as "sunny and windy [and later as] rainy". (Kar-wai, 1994) Such incongruities and inconsistencies, both in the characterisation and the delineation of time, are reconfigured and reflected in the visual imagery. At times, Wong presents the inability of some of his characters to pin down time, which results in vague phrases and uncertain articulations such as "a few years later", and "ever since that night". (Kar-wai, 1994) The film features flashbacks within flashbacks, shifts in point of view, disjunctive editing, surprising juxtapositions of events and fragmented sequences that enmesh Wong's most vital aspects of his narrative discourse and process of expression, a visionary structure which is experienced not only in *Ashes of Time* but other films of his.

In *Ashes of Time*, Wong underpins the philosophical paradigm of the parallelisms of time by depicting different characters visiting same locations in order to capture, in filmic terms, how time imbues one location with different meanings and significances. For example, Huang meets the Sunset Warrior's wife in the same location where, in a later sequence, Ouyang meets her. Therefore, filmic space in *Ashes of Time* becomes a way of exemplifying the power of time. Furthermore, in line with the Bergsonian concept of 'pure' time as that which is emotional and pertains to memory, Wong tackles the concept of time in a similar manner. The idea that time is a force of continuous flow can be deemed as a man-made construct that we as humans have got accustomed to use and experience in our daily life. Wong seems to be conveying an alternate conceptualisation of time by use of fragments, dislocations, discrepancies and disjunctions in the filmic narrative to depict this alternate way of making sense of this disjointed time-space continuum. Equally and effectively, memory plays a crucial role in the propulsion of the narrative and it may be argued that for Wong it is not the continuities that evoke memory but rather the discontinuities, and his narrative discourse may be said to stem from this hypothesis.

The prominence of the present is typically conveyed through the structure of Wong's narratives and an interesting aspect is that most of the narratives in his films cover a short span of time. In certain films such as *Chungking Express* and his later *Fallen Angels* [Duòluò tiānshǐ] (1995), Wong even depicts narrative time as close as possible to real time, a notion which can be attributed to a filmmaker like Tom Tykwer who used it most notably in his film *Run Lola Run* [Lola rennt] (1998). In fact, it may be argued that the non-linear narrative in Wong's *Ashes of Time* is there, but thematically and stylistically transposed where the narrative unfolds stories of other characters eclipsing Ouyang's narrative and interestingly

occurring at the same time. Furthermore, the montage of events seen from different perspectives heightens and deepens this notion of narrative abundance.

In narrative terms, Wong even transmutes the audiences' expectancy of the typical martial arts film. In the traditional sense, the audience is aware of the narrative in the present and the future is mostly unknown and therefore the films build a certain curiosity as to what is to happen next. Wong shifts this ontological framework by revealing to the audience, at most times in the very beginning, the future. This is usually revealed through either the visuals or voice-overs. It is as if Wong's characters, especially in *Ashes of Time*, are trapped in their own fate as well as in the fate of others. The film opens with the words, "In the years to come I will be given the nickname Malicious West" (Kar-wai, 1994), hence, verifying Wong's inversive rupture of the Bazinian spatial-temporal ontological framework of realism, where in Wong's filmic world, the future is in fact in the present. Simultaneously, the past is just as deeply rooted in mystery and is often bespoken or revealed in the same accurate manner as the future. Wong's vision of the past and future is boxed, inescapable and determined by, paradoxically, the present which remains "open, an enigma and a chance for adventure." (Mazierska, E., & Rascaroli, L., 2000, p. 16)

It is through this fascination with the idea of alternative temporalities that distinguishes Wong as a creative filmmaker. For him "the world consists of numerous private microcosms, some of them real, the majority only possible and existing in people's imagination." (Mazierska, E., & Rascaroli, L., 2000, pp. 16-17) Wong's hypothetical vision seems to draw attention to the unlimited opportunities of people meeting each other and overcoming their solitude. Hence the thematic significance of He Qiwu's inner monologue at the beginning of

Chungking Express: “We rub shoulders everyday. We might not know each other. But we could be friends someday.”

Chapter 3: Colour Me Synaesthetic – The Use of Colour and Realism in Zhang Yimou's *Hero* [Yīng xióng]

"Every human being and every people needs [...] a certain knowledge of the past, sometimes as monumental, sometimes as antiquarian, and sometimes as critical" - Friedrich Nietzsche

On the Uses and Disadvantages of History for Life

(From Untimely Meditations)

"Deeds need time, even after they are done, in order to be seen and heard" - Friedrich Nietzsche

The Gay Science

3.1 : The Inversion of the Bazinian Spatial-Temporal Ontological Framework of Realism

For André Bazin (1945), filmic images are replications and doubles of the world, or in other words, reflections of the physical world petrified in time. He pivots his film theory on the ancient Egyptian belief that, by mummifying corpses, the lives of the dead are preserved and held against the flow of time and ultimately death. For the French film critic, cinema, like the mummified corpse, can claim victory over the loss of time. He backs this up by stating that this is because cinema and the mummy are representations of life. Bazin believes that everything that is filmed was once in reality, and it is cinema that brings images back to life. However, later, he shifts his perception about time's importance to represent reality. Bazin analyses a particular sequence from Robert J. Flaherty's *Nanook of the North* (1922), namely the seal hunting sequence. According to Bazin, Flaherty is interested in the relationship between Nanook and the animal, and further points out that the very substance of the image, is the actual duration of time that Nanook takes in the film in order to lie down and wait before he strikes. This creates, according to Bazin, a situation whereby the audience seems to be right beside Nanook, throughout the sequence and sharing his excitement of actual hunting time.

As discussed in the previous chapter, Wong's treatment of time is of the utmost importance for Asian cinema studies and to complement the aforementioned Bazinian discussion of *Nanook of the North*, one can refer to a famous scene from Wong that deals with the 'realistic' representation of time. In the opening sequence of *Days of Being Wild* [Āfēi Zhèngzhuàn] (1990), Yuddy asks Su Li-zhen to look at her wristwatch. She does, and at this moment, Wong's camera remains fixated for one minute, with the clock's clicking sound heard offscreen. After that Yuddy tells Su Li-zhen that "[f]rom [then] on [they] are friends for

one minute." He says that "[t]his is a fact [that she] can't retreat [because] it's accomplished." (Kar-wai, 1990) Here Wong seems to pay homage to Flaherty and to a certain degree to other films such as Fred Zinnemann's *High Noon* (1952), namely, for their faithful treatment of temporal reality in cinema unlike what he does in *Ashes of Time* [Dōng Xié, Xī Dú] (1994).

The case of Zhang Yimou differs just as Wong's does in *Ashes of Time*. Consider, for instance, the Old Master's funeral sequence in *Jú Dòu* (1990) which Zhang pivots on the ancient rule that requires that for a total of forty-nine times, both his widow and his niece, need to stop the coffin in order to show their loyalty. In this same sequence, the widow, played by Gong Li, and the nephew, who is actually her lover in the film, are portrayed by Zhang as kneeling before the coffin and trying in vain to stop it, because people would come up to take them away. Yet, Zhang makes them rush back to do it over and over again. In this three-minute sequence, Zhang's camera, unlike Wong's and Flaherty's, does not stay in one fixed state but rather like King Hu, captures their frustration and exhaustion by constantly changing positions and angles. What is even more intriguing is how Zhang's camera speed is later slowed down gradually, as if suggesting that they are cursed to do an infinite repetition of this ritual. It may be suggested that Zhang rejects the Bazinian notion of the realist theoretical framework and rather presents a temporal vision which echoes more the Nietzchean concept of eternal recurrence and the Camusian myth of Sisyphus, as can be similarly attributed to Wong's treatment of time in *Ashes of Time*.

Apart from Zhang's temporal treatment as an important marker that defines his idiosyncratic vision of existence, this chapter shall delve into another film aesthetic that equally and arguably better defines his vision and that is by means of analysing his use of colour. This chapter shall address how similar elemental filmic features which manifest in King

Hu's cinema seem to also permeate Zhang's films, mainly his *wuxia* film *Hero* [Yīng xióng] (2002). One of the main arguments in this chapter shall focus on the fight sequence in *Hero* between Nameless, played by Jet Li, and Sky, played by Donnie Yen, in terms of colour and temporal-spatial ontology.

3.2 : Synaesthetic Colour

As Linda C. Ehrlich and David Desser (1994) argue, colour in Asian cinema, most notably in Japanese cinema, was at its most experimental post-war phase with Daiei studio producing the most "highly desired and successful" (p. 309) films such as *Gate of Hell* [Jigokumon] (1953) and *Gate of Flesh* [Nikutai no mon] (1964). These films, along with other films such as Kon Ichikawa's *An Actor's Revenge* [Yukinojō henge] (1963) and Hou's *A City of Sadness* [Bēi qíng chéng shì] (1989) and Zhang's *Jú Dòu* (1990) are all examples of films which, as Douglas .Wilkerson points out, have combined "Eastern spirit with Western form" (Ehrlich, L. C., & Desser, D., 1994, p. 8). Furthermore, the same films served as an exercise to experiment with colour as a means to serve a dual purpose: the 'realistic' purpose and the deliberately decorative purpose and hence intermesh film with traditions as diverse as the *huāniǎohuà*[11] and the *sōsaku-hanga*[12]. All this can be contrasted to what Ehrlich & Desser (1994) describe as "the invisibility of classical Hollywood film style in which color should be attached to a specific meaning." (p. 8)

The filmmaking of Akira Kurosawa, among other Japanese filmmakers like Masaki Kobayashi, served as a major inspiration to Zhang's visual language in *Hero.* Both Kurosawa and Zhang's use of colour often suggests the emergence of a sensuously unifying cinematic language, one that challenges the meaning of recent ideas of the so-called 'pan-Asian' cinema. As Feng Lan (2008) notes, Zhang's vision is one which seeks to recast his *wuxia* protagonists as "culture heroes rather than merely swordsmen." (p. 33) In *Hero*, for example,

[11] *Huāniǎohuà*, is bird and flower painting, known to be a traditional type of painting in China, and considered to be one of China's precious cultural treasures. Its name derives after its subject matter.

[12] An artistic movement, initiated in the 20th century in Japan, consisting of woodblock printing.

Zhang directs long sequences of the film in a seemingly seasonal single colour palette, namely in red, white, blue, a green interlude and a primary narrative in black, in order to nullify the contiguous deduction of meaning possible in Zhang's earlier films. Just as Zhang seems to be presenting the audience with a somewhat open-ended interpretation of these sequences with the use of colour, it may be equally said that the filmmaker is also meta-cinematically meditating and reflecting on the purpose of colour in film and its various possible interpretations in the medium of film, a preoccupation which takes its most important cues from Kurosawa namely in a film such as *Dreams* [Yume] (1990).

In *Hero*, colour becomes a very powerful synaesthetic experience, where the audience, with presumably international and different backgrounds, can interpret the use of colour differently. One may argue, in fact, that Zhang, through his synaesthetic use of colour, creates a visual palette that parallels the film's multi-perspective storytelling by reinforcing the latter's implication that, quoting Macbeth, "nothing is but what is not" (Shakespeare, 1606/2005, 1.3.38). It might be implied that except for the red, which is ostentatiously associated with Western concepts of passion and 'Chineseness', Zhang combines different colour schemes to arguably, in part, echo Wilkerson's argument on Eastern and Western conventions which, intermeshing in return, relate to a wider range of audiences and not solely Asian ones. In his earlier films like *Red Sorghum* [Hóng gāo liáng] (1987) and *Raise the Red Lantern* [Dà Hóng Dēng long Gāo gāo Guà] (1991), as even the titles imply, Zhang mainly uses the colour element of Chinese red, to express the main emotional ethos of the films. It may be argued that Zhang at a later point in his filmography made a shift in his colour aesthetic where in a film such as *House of Flying Daggers* [Shí Miàn Mái Fú] (2004), the filmmaker adopts a wealth of colour elements, at times intermeshing turquoise and red. Furthermore, in one of his most recent films, *Shadow* [Yǐng] (2018), Zhang, in terms of colour tone, directs

the whole story in black and white and appropriates the Japanese *suiboku-ga*[13] and the Chinese *shui mo hua*[14].

Arguably, *Hero*, in which Zhang is at his most prolific use of colour, seems to convey an Eisensteinean overtonal montage[15] that contrasts with the Deleuzean overarching "critical-ethical" horizon of the epic. In comparison, Oliver Stone's *Alexander* (2004), "the florid tints and hues long associated with barbarism, carnality, and the feminine seem to surge from the screen to challenge and reorder the color palette traditionally associated with classical civilization" (Burgoyne, 2012, p. 18) Similarly, in *Hero*, Zhang seems to render the coloured memory sequences as a reflective contrast to the colour tone subdued present-tense sequences in mostly black and grey muted tones. The vibrancy brought upon by the memory scenes might be an artistic representation of the film's evident message of one individual for the sake of the many. By pivoting the role of colour as a symbol of cultural meaning, both films seem to be imbuing the visual "seeming" ephemera, the ornamental and the decorative dimension of the epic film, along with the colours of the costumes and the symbolism of the set design, with deeper thematic focus and importance. (Burgoyne, 2012)

Cinematographer Christopher Doyle (2003) was asked about the notion of colour in *Hero* yet seemed to disregard any symbolic connotations and connections between the scenes' colours and any philosophical understanding or reading. In this article, Doyle insists that the colour values of the film do not carry any symbolic reading. "White," he notes, represents the

[13] *Suiboku-ga*, is a Japanese technique primarily produced in China at the time of the Sung dynasty (960- 1274), consisting of a monochrome ink painting, and later taken to Japan in the 14th century by the Zen Buddhist monks.

[14] *Shui mo hua* is a type of black ink brush painting, in different dilutions, commonly used in calligraphy.

[15] Overtonal montage is a method of film editing which combines metric, rhythmic, and tonal montages with the result of making the audience feel emotionally connected to what is being seen.

"truer sequence, and we chose red to suggest that passion has a different truth" and "as far as I'm concerned, these colors are nothing more or less than what they are." (Doyle, 2003, p. 33) Now, while I do appreciate Doyle's comments, still, I remain unconvinced that the colour design of *Hero* is simply a spectacular form of ravishing imagery devoid of any semiotic meaning. To begin with, Zhang's powerful use of colour throughout his films, and predominantly in *Hero*, might be read as a key to understanding his work and his paradoxical vision of existence where multi-interpretational colour, like Hu's *wuxia* masks, acts as a "kind of camouflage or concealment, or perhaps better, a kind of [reality] masquerade." (Burgoyne, 2012, p. 33) Keeping this hypothesis in mind, therefore, a reference to Nietzsche's three registers of historical practice, as monumental, antiquarian, and critical, is quintessential in order to understand Zhang's vision.

3.3 : Re-creating the Colour Epic Film

Nietzsche (1874) defines monumental history as that which partakes of activity and ambition, antiquarian history as that which concerns preservation and admiration, and critical history as that which deals with abolition and liberation. These same three registers are appropriated by Deleuze (1986) in his critical interpretation of the central characteristics that define epic cinema. Deleuze's analysis of the antiquarian aspects of the epic form seem to resonate with Zhang's films, mostly in terms of statements he makes such as that "[a]ntiquarian history must reconstitute the forms which are habitual to the epoch [such as] wars and confrontations, [...] actions and intimate customs." (Deleuze, 1986, p. 150) He also makes note of "the vast tapestries, clothes, finery, machines, weapons or tools, jewels, [and] private objects" (p. 150) as crucial elements that define antiquarian history. It should be noted that for Deleuze, the antiquarian horizon includes what he calls the "colour-image" (p. 117) in the epic film, where for him, fabrics become a fundamental design element. Deleuze (1986) states that Cecil B. DeMille's *Samson and Delilah* (1949) attains its two main peaks of colour when the merchant displays the cloth and when Samson steals the thirty tunics. Similarly, in *Hero*, both the antiquarian and the monumental of the epic are mostly intermeshed in the exotic *mise-en-scène* and in the ornate choreographies of the duels. Where the film seems to diverge, though, from the coded characteristics of the conventional epic is in its rethinking of the critical-ethical horizon, the key dimension of the epic, which Deleuze defines as that which supervises and organises the rest.

One of the most notable traits in Zhang's rethinking, although he is not the first to do it, is his radical treatment of the epic conventional hero. Whereas in the conventional epic form, the audience can almost immediately identify who the hero is, after watching *Hero*, one of

the questions which may arise is who exactly is the hero in the film? Given that the conventional epic, in all its artistic form and interpretation, depicts a male hero, Zhang tends to shift this convention. By intermeshing both the *wuxia* and the *nuxia*[16], with arguable emphasis on the latter, in *Hero*, Zhang seems to articulate more the female characters' stories in the film in aesthetic ways such as rendering them in the ethereal colour sequences for which the film is mostly famous. This seems to suggest just how important his female characters, namely Moon, played by Ziyi Zhang, and Flying Snow, played by Michelle Yeoh are in the film. The argument can go further as to say that this "transnational mutability" (Hunt, 2007, p. 145) kept going and is still happening. Within Asian cinematic parameters, and during the time period of Zhang's *Hero* and *House of Flying Daggers*, this transference can be seen through Ziyi Zhang. A year after *House of Flying Daggers*, in 2005, she made her English-speaking debut in Rob Marshall's *Memoirs of a Geisha* (2005). It was a ground-breaking example where a Chinese actress played a Japanese role speaking in English.

It is through these aesthetic choices that Zhang seems to be creating a filmic variation of the typical epic thematic elements. Significantly, his choice of emphasising the *nuxia* and the female protagonists in *Hero* may be defined as a coded representation of Zhang's auteristic perspective, channelled through, and to a certain extent, disguised in his female characters, a notion which echoes King Hu's dual persona. In Hu's *A Touch of Zen* [Xiá Nǚ] (1971), the point of view is mostly attributed to the beautiful and mysterious Yang Hui-zhen, as it is attributed to the master's daughter, Ling, in Tsui Hark's *The Blade* [Dāo] (1995), and to Yu Shu Lien and to Jen Yu, played by Michelle Yeoh and Ziyi Zhang respectively, in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [Wòhǔ Cánglóng] (2000). If one also reads the timelines of the examples

[16] *Nuxia* refers to a female warrior or hero.

given, one can note that this female perspective trope is not an artistic choice invented by Zhang but rather the latter chose to keep it and furthermore to infuse Hollywood cinema with it.

3.4 : Colourful Balletic Bloodless Violence

Hero's narrative structure seems to resemble in more ways than one both that of Kobayashi's *Harakiri* [Seppuku] (1962) and Kurosawa's *Rashōmon* (1950) in terms of temporal transitions and multi-interpretation 'truth' narrations. The present tense may be argued to be represented in the framing story of the male 'hero', Nameless, and the king seated in his chambers. Zhang directs this scene in a dark, almost noirish tone of blacks and shadows, with a penetrating array of candles and a large scroll bearing the crimson character for 'sword'. Consequently, this colour palette is mirrored in the first reconstructed battle sequence between Nameless and Sky where in this rather complex and spiritually driven sequence set in a chess house, Zhang directs the duel in a nearly black and white palette, with only the subtlest tints of colour. At the exact moment of increasing dramatic tension leading up to a fatal combat, Zhang freezes both Nameless and Sky in action and makes them battle each other in complete stillness. Interestingly, Zhang creates a psychological battle, one which occurs in the minds of the characters where both contemplate "what might have happened" (Lee, 2007, p. 9). This termination of "real" action occurring and its continuation in the psychological realm within the minds of the fighters creates a caesura in the action's momentum and invites the audience "to participate in the contemplation of the imaginary [fantastic] action." (Lee, 2007, p. 9)

While this contemplative mood echoes throughout the film and arguably defines the rest of the film's narrative, particularly through the initial mind game between Nameless and the King, it also shifts the plane of perception from the present to the absent, or in other words, from "what is seen happening" to "what is seen not happening". (Lee, 2007, p. 9) This is where Zhang's 'use of colour becomes quintessential. In the aforementioned sequences, colour

becomes an absent presence. Consequently, this notion of mind games and absent presences seem to correlate with the computer program in *The Matrix* (1999) which serve as the space between the real and the hyperreal, two diametrically opposed realms that ultimately collide. (Lee, 2007) In fact, Zhang's *Hero* (2002) is flooded with fantastic action taking place in its characters' minds and with conflicting points of view of the same events, echoing, in a cinematic theoretical framework, the cinema of the non-event, mostly attributed to Michelangelo Antonioni, Andrei Tarkovsky and Yasujirō Ozu. Again, what Zhang seems to be trying to achieve, as the chapter argued earlier when discussing the synaesthetic colour and the female perspective, is intermeshing Eastern with Western cinematic tropes.

In the aforementioned battle sequence between Nameless and Sky, the staging of the non-event reveals not only what is not happening, but also "what in reality cannot be seen, namely the quick flashes of thoughts within the mind." (Lee, 2007, p. 9) Therefore, the entire sequence depicts a tensive scenario between the body's stillness and the speed of mental events occurring within the duration of stillness. This silent tension is then exemplified in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *The Assassin* [Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng] (2015) as the next chapter will argue where Hou pivots his film on the paradoxical interplay of the assassin's silent stillness and the precisely timed movement and montage cutting reflecting the assassin's precise timely attack. Similarly, Zhang manages to filmically capture a paradoxical hyper stillness made up of the tenacity, the speed of thought and the sharp mind required by martial artists. More interesting is Zhang's ability to accompany this stillness by two main temporal markers, namely by the *guqin*[17] musical scores played by the musician placed on the far side of the courtyard where the fight occurs, and the resonant sound of dripping water drops. Zhang

[17] *Guqin* is a seven-string Chinese musical instrument deemed to be an instrument of delicate and refined beauty.

directs the audience's sensory perception to feel more attuned to the non-narrative elements, namely the silence and the background sound or music and the *mise-en-scène* of the fight. As the non-event unfolds, these auditory and visual details become the base for constructing what Pauline Chen calls "a stylized musical performance" (2004, p. 41).

As discussed in the introductory chapter on Hu's vision of fantastic realism, Zhang, like Hu, manages to create a dance-like performance that places the fight within an artistic realm. The climax of this non-event is crucial as Zhang, once again, marks it by another caesura, precisely as the music is abruptly stopped by the broken zither strings, which signals a return back to the "real" action rendered in colour. Unlike the slow-motion bullets in *The Matrix*, in *Hero,* Sky splashes up a shield of water (refer to Figure 50) which Nameless and his "swift sword" penetrates (refer to Figures 51-52), and in bullet time motion, plunges into Sky's chest (refer to Figure 53) and defeats him. (Lee, 2007)

Figure 50:"Sky splashes up a shield of water," Zhang Yimou, Hero *[Yīng xióng], 2002.*

Figure 51:"In bullet time motion Nameless penetrates," Zhang Yimou, Hero *[Yīng xióng], 2002.*

Figure 52:"Nameless's "swift sword" penetrates," Zhang Yimou, Hero *[Yīng xióng], 2002.*

Figure 53:"Nameless plunges into Sky's chest and defeats him," Zhang Yimou, Hero *[Yīng xióng], 2002.*

Instead of focusing on the fighters and their bodies, Zhang's camera closes in on the objects that stand between the fighters and what the audience sees, therefore, is a screen of objects, whose "dance" is "dramatized by the orchestration of sound effects, revealed to us like a series of abstract paintings in succession." (Lee, 2007, p. 9) Like Hu's films, Zhang's *Hero* becomes not so much a historical epic but rather a kind of highly stylised and determined dreamy ballet with bloodless violence.

Chapter 4: Long, Lush and Languid Takes: Silent Stillness in Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *The Assassin* [Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng]

"Attain utmost emptiness. Abide in steadfast stillness." -

Lao Tzu

[*Tao Te Ching* - Chapter 16]

4.1 : Depicting Something out of Nothing

Although *The Assassin* [Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng] (2015) got Hou Hsiao-Hsien the Best Director award at that year's prestigious Cannes Film Festival, various critics left no stone unturned at praising the film's exceptional beauty yet conceding that, content-wise, the film seems to depict very little. In fact, considering its own seeming lack of action in a genre known for action, is counter to a clear narrative direction. This chapter shall focus on how Hou conveys his idiosyncratic vision of existence through his film language by conceiving a *wuxia* film that goes against the grain of the genre and manages to depict something out of nothing.

Wuxia swordplay films are conventionally known for their frenzied movement and their fantastic martial arts battle sequences that defy gravity with characters hovering through thin air. In Hou's *The Assassin*, there are even less fight scenes than in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* [Wòhǔ Cánglóng] (2000) which was one of the instances where Hong Kong and Chinese audiences who were accustomed to fantastic action with fast cuts and blood fight sequences, were partly discouraged by the lack of such events. In fact, Hou's action sequences in *The Assassin* are even shorter, with less wirework for aerial flight balletic sequences and much less martial arts choreography and special effect stunts. Hou, consciously, even uses no trace of blood in the film.

Known for his realistic film style favouring long takes and an unmoving camera, throughout this chapter it becomes clearer that *The Assassin* requires, as do most of Hou's films, a different practice of viewing, one that must contend with the aesthetics of stillness. Anthony Carew (2016) argues that *The Assassin* "embodies [Hou's] signature penchant for stillness and minimalism, ambience and atmosphere, and revelation through reverie." (p. 65)

This style of film language is the complete opposite of what this paper analyses in previous chapters most particularly when compared to King Hu's vision, composed of rapid cuts and fast montage which at times is defined as a counter Hollywood type of style. A case in point is one of Hou's earlier films, *Flowers of Shanghai* [Hǎi shàng Huā] (1998) which although 113 minutes long, it consists of only 37 shots in 31 scenes with each shot averaging about three to four minutes. This type of filmmaking, termed as *slow cinema*, can also be found in other national cinemas namely in Hungarian cinema with Béla Tarr's *Sátántangó* (1994) and *The Turin Horse* [A torinói ló] (2011) and Soviet cinema with Andrei Tarkovksy's *Mirror* [Zerkalo] (1975). Hou's vision, like Tarr's and Tarkovsky's, is unyielding to such an extent that, as Sheng Mei Ma puts it, Hou "risks alienating his viewers" (2016, p. 101). As this chapter progresses, Ma's hypothetical argument shall flourish as that is precisely the point of *The Assassin*.

As previously pointed out, Hou's cinematic style, especially in *The Assassin,* is one which favours long, lush and languid takes and which seems to resonate with Bazin's theory of cinematic realism, which also favours the use of the long shot and the long take to preserve a realistic impression of a holistic filmic spatiality. It may be argued that Hou uses these techniques, in most of his films, to observe a location and its environment. The French critic believes that by portraying space in this 'realist' manner, one addresses the social and psychological 'truth' of the event being depicted. In fact, an example to back up this Bazinian spatial hypothesis is no other than Hou himself with an earlier film, *The Sandwich Man* [Er zi de da wan'ou] (1983). Comprised of three vignettes from three different filmmakers, Hou opens his with a long and deep focus shot which lasts about thirty seconds. A 'sandwich' man appears from the far side of the frame, his upper body only visible, with huge street billboards behind him making him appear in miniscule stature. Hou directs the 'sandwich man' to keep walking towards the camera but, no matter how long he walks, the distance between him and

the camera remains fairly the same. His small body continues to be dwarfed by background street signs. This establishing shot does not indicate any ontological or spatial information of the plot but rather reveals the universality of existence, that which depicts how the underprivileged face enormous oppression and prejudices in society. Hou, through his early films and with this sequence, was already forming his own unique film language by injecting the film frame with the stillness of the ancient Chinese landscape Sui and Tang Dynasties' paintings, a trait that as this chapter will argue kept lurking in Hou's later films. In terms of film language, *The Assassin* follows a similar film logic. In fact, Hou's idiosyncratic vision of the *wuxia* genre may be argued to pertain more to a meta-cinematic one as opposed to the conventional notions which make up a *wuxia* text. Just as Eric Rohmer's *Perceval le Gallois* (1978), functions like a filmic medieval manuscript, so does Hou's with *The Assassin* work like a filmic Sui Tang painting, confined "in stillness and silence [with] visual rapture married to narrative minimalism." (Carew, 2016, p. 65)

Furthermore, as Amelie Hastie (2016) points out, if one also dissects the term *wuxia* itself and refers to its root semantic meaning, one notices that the '*wu'* in *wuxia* can mean both 'to cut' and 'to stop' and "[i]t also refers to the weapon—usually a sword—carried by the assassin [or[the hero of the [narrative]." (p. 74) It may also be argued then that, in meta-cinematic terms and parameters, "for Hou, the "cut" that is [undeniably] central to his film is not only that of the [assassin's swift and precise] sword but that of the [film] edit […] [for since] the camera remains relatively fixed within individual scenes [in *The Assassin*], it is left to the editing to open up new space." (pp. 74-75)

Some viewers may argue that Hou's *The Assassin* is a film that captures the spiritual Zen Buddhist notion of self-illumination, whilst others perceive the film as an aesthetic exercise

for Hou. In terms of the former, a theological analogy can be made whereby one can perceive an assassin as “God’s lonely man.” (Scorsese, 1976) Like Jean-Pierre Melville in *Le Samouraï* (1967) and Martin Scorsese in *Taxi Driver* (1976), Hou creates a film pivoted on loneliness and reticence, for his female protagonist Yinniang remains, like Hou’s camera, largely still, mute, or barely moving, all traits typical of a professional assassin.

4.2 : The Avian Assassin

Hou opens *The Assassin* with a visual prologue devoid of any aural sound and then cuts to a tight black and white shot of two donkeys standing side by side. Hou pans his camera to the left and captures two women "dressed in parallel to the film's stock: one wearing all white, the other black" (Hastie, 2016, p. 74), already encapsulating his meta-cinematic vision of the medium. Even though the sequence is devoid of almost any sound, yet it is through this stillness of the image and sound of the film that Hou reinforces Yinniang's slow yet intent movement and further "[guides the] viewer to sit with it, to observe quietly" (Hastie, 2016, p. 76).

Through this opening prologue and "empty shot", Hou "assaults the ear with "the sound of nature"" (Chen, T. C., & Chang, H., 2019, p. 107). He complements the black and white shot with "sounds of wind rustling through the leaves, distant horses, and the offscreen birdsong". (Chen, T. C., & Chang, H., 2019, p. 107). Although sound is enhanced in a way that the audience can hear the onscreen donkeys' breathing and their hooves clattering, it may be argued that this scene is more about the birds' sounds rather than the donkeys' or horses'. By constantly keeping the birdsong offscreen throughout most of the film, Hou creates "an affective assemblage of multiplicity" to suggest "a larger world beyond the constraining frame of nation, machination, and assassination" (Chen, T. C., & Chang, H., 2019, p. 107) and further intensifies Yinniang's Chionesque acousmêtre. Like Norman Bates in Hitchcock's *Psycho* (1960), she is an avian assassin, lurking everywhere, even in her absence.

Hou imbues his film with avian imagery and symbolism. If we take the black-and-white opening sequence, the audience arguably gets to experience the bird through three different

means, seemingly through three different ears: as a bird in sound, a bird in narration and a bird in vision. As Hou's camera pans left and frames Yinniang in black and her master, the Nun-Princess, in white, in a two-shot (refer to Figure 54), the latter orders Yinniang to cut down her target "as if he were a bird in flight" (Hsiao-Hsien, 2015) and hands her a dagger as weapon. By this shot, the audience has already encountered the bird in sound and the bird in narration. The next shot reveals Yinniang and the Nun-Princess's point of view overlooking her target amidst a caravan of horses walking to the right. Hou cuts the next shot following Yinniang as she moves stealthily from right to left in the forest (refer to Figure 55) and cuts to her target riding a horse from left to right (refer to Figure 56). Hou cuts back to Yinniang in the forest about to launch her attack. In the next shot, Yinniang darts from the left toward her target on a horseback (refer to Figure 57). Her target is not killed easily "as if he were a bird in flight" according to the Nun-Princess's instructions but rather, Yinniang approaches her target "like a bird in flight", hence becoming a bird in vision (refer to Figure 58). (Chen, T. C., & Chang, H., 2019) Hou, like Hitchcock's treatment of Norman Bates, makes Yinniang kill as instantaneously as a bird of prey.

Figure 54: "Avian Yinniang observes," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

Figure 55: "Yinniang moves stealthily from right to left in the forest," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

Figure 56: "Yinniang's target riding a horse from left to right," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

Figure 57: "Yinniang darts from the left toward her target on a horseback," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

Figure 58: "Like a bird in flight, Yinniang slashes her target," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

One may also argue that Hou seems to suggest that Yinniang is even faster than sound itself. Hou accentuates her speed, like King Hu does "through rapid editing, slow motion, and the silencing of diegetic sounds, which are [then] replaced by a stylized slicing sound across the man's neck followed by an electronic whirr." (Chen, T. C., & Chang, H., 2019, p. 107) During the killing process, time is dilated and slowed down into five successive quasi–freeze frames. The unseen blood spurting from the neck seems to also be an element hinting at Hou's bending of the *wuxia* genre and also of Japanese filmic conventions. Whereas in a film like Toshiyo Fujita's *Lady Snowblood* [Shurayuki-hime] (1973), the audience witnesses such similar blood spurting on-screen, yet Hou renders it unseen.

4.3 : Resurrecting the Off-Screen Silent Film

As previouly pointed out, the cinematic style of Hou seems to resonate with the Bazinian notion of realism, favouring the use of the long shot and long take to preserve reality. Hou, in most of his films, uses the long shot and long take as a means to observe the overall environment, although, such an environment is not limited by the camera's frame but rather, "Hou's actors often move on and off screen, allowing viewers to become aware of the fact that the camera — and by extension, the viewers — are part of this environment." (Fan, 2019, pp.179-180) It may be argued that through this vision, Hou is also resurrecting tropes from the silent cinema era. A case in point is F.W. Murnau with films such as the seminal *Nosferatu* (1922) where for the German filmmaker what happens offscreen determines the thematic significance of what occurs within the frame. As Lloyd Michaels (1998) argues, Murnau's concerns are more psychological rather than of a social nature, and this becomes evident in two ambiguous cuts during the sleepwalking sequences between Nina and the far distant count. The first can be traced when, from her bedroom in Bremen, Nina calls out to Jonathan, who lies "prostrate before the menacing shadow of the count in his Carpathian castle". (Michaels, 1998, p. 70) Murnau's intertitle states that Jonathan heard her warning cry, but the crosscut shows only Nosferatu retreating in apparent response. In a second sleepwalking sequence, Nina awakens to announce, "He is coming! I must go to him!" (Murnau, 1922) but her reference is an ambiguous one since Murnau follows this with a shot, not of Jonathan returning by stagecoach, but of Nosferatu's ship at sea. This ties with what happens earlier on in the film, where Nina had kept a vigil on the beach, supposedly for Jonathan, which further suggests that the film's truest marriage is between the vampire and herself. (Michaels, 1998)

Like Murnau's use of the offscreen space, Hou breaks open the confine of the screen frame and incorporates the offscreen space into the *mise-en-scène* of his films. Bazin (1967) writes that "[t]he screen is not a frame like that of a picture but a mask which allows only a part of the action to be seen." (p. 105) In this sense, therefore, "[w]hen a character moves off screen, [the audience] accept[s] the fact that he is out of sight" yet, equally important, it must be noted that the same character "continues to exist in his own capacity at some other place." Bazin, 1967, p. 105)

Following this theoretical framework, let's first consider a sequence from Hou's *The Boys from Fengkuei* [Fēngguì lái de rén] (1983), depicting a fight between two groups of young men, in order to then analyse how in *The Assassin*, Hou intensifies his use of offscreen. In his earlier film, during this fight sequence, Hou places his camera in a centre position, to directly face the end of the alley where the fight takes place (refer to Figure 59). After the fight commences, one group pursues another, and both groups exit the screen from the left-hand side (refer to Figure 60). The same two groups then, return from the left side, run across the lane and exit, this time, from the right side of the screen (refer to Figure 61). Hou's camera remains rooted in the same spot with the screen depicting a seemingly empty shot (refer to Figure 62). Ten seconds later, the groups enter from the right side of the screen again and the fighting continues, until the camera cuts to the next shot. It may be argued that this scene's main point of interest is that ten-second empty shot, due to the fact that the fighting does not take place on screen, in front of the camera, but somewhere offscreen. Hou makes the audience imagine the fight happening offscreen as opposed to witnessing it onscreen.

Figure 59: "Hou places his camera in a centre position, directly facing the end of the alley where the fight takes place," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Boys from Fengkuei *[Fēngguì lái de rén], 1983.*

Figure 60: "Both groups exit the screen from the left-hand side," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Boys from Fengkuei *[Fēngguì lái de rén], 1983.*

Figure 61: "Both groups return from the left side, run across the lane and exit, this time, from the right side of the screen," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Boys from Fengkuei *[Fēngguì lái de rén], 1983.*

Figure 62: "Hou's camera remains rooted in the same spot for ten seconds with the screen depicting a seemingly empty shot," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Boys from Fengkuei *[Fēngguì lái de rén], 1983.*

More powerfully, in *The Assassin*, Hou intensifies his offscreen usage, not just in visual terms but also aurally. Lim Giong, the soundtrack designer of *The Assassin*, dissects the film score as consisting mainly of two types. He defines the first type as that which is not part of the dramatic narrative namely the sounds whose "sources are invisible onscreen but are implied to be present in the diegetic world, appearing and disappearing randomly, not necessarily connected with the dramatic narrative and the mood of the scenes." (Hsiao-yen, 2019, p. 95) On the other hand, the second type of film score is defined by Lim as the music that comes from instruments seen on the screen with notable examples such as the *guqin* music played by Princess Jiacheng and the music that accompanies the *Sogdian* whirl dance[18].

Unlike what this paper argued in a previous chapter when discussing King Hu and his auditory filmic appropriation of the Chinese opera in his films, for Hou's *The Assassin,* Lim points out that music stylistics, in terms of the traditional Chinese opera, were deliberately avoided and instead elements similar to Middle Eastern music were used in order to depict the intermeshing *Han* and *Sogdian* culture of the Tang. For the sake of our chapter's main argument, let's consider the first type of film score, as it is arguably of the essence to truly understand Hou's vision, for it intensifies the dramatic narrative and the mood of the scenes. Such diegetic sounds, although occurring offscreen, are a product of Hou's intention to recreate the Tang milieu in which the story unfolds. Examples of these types of sounds are the wind, the rustling of leaves, the occasional drumbeat, the singing of cicadas echoing Kurosawa's shrilling ones in *Ran* (1985), and a few notes played by old Japanese traditional instruments namely the *chiba*, a woodwind instrument which literally means "one thousand

[18] Sogdian dance imported in China in the first half of the first millennium AD. The dance was imitated by the Chinese, and became extremely popular in China, where it went on to be performed at court.

leaves", from the name of a former governor, a hundred years ago. For Hou, natural elements like the wind have their own sound and the film's characters, like the figures in Chinese landscape paintings, are at one with nature. It may also be argued that Hou opts for the *chiba*, in particular, due to it being a woodwind instrument, thereby implying that what lurks within the avian assassin is a heart of wood.

Arguably, Hou best captures this metaphorical notion during the fight in the woods. Yinniang becomes one with the natural landscape almost as if she is an inevitable element in it, in her stillness. She observes without being observed and Hou filmically captures this through the stillness, as the key to her invisibility. What Yinniang evokes is Emerson's belief that "nature does not like to be observed". (Emerson, 1983, p. 473) In this sequence, Hou manages to filmically blend the fantastical and the realistic. He frames Yinniang walking past the leaves as if she were a leaf herself and with masterful framed composition, Hou's camera pans and frames the female assassin within wooden tree log parameters as if, like a bird, they are her protection. Still, in this sequence, it is arguably the 20 second fixed low angle shot capturing a filmic landscape of the hard wooden trees seemingly penetrating the soft clouds, which is mostly intriguing. Like in Hou's fight sequence from *The Boys from Fengkuei*, as previously mentioned in this chapter, here in these 20 seconds, Hou seems to be depicting Yinniang off-screen as a Chionesque absent presence, observing in silence, invisible, fixed like Hou's camera and almost metamorphosised into those trees with only a few natural sounds of birds and rustling leaves. Her auditory voyeurism is often helped with height, hence the low angle shot to exemplify the height, where sounds tend to travel up and becoming more vivid when heard from above, and human vision tends to point down. The longer Yinniang waits, the more lethal and deadly she becomes.

Hou directs the characters and the camera in this sequence to move in a very slow manner like the cautious assassin that Yinniang is, and then breaks this flow and its accompanying silence with the sudden attack that starts the fight, in turn replacing the slow pans with faster cuts, mirroring the sudden reflexes and techniques of the assassins, and the sounds of the touching blades with every strike. The fight sequence is brief, yet Hou artistically seems to be encapsulating what van Gogh claims when questioning Japanese art, as the discovery of "a man who is undeniably wise, philosophical and intelligent, [and] spends his time […] [studying … a single blade of grass" (Vincent van Gogh to Theo van Gogh, 24 September 1888) and Yinniang, in Hou's film, is indeed a tenacious and precise assassin who contemplates and observes for long but captures the right moment to strike.

Figure 63: "A leaf among leaves," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

Figure 64: "Hou's master framed composition," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

Figure 65: "Hou's fixed 20 second low angle shot," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

As analysed, therefore, one can arguably say that Hou's understanding of realism, as is Hu's to Kracauer's theoretical frameworks on photographic reality, is not limited to the Bazinian concept of cinematic reality and arguably transcends such a framework. Hou manages to filmically depict Li Mu Bai's words in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger Hidden Dragon* when he urges Jen to "defeat movement with stillness". (Lee, 2000)

4.4 : A Filmic Tang Painting

Like Wong Kar-wai's *Ashes of Time* [Dōng Xié, Xī Dú] (1994), Hou's *The Assassin* is also a film that floats and drifts across time and space, one which through Hou's intentional direction of cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-bing's camera demands its audience to observe and absorb through its stillness and long takes and presents a vision of the *wuxia* genre that twists convention into something more artistic, abstract, idiosyncratic. In short, it is Hou bending *wuxia* to suit his style. Admittedly, critics like Abé Mark Nornes and Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh (2014) claim that Hou's style is arguably influenced by Japanese filmmaker Yasujirō Ozu. In *The Assassin*, though, it may be argued that by pivoting the film's narrative on the Tang Dynasty tales, Hou is not solely reminiscing Ozu in terms of style but, in fact, like Murnau, whose *Nosferatu* reclaims German cultural tropes which Stoker appropriates in *Dracula* (1897), as discussed in a previous chapter, Hou is arguably reclaiming Chinese cultural tropes which have been appropriated by the Japanese.

The Tang and Five Dynasties landscape paintings were arguably important sources of inspiration for Hou to create the film's setting. The amalgamation of colours, the multi-layered mountains, rivers, fields, and gardens found in these paintings were, as Peng Hsiao-yen (2015) argues, instrumental for Hou "to conceptualise the colour tone for the interior design and for the silk screens and transparent veils that often appear in the film." (p. 90) Interestingly, a year later, Wen-Ying Huang, the production designer of *The Assassin*, was chosen as the art director for Martin Scorsese's *Silence* (2016) which is an adaptation of Shūsaku Endō 1966 novel. Scorsese's film is arguably influenced by Japanese paintings from the 17th century Edo period in Japan. In fact, one of the most important elements found in these paintings is the capturing of mist. Scorsese, as he does in the opening sequences of *Taxi*

Driver (1976), *Raging Bull* (1980) and *Shutter Island* (2010), opens *Silence* with a mist flooded frame. In fact, the Japanese Tang-style temples and shrines also served as a number of main shooting settings for *The Assassin*. In Hou's film, the audience experiences breath-taking silent and poetic images of nature which serve as a backdrop to the complex human drama in a Tang world. Rather motionless and seemingly soundless, Hou's film is a visual and aural representation of the human inner struggle of Yinniang, the assassin.

Like *Flowers of Shanghai*, another of Hou's historical epics, *The Assassin* appears on screen like a series of cine-paintings with few cuts, evocative colours, and profound beauty. It may be argued that "these paintings are often landscapes; shrines to the natural world, vast, inspiring, and foreboding" (Carew, 2016, p. 65), with human figures, like Hou's sandwich man's body, proceeding through the frame but remaining relatively small. In Chinese culture, mountains and water, as also visible in Wong's "pure" time vision of existence in *Ashes of Time*, symbolise cosmic forces that work harmoniously to a ceaseless renewal of the universe. The change of seasons, also in terms of natural elements for Chinese painters, is a manifestation of the rhythm of the universe itself. In other words, these Tang paintings are a meditative expression of man's Aristotelian 'purpose' and place in the cosmic order. If one just appreciates these Chinese landscape paintings at their face value only, one tends to merely miss the hidden philosophical depths conveyed in them and in what Hou encapsulates in *The Assassin*. One of the main reasons is arguably due to the fact that Chinese landscape paintings were never really purely about nature, but more about human nature. They are a meditative practice and a reflection of man's place in nature.

According to art historian Qian Zhengkun, "when Confucianism, with its humanist concerns, was the dominant force before the Sui and the Tang, the foregrounded human

figure in the landscape painting was larger than the mountains, with the landscape retreating to the background." (Hsiao-yen, 2019, p. 93) He argues that when Zen Buddhism prevailed during the Tang dynasty period (618–907 CE), human beings in landscape paintings took more of a miniature stance which indicated a shift of perception in the relationship between man and nature with the former seemingly insignificant and a nothing in the face of nature. (Hsiao-yen, 2019) Consequently, *The Assassin* features shots of serenity, namely of mountains and waters that echo the Chinese landscape painting that emerged before the Sui dynasty (581–618) and was further developed into an independent genre by the mid-Tang (690 and 705), during the An Lushan Rebellion (755 AD - 763 AD), marking a high time of both cultural and economic flourishing and political unrest. In these landscape paintings, the Tang artist found his aesthetic escape from a restless world smothered in the turmoil of politics. For the sake of this chapter's argument let's consider some reproductions of Tang landscapes from artists like Li Sixun, Zhang Xuan, Zhang Sengyao, Mi Fu, and Zhan Ziqian, in order to exemplify our appreciation of Hou's aesthetic. (Refer to Figures 66-75)

Figure 66: Li Sixun. (ca. 1500). Emperor Taizong Arriving at the Jiucheng Palace*. [Ink, colour, and gold on silk]. Currently not on view.*

Figure 67: "The Commander arriving on a horseback," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

Figure 68: Zhang Xuan. (907). Lady Guoguo's Spring Outing*. [colours on silk]. Liaoning Provincial Museum. China.*

Figure 69: "Princess Jiacheng escorted," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

Figure 70: Zhang Sengyao. (700-800). Fu Sheng Expounding the Classic*. [colour on silk]. Osaka City Museum of Fine Arts. Japan.*

Figure 71: "Princess Jiacheng playing the zither," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

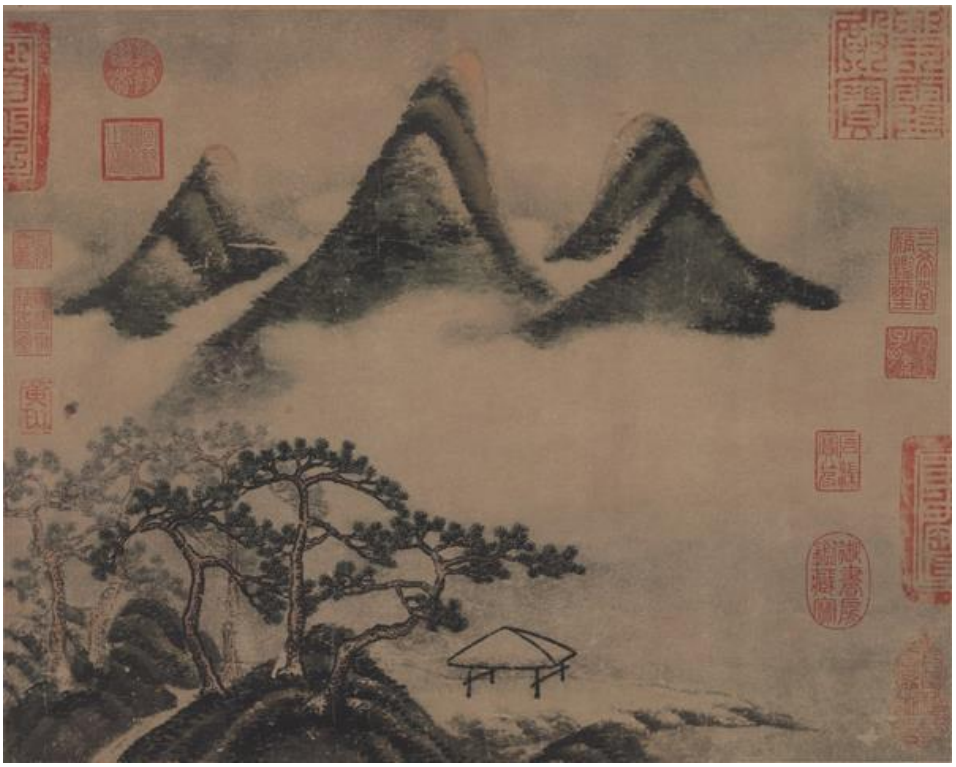

Figure 72: Mi Fu. (1100c). Mountains and Pines in Spring. *[ink and color on paper]. National Palace Museum, Taipei, Taiwan.*

Figure 73: "Landscape Smothered in Mist," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

Figure 74: Zhan Ziqian. (ca. latter half of the 6th c). Spring Excursion*. [ink and colour on silk]. The Palace Museum, Beijing, China.*

Figure 75: "Miniscule humans in Breathtaking Landscape," Hou Hsiao-Hsien, The Assassin *[Cìkè Niè Yǐnniáng], 2015.*

It is through these idiosyncratic choices that one can assess Hou's unique contribution to the *wuxia* genre. Conventional martial arts sequences would deem unfit for a character like Yinniang. Consequently, as seen in previous chapters, namely when discussing Hu and Zhang's cinematic vision of existence, it would be a fallacy to say or even imagine that a "pure" Chineseness has ever existed. In Hou's case, *The Assassin*'s visual design and the music are testament to widen our understanding that culture is a constantly evolving concept by means of borrowing and infusing elements within it. This is what enriches culture and its power to renovate. No culture that operates in a vacuum or isolates itself prospers. However forceful one might to try to discourage cultural movement and evolvement, total isolation has always been impossible, in the remote past, in the present and in the future.

Conclusion

While Hong Kong's commercial film industry seems to be immersed in both action and violence, it may be argued that a handful of filmmakers have managed to capture filmic action and violence in a stylised manner. These filmmakers managed to transcend film action and violence by means of "stylistic experimentalism [hence] creating critical meditations on violence that not just address fundamental concerns of genres that seem to require violence as an attraction but also probe deeper into questions of the inherent nature of violence in human existence and social formations." (Teo, 2010, p. 156) Although Bazin's and Kracauer's critiques of film realism may have seemed as valid and true at the time, creative filmmakers such as Hu, Wong, Zhang and Hou transcend such film theoretical frameworks.

Hu's cinema opera, as this paper shows, is his own appropriation of Beijing opera, faithful to the representational context of traditional stage performance in many aspects yet comes with the cinematic practices and artistic goals that are significantly deviated from stage conventions. (Law, 2014) Under his directorial manipulation, this attempt resulted in his idiosyncratic yet fascinating treatment of defining 'action cinema' as that which was never conceived as actual confrontation, but rather as a dance, as a performance.

Wong's vision in terms of disjointed time and space and the crystal-image recreates a pattern of circularity, most particularly in the recurring dream sequences, which combines the conscious interior and the unconscious exterior. Wong directs Ouyang's dreams and memories by moments of circularity and ellipses in order to generate a framework that encapsulates the past, the present and the future into one.

Zhang, following Hu's steps, manages to transcend the conventional epic to articulate more the female characters' stories in the film and re-creates fight sequences to operate like

dances within the realm of art in aesthetic ways such as rendering them in the exquisite colour palettes. Zhang seems to be presenting the audience with a somewhat open-ended interpretation of these sequences with the use of colour, as like Hu's masks, Zhang synaesthetic colour is presenting his own idiosyncratic vision of existence and at the same time the filmmaker is also meta-cinematically meditating and reflecting on the purpose of colour in film and its various possible interpretations.

Hou, very much like Wong, conveys his own idiosyncratic vision of existence through his film language by conceiving a *wuxia* film that goes against the conventional notions of the genre and manages to depict something out of nothing by creating a film that operates like a Sui Tang painting. Like the Chinese landscape paintings who were a meditative practice and a reflection of man's place in nature, Hou depicts a profound study of human nature, in this case, Yinniang, the avian assassin.

To conclude, it must be stated that while this paper studies the aesthetics of fantastic realism mainly in *wuxia* films by Hu, Wong, Zhang and Hou, I still feel intrigued by other filmmakers of the genre, namely, Tsui Hark, Chang Cheh, John Woo, and Chor Yuen. It would be deeply rewarding if other students and critics conduct critical research on the latter aforementioned filmmakers and further shed light on their visions. Such work intensifies audiences' appreciation of such filmmakers and their films and further expose the genre to a wider audience.

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