THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

THE ANIMIST IMAGINATION OF CINEMA

A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO

THE FACULTY OF THE DIVISION OF THE HUMANITIES

IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

DEPARTMENT OF CINEMA AND MEDIA STUDIES

AND

DEPARTMENT OF EAST ASIAN LANGUAGES AND CIVILIZATIONS

BY

PAO-CHEN TANG

CHICAGO, ILLINOIS

JUNE 2020

CONTENTS

LIST OF FIGURES iii

ABSTRACT v

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS vi

INTRODUCTION THE ANIMIST IMAGINATION AND ITS SHAMANS 1

CHAPTER 1 THE CHILD 32

CHAPTER 2 THE AUTISTIC 100

CHAPTER 3 THE MARTIAL ARTIST 154

CHAPTER 4 THE LEPER 213

CODA THE FILM CRITIC 265

BIBLIOGRAPHY 274

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1.1: Frame from *Children of Men* (2006) • 33

Figure 1.2: Frame from *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007) • 52

Figure 1.3: Frame from *Air Doll* (2009) • 62

Figure 1.4: Frame from *Café Lumière* (2003) • 77

Figure 1.5: Frame from *Café Lumière* (2003) • 84

Figure 2.1: Frame from *The Assassin* (2015) • 130

Figure 2.2: Frame from *The Assassin* (2015) • 132

Figure 2.3: Frame from *The Assassin* (2015) • 143

Figure 2.4: Frame from *The Assassin* (2015) • 145

Figure 2.5: Frame from *The Assassin* (2015) • 149

Figure 3.1: Frame from *The Grandmaster* (2013) before digital modification • 177

Figure 3.2: Frame from *The Grandmaster* (2013) • 178

Figure 3.3: Particle systems at work in *The Grandmaster* (2013) • 178

Figure 3.4: Frame from *The Grandmaster* (2013) before digital modification • 180

Figure 3.5: Digital effects at work in *The Grandmaster* (2013) • 181

Figure 3.6: Frame from *The Grandmaster* (2013) • 181

Figure 3.7: Frame from *The Grandmaster* (2013) • 183

Figure 3.8: Frame from *The Grandmaster* (2013) • 183

Figure 3.9: Frame from *The Grandmaster* (2013) before digital modification • 184

Figure 3.10: Frame from *The Grandmaster* (2013) • 185

Figure 3.11: Frame from *Ashes of Time* (1994) • 186

Figure 3.12: Frame from *Meditation on Violence* (1948) • 194

Figure 3.13: Frame from *Meditation on Violence* (1948) • 195

Figure 3.14: Frame from *Meditation on Violence* (1948) • 195

Figure 3.15: Frame from *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978) • 200

Figure 3.16: Frame from *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978) • 200

Figure 3.17: Frame from *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978) • 201

Figure 4.1: Frame from *Sweet Bean* (2015) • 238

Figure 4.2: Book cover of *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* • 239

Figure 4.3: Frame from *Sweet Bean* (2015) • 251

Figure 5.1: Frame from Radiance (2017) • 272

ABSTRACT

This dissertation examines the audiovisual aesthetics of contemporary East Asian art cinemas, with films by Kore-eda Hirokazu, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Wong Kar-wai, and Kawase Naomi as my privileged objects of study. Collectively, their recent works present a new mode of filmmaking and an ethical position based on an expanded notion of "personhood" that sees various nonhuman entities as persons. Insofar as their shared rethinking of the constitutive boundaries between the human and the nonhuman is concerned, I submit that their artistic visions are best understood through the logic and language of animism: a worldview which sees every entity as potentially animate, soulful, and thereby personal. "Primitive" but by no means dated, animism as conceptualized in these films addresses pertinent and pressing issues of our time, not least against the backdrop of ecological crisis.

In order to understand how the worldview of animism and film aesthetics mutually influence each other, I study the interaction between the human characters and various nonhuman others in a number of films by these filmmakers. Each of the four chapters in this dissertation is devoted to one type of human figure, whom I describe as "shamanic": 1) children; 2) people with autism spectrum disorder; 3) martial artists; 4) former leprosy patients. Through the mediation of film aesthetics, these shamanic figures bridge the human and nonhuman realms in various ways that befit their respective mode of being and living. What emerges out of our engagement with these films from the perspective of animism is an original account of contemporary cinema as characterized by its metaphysics, stylistics, and the specificities of its human character's subjectivity.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The Animist Imagination of Cinema has evolved with the help and inspiration of so many individuals near and far. I thank most especially the members of my dissertation committee at the University of Chicago for their intellectual and emotional supports. Tom Gunning taught me that big claims did not exist in a theoretical vacuum but must grow out of our curiosity towards the world and sustained, intimate engagement with it. He embodies a model of scholarship and mentorship to which I can only aspire in my future writing and teaching. Professionally, Paola Iovene challenged many things I took for granted. Personally, she demonstrated what a principled living could look and feel like. I thank her in particular for her timely reminder, during a rather dark period, that "Du, lass dich nicht verbittern in dieser bittren Zeit." Daniel Morgan showed me the power of film criticism. The way he performed it made me realize that it was possible to marry attentiveness and critical distance when it comes to the objects we care about. Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, above all else, pointed me to things that mattered in both work and life.

The foundation of my doctoral studies was built during my time as an undergraduate student at National Taiwan University and Masters student at the University of Chicago. At the former, Iris Tsung-huei Huang, Shiao-ying Shen, Hsiu-chih Tsai, and Ming-tsang Yang were the best teachers a clueless teenager could ever ask for. At the latter, the kindness and support from Jennifer Wild, Heather Keenleyside, Noa Steimatsky, and Anna Lee were pivotal. I thank Jennifer, Noa, and Shiao-Ying, in particular, for introducing me to the wonder, relevance, and fun of film studies.

On campus, two writing groups I joined gave me a taste of the power of scholarly community. I thank my fellow Wolverines: Carl Fuldner, Bill Hutchison, Sarah Kunjummen,

Agnes Malinowska, Katharine Mershon, Nell Pach, and Allison Turner; and my fellow Dumpling Rebels: Alia Breitwieser, Nancy Lin, and Yiren Zheng. I also wish to express my gratitude to many participants in conferences and workshops where I presented early drafts of my chapters, especially the Taiwan Studies Workshop at the University of California, Davis and the University of Chicago's Mass Culture, Visual and Material Perspectives on East Asia, Animal Studies, and the Franke Fellows Workshops.

Ongoing conversations with numerous teachers and colleagues in and out of Chicago made this dissertation possible and academic pursuits in general worthwhile. They include but are not limited to Michael Bourdaghs, Dave Burnham, James Leo Cahill, William Carroll, Kyeong-Hee Choi, the late Hannah Frank, Naixi Feng, Colin Halverson, Yueling Ji, Tien-Tien Jong, Katerina Korola, Mikki Kressbach, Francesca Lambert, Leah Li, Noa Merkin, Richard Neer, Jordan Schonig, Takuya Tsunoda, Chao Wang, Artemis Willis, Wu Hung, Junko Yamazaki, Yuqian Yan, Emily Jungmin Yoon, Chang-min Yu, Alex Zhang, Ling Zhang, and Boqun Zhou.

Staff members of the Department of Cinema and Media Studies, the Department of East Asian Languages and Civilizations, the Film Studies Center, and the Center for East Asian Studies at the University of Chicago provided the essential support for my campus life and beyond in the past six years. I also thank the China Times Cultural Foundation, Franke Institute for the Humanities, SCMS Student Writing Award, the SCMS Transnational Cinemas Scholarly Interest Group, ASLE Graduate Student Paper Award, Ishibashi Foundation Fellowship, the Chiu Scholarly Exchange Program for Taiwan Studies, Taiwan's National Film Institute, and the Domitor Student Essay Award for their support and recognition at different stages across this journey.

Frequent or regular banters with Katerina Korola, Chang-min Yu, Chih-chan Tien, Steve Wei, Michael Lukey, Frank Lutrin, Matthias Staisch, and Chiao-hsuan Luo have kept me afloat and laughing. Their friendship and companionship turned stressful times into enjoyable memories.

To my family is this dissertation dedicated, after all. I thank my parents, Shi-chi Yang and Hsin-min Tang, for bearing with my eccentric career choices all these years and for believing in me in spite of all. They have sustained me as always, even from afar. And in sweet memory of my grandfather, Chien-chang Yang (1926-2015), by whose photographs and in whose atmosphere was this dissertation written.

INTRODUCTION. THE ANIMIST IMAGINATION AND ITS SHAMANS

> *Daily we use unmeasured energies as if in our sleep. What we do and think is filled with the being of our fathers and ancestors.*
>
> —Walter Benjamin, "The Metaphysics of Youth"[1]

Midway through a celebratory banquet in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Assassin* (2015), a pair of disembodied hands abruptly appears, tearing a piece of thick, yellow paper into what vaguely resembles the shape of a human body. They belong to, as the following shot reveals, a bald man with a long white beard and eyebrows, sitting at the center of a compact, dimly lit room. Through the translucent black curtains that surround his seat, we see him dip the tip of his left middle finger in two kinds of ink, colored black and red respectively. Alternating between them, he swiftly presses his inked fingertip on the paper cutout, leaving more than a dozen black and red dots on its surface, before tossing it into a basin full of water. As close-up shows the surface of the cutout figure, with most of the dots on its head, chest, and limbs, the old man whispers some indistinct words which magically weight down the floating paper to the bottom of the basin. It descends as it gradually dissolves, leaving no visible trace in the water. The next shot brings us to a courtyard outside of the mansion where the banquet is held. The camera makes a leftward lateral track to follow three torch-carrying patrols in the background. As they exit the frame, the camera pans down and tracks back to capture, in the foreground, a small but steady stream of water that emerges from a capped well and flows towards screen right. Another team of patrols walk into the frame; the flame on their torches creates a lateral progression of fire in the depth of the space, marking a sharp elemental contrast with the running water in the fore until it seeps

[1] Walter Benjamin, "The Metaphysics of Youth," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, ed. by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996), 6.

underground again. The subsequent shot leads us away from the courtyard to the bottom of the mansion, where a thin cloud of white smoke arises, transforming and extending the previously flowing water into a gaseous form. Tracking up and left to follow the smoke's ascension and percolation through the mansion's elevated basis, the camera arrives at a corridor. From the background, a few joyous dancers who have just performed at the banquet walk towards us. As one of them passes through the area from which the smoke has diffused into this connecting space, she slows down, covers her nose, and appears painful. Panting, she drags herself towards the nearest pillar and leans on it for physical support. From the lower right corner of the frame the white smoke re-emerges, steadily spiraling up along the pillar and revolving around her. The next shot cuts to an extreme long shot looking into the corridor from the exterior. The rest of the dancers and some female servants rush towards the pillar from, respectively, the left and right edges of the frame. Shortly the film cuts back to the corridor and captures how all of them, horrified by the ghastly incident, scream and flee from the scene, leaving behind the cursed girl who has been excruciatingly fastened to the pillar by the immense force of the rapidly twirling smoke, unable to break through its crushing grip. It is at this moment that the film's protagonist, Nie Yinniang, walks into the frame from screen right. Nie jabs the girl in the back. Immediately the cloud of smoke dissipates and disappears. In a dead faint the girl falls and Nie gently rests her on the floor.

Though the generic category of martial arts cinema to which *The Assassin* arguably belongs has never precluded fantastical elements, this thrilling sequence stands out in a film where entities, human and nonhuman alike, otherwise obey the laws of physics, where nothing (too) unempirical happens. Indeed, its straightforward staging of a supernatural phenomenon seems to have posed an interpretive challenge for critics, who cannot quite reconcile the blatant

use of magic with the familiar discourse of realism, understood as the depiction of objective, everyday reality, through which Hou's past films have frequently been discussed. Such a "touch of black magic," one reviewer suggests, "[is] balanced by a more down-to-earth realism."[2] Another reviewer, praising how the director "straps 'The Assassin' firmly to the ground—and to the mixed, real-world emotions of his protagonists," emphasizes that "Hou Hsiao-Hsien strives for realism, not magic. That's why he took the Cannes Best Director prize this year for 'The Assassin' back to Taiwan."[3]

Rather than taking this sequence as an imbalanced, ungrounded misfit that hinders a wholistic understanding of the film, this dissertation advances that the operational logic of its magic offers a definitive framework of interpretation for us to approach not only *The Assassin* but also a prominent mode of contemporary filmmaking. Behind the mystery of this sequence lies a shared principle by which a cycle of films structures its world and asks to be viewed. The principle is the worldview of animism; and this cycle of films constitutes the titular heuristic of this dissertation: the animist imagination of cinema.

While the title of my concept foregrounds the power of imagination, the foundation of the animist imagination of cinema is not so much the division between fiction and documentary modes of filmmaking but a structural component of narrative cinema: the relation between characters and their environments. To qualify as an animist imagination, a film should feature a human character who acts as an intermediary capable of fashioning an animist sphere, wherein nonhuman entities could be understood as animate and personal. Insofar as the nonhuman can be

[2] Mark Kermode, "*The Assassin* Review—Martial Arts to Die For," *The Guardian*, January 2016, available at https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/24/the-assassin-review-hou-hsiao-hsien-nie-yinniang.
[3] Ryan Lattanzio, "5 Questions for Hou Hsiao-Hsien About Filmmaking and 'The Assassin'," *IndieWire*, October 2015, available at https://www.indiewire.com/2015/10/5-questions-for-hou-hsiao-hsien-about-filmmaking-and-the-assassin-176242/.

as just personal as the human might be in such a sphere, possibilities of human-nonhuman communication transpire. By opening up such an animist sphere on screen, the human intermediary—and by extension, the film as a whole—demonstrates to the viewer specific know-hows of attending to, interacting with, and caring about various nonhuman entities.

To evoke further associations with the worldview of animism, I describe these human intermediaries in the animist imagination of cinema as "shamanic figures." Like the ethnographic shaman who serves as a ritualistic mediator between physics and metaphysics, the shamanic figure participates in the world of the nonhuman through some aspects of his or her particular identity and associated mode of living. By thematizing such a figure's connectivity and communication with the nonhuman, an animist imagination submits to its viewer pedagogical strategies of navigating the sameness and difference between human and nonhuman realms. Not simply one element among many in the animist imagination of cinema, then, the shamanic figure serves as its very agent, based on whose presence and specificities each work of the animist imagination arranges itself. In other words, each shamanic figure's characteristics, defined by his or her ability to recognize nonhuman personhood, determines how each animist imagination structures all aspects of its filmic world and presents them to its viewers.

Consider how the old sorcerer in *The Assassin* instantiates the lesson on animist engagements with the nonhuman that the shamanic figure could offer us. Certain knowledge of black magic that he possesses allows him to awake the latent vitality of various objects. Paper and ink, following his ritualistic arrangement, transform themselves from mere matter into predators that are mobile, shapeshifting, intentional, and interactive. While it would be absurd to claim that the main objective of this sequence is to stage a tutorial of malicious spell casting, the sorcerer's action does provide a step-by-step visualization of the two rules of sympathetic magic

which, according to Marcel Mauss's canonical account, an ethnographic shaman's animist capacity follows: the law of similarity and the law of contiguity. The former explains a mimetic identification between distinct entities—like produces like; like acts upon like. Outward similarity between two entities creates an affiliation between them, as seen in the inferential relation of the paper cutout to the cursed girl.[4] The latter defines the identification between a part and the whole, pointing to the indivisible nature of such essential entities as spirit and vitality, which exist as a whole in each of a person's bodily parts, the objects that he or she has been in close contact with, and the larger milieu where he or she dwells.[5] To exert influence on someone through magic thereby takes a transference of impact down the sympathetic chain: from one object to another until it approximates, if not directly touches, the target of the spell. The series of shots in the sorcerer sequence wherein the mobile camera follows the trajectory of the liquified and, then, gasified paper cutout exemplifies the cooperation of the two laws: not only does the cutout resembles the contour of a human being but it also travels to a specific human being's precise location. (Indeed, after the incident, the head of the security guard returns to examine the corridor and finds, right next to the pillar to which she was forcefully attached, the cutout which has re-solidified from permeating smoke into its original paper form.) In other words, while this sequence might not teach us much about the savoir-faire of an animist malpractice, it gives form to a schematic outline of animism's general operation.

This pedagogical weight of the animist imagination of cinema reflects a larger, collective engagement with the heightened condition of ecological insecurity today. Indeed, from around the 1970s onwards, along with the emergence of proto-theoretical accounts of posthumanism, not

---

[4] Marcel Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, trans. Robert Brain (New York: Routledge, 2001), 84.
[5] One's vitality, in this view, is not only contained in a single hair and a small piece of nail clipping, but also the scissors used to trim the hair and the nail clippers themselves. Ibid., 80.

least animal studies, numerous art projects with strong ecological consciousness have attested to the instability of the notion that there exists a unified human subject distinct from the nonhuman. These artworks have urged us to rethink the constitutive boundary of human subjectivity and the dominant notion of anthropocentrism that was once, if not in many ways continues to be, the primary ideological ordering of our life. In recent years such an ecological commitment has only increased in momentum and scope across media. Underlying the vibrancy of ecocriticism, the emergence of "cli-fi" literature, and the green turn of visual culture, in which the sub-discipline of film studies known as ecocinema partakes, is a shared sense of instability that arises as the human subject endeavors to recognize, investigate, and comprehend various nonhuman others whose pervasive presence—from newly developed viruses to forest engulfing fires to the damaged planetary ecosystem as whole—is deeply felt even though it might not always be invisible.

Given that humans could in no way solely exist in this world where nonhumans afford virtually all the necessary conditions—or "ecosystem services," as environmentalists have termed—for human flourishing, the concepts of "the human" and "personhood" must entertain the existence of nonhuman entities, however inanimate or quietly animate they might seem. As we live through a new paradigm of the world that commands an indispensable welding of any individual agent or community with countless nonhuman beings across the planet, so we must relentlessly lend them our regard.[6] The question of who counts as a person thereby becomes a contested field with increasingly high stakes, not least because personhood generally indicates a

[6] This is particularly true given that other lessons of coexistence from modern history, unhappily, cannot seem to be transposed to the here and now of present-day ecological crisis. Unlike the threat of nuclear warfare which could still be attributed to some discernable Dr. Strangelove, this time no one is in total charge of pressing that launch button; ever more sweeping than the tide of globalization (with its fantasy of an asepticized unanimity), the ecological juggernaut seems to have found a way to fully assimilate all geographical and ideological exteriorities. There is no ideological outside, as the popular discourse asserts, because ecological crisis such as climate emergency is not a human construct but a reality faced by all "persons."

legitimatized status in possession of basic rights under the protection of the legal system. It is out of this historical context that scholars across humanities and social sciences have developed the animist worldview into a privileged theoretical framework for rethinking personhood, as seen in a host of recent ecological thoughts including new materialism, object-oriented ontology, affect theory, thing theory, speculative realism, and actor-network theory. Indeed, according to Philippe Descola, animism is extremely generous in its attribution of personhood and, consequently, sociality to nonhumans. While non-anthropologists might have the misgiving that the language of personhood renders animism anthropocentric, essentially the human and the nonhuman share the same condition, with the former's only privilege being "the ascription to nonhumans of institutions that are similar to their own so as to establish with them relations based on shared norms of behavior." "Animism is thus better defined as anthropogenic," Descola argues, "in that it contents itself with deriving from humans only what is necessary in order for nonhumans to be treated like humans."[7]

As part of a contemporary audiovisual culture that attempts to depict the current human condition in a more-than-human world, the animist imagination of cinema aims at laying bare the range of vicissitudes, limitations, and ironies with which we pursue the possibility of togetherness with so many nonhuman others in the shifting climate today. As imaginary responses to different ecological uncertainties, if not already emergencies, the animist imagination forms a kind of useful cinema. Not only does it envision various tactics of viewing that help us recognize nonhuman entities as persons, but it also demonstrates that, beyond mere recognition, we can gain something profound and meaningful by caring about nonhuman persons too. As a textual construct, each animist imagination delineates on screen a utopian placeholder

[7] Philippe Descola, "Between Nature and Culture," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (New York: Routledge, 2015), 87.

that functionally overcomes the distance between the human and nonhuman worlds, namely the source of ecological calamity. Crucially, this utopia does not simply happen but can be sketched, composed, and rendered by the rich stylistic devices that cinema has to offer, meaning that it could ever redefine and expand itself in terms of peculiarity, incoherence, and stochasticity. Such plasticity of the animist imagination, itself the plasticity of cinema, gestures towards Frances Ferguson's reflection on the aesthetics encouraged by the advent of climate change: "the benefit of the kind of shift registered in the sublime—when we know more than we understand."[8] As what we have understood to be the standard of personhood gets defamiliarized, alternative models of human-nonhuman relations might just emerge, the precise contour of which as outlined in each film is what this dissertation strives to unpack.

To account for the range of permutation of my heuristic, this dissertation closely studies a number of exemplary films from the oeuvres of Kore-eda Hirokazu, Hou Hsiao-hsien, Wong Kar-wai, and Kawase Naomi—four brilliant filmmakers whose recent films I read as intertexts of one another with regards to their documented interpersonal exchanges, foregrounded thematic memories, anxious weights of influence, and collective reflections upon the human-environment relation through the animist worldview. (Notice, here, the absence of their common background from East Asia as one of my reasons of selection, to which I shall return.) These core texts for my dissertation are, in order of appearance across four chapters, *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007), *Air Doll* (2009), *Café Lumière* (2003), *I Wish* (2011), *The Assassin*, *The Grandmaster* (2013), *Sweet Bean* (2015). Like the old sorcery in *The Assassin*, in each of these films a shamanic figure interacts with one kind of nonhuman entity through the cinematic mediation of

[8] The role that cinema plays in regard to Ferguson's view on climate change criticism cannot be overemphasized, given that her view itself follows Miriam Hansen's work on cinema and experience, particularly the sections devoted to Adorno and Kracauer on aesthetic experience. Frances Ferguson, "Climate Change and Us," *diacritics* 41.3 (2013), 38.

certain stylistic devices and technologies. While throughout this dissertation I will frequently point to a wealth of intertexts by other filmmakers or from other historical periods with which my privileged films converse, ultimately I have decided to focus on a relatively small corpus because, viewed together, these films foreground four distinct but interrelated types of shamanic figures that best illustrate the full potentiality of the animist imagination of cinema. They include: 1) children; 2) people with autism spectrum disorder; 3) martial artists; 4) former Hansen's disease patients. In surprising ways informed by their particular subjectivities, these four types of shamanic figures respectively identify and engage with the personhood of objects, animals, natural landscapes, and our daily bread. It is thus through the figure of the shaman—the seasons of their lives; a variety of innate and acquired capacities they come to possess; and their personal accomplishments and agonies—that this dissertation organizes its four chapters, with each chapter dealing with a shamanic type in depth.

Before I discuss the significance of each shamanic type and the implication of studying the four of them together in the specific order I have arranged, an account of how the language of animism has been mobilized across various discourses is in need in order to better contextualize the historicity of my heuristic. In what follows I will elaborate upon the centrality of animist worldview not only for contemporary ecocriticism but also for the cinematic medium.

Animism Reanimated

Originally a concept advanced by Georg Ernst Stahl in the early 18th century, animism (*animismus*) sees the living body as an organism animated by a vital force (the Aristotelian notion of *anima*) instead of a mechanism that reduces all life activities to physical and chemical phenomena. According to Gunnar Stollberg's historical tracing, this notion paved the way for the

emergence of the discourse of vitalism in eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biology, natural philosophy, and medicine, before it eventually met its demise in early twentieth century as physicalism and mechanism gained primacy in these fields. Following and modifying Stahl's animism, the vitalist scientists developed a theory of life that regarded the source and signs of vitality as the outcome of a mysterious life force as opposed to the mainstream view of causal mechanism and physics—an accepted view after the seventeenth-century scientific revolution—that theorized nature as a running machine. Stollberg thus suggests animism could be seen as the conceptual ancestor of vitalism, the first stage of the vitalist discourse.[9]

Its influence in the scientific world aside, Stahl's term was also picked up, albeit with a twist, in the field of religious anthropology, most famously by the Victorian anthropologists Edward Tylor in his 1871 *Primitive Culture* and J. G. Frazer in his 1890 *The Golden Bough*. Stahl's original conceptualization, while in debt to Aristotle, places the vital force of the soul in the Christian tradition: the infusion of soul into the human body as God's creation. The Victorian anthropologists held onto Stahl's core concept but expanded on the Christian framework. Their writings proffer the best known definition of animism today: a "primitive religion" characterized by its acceptance of spirits that travel, like the wind, in and out of not merely human bodies but potentially everything.[10] By acknowledging the existence and power of spirits, the archaic men made sense of and controlled a concrete, physical world in which non-empirical phenomena—that which cannot be tested out or (re)produced through scientific observation and

---

[9] Gunnar Stollberg, "Vitalism and Vital Force in Life Sciences—The Demise and Life of a Scientific Conception," 1-6 (unpublished manuscript, December 2017), available at http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/soz/pdf/Vitalism.pdf.
[10] This is not to deny the strong interdependence of body and soul in some cultures, however. As Emile Durkheim suggests in his study of aboriginal tribes in Australia, "Just as there is something of the body in the soul, since it sometimes reproduces the body's form, so there is something of the soul in body. Certain religions and products of the body are thought to have a special affinity with the soul: the heart, the breath, the placenta, the blood, the shadow, the liver, the fat of the liver, and the kidneys, and so forth. These various physical substrates are not mere lodgings for the soul; they are soul itself viewed from outside." See Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, trans. Karen E. Fields (New York: The Free Press, 1995), 245-246.

experimentation—were nevertheless felt or encountered. However, the modification of Stahl's Christian view did not aim at creating a distinction between primitive beliefs and Christianity, for the term "primitive religion" was itself a tautology in the nineteenth-century context where religion, according to Robert A. Segal, was already regarded as "the 'primitive' counterpart to either scientific theory (Tylor) or applied science (Frazer)."[11] Science, arguably the most powerful discourse since the Enlightenment, likewise enabled people to make sense of and control the world, only now through direct and rational methods approved by science itself, taken to be the immutable, universal standard. Functionally speaking, then, religion and science were both epistemological tools through which the human approached the world. They were incompatible, however, insofar as science considered religious explanations of the world not simply passé but fundamentally false. As the dominant way of conceptualizing the world had gradually evolved from one that put its faith in religion to one based on science, a paradigm shift took place.[12]

It is a commonplace now that such a teleological narrative does not adequately describe the lived reality, a sphere where indices of Bruno Latour's celebrated claim that "we have never been modern" were abundant. Science and (a host of textual traditions known more commonly today as) religion; the modern and the archaic; technology and magic—none of these binary pairs holds water in the thick of everyday. In many ways, animism crystallizes these entangled concepts and forces: a discursive site that cannot be fully disenchanted and thus gets revived today against onrushing ecological crises, anxieties over the location of personhood, and the quest for an alternative model of planetary sustainability. Consider, for instance, Timothy

---

[11] Robert A. Segal, "Animism for Tylor," in *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, ed. Graham Harvey (New York: Routledge, 2015), 53.
[12] Though, according to Segal, Tylor also attempted to reconcile animism and science, even if he ultimately saw the former "in the modern world [as] more than a relic but much less than a flourishing enterprise." Ibid., 62.

Morton's call for a new model of understanding personhood through none other than the framework of animism: "In an age of ecology without Nature, we would treat many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas about what counts as people. […] Ancient animisms treat being as people, without a concept of Nature. Perhaps I'm aiming for an upgraded version of animism."[13]

But what makes "Nature" so problematic? Which aspects of the "ancient animisms" are so inadequate for our current situation that an upgrade becomes necessary? On what ground does this upgrade of animism differentiate itself from its archaic counterpart? One answer has to do with sensitive issues concerning the politics of cultural appropriation and of the representation of others, not least performed by the (Western) scholarly community itself. Indeed, it can be observed that the mobilization of animism in contemporary ecocriticism, while in conversation with facets of animism as an indigenous tradition or system of belief, consciously moves away from them in order to distill, out of their relational operation with the nonhuman entities, a posthumanist ethical position that treats all life forms as other-than-human persons. By consciously downplaying the significance of such an elusive, culturally specific concept as "Nature" with a capital N, the upgraded animism does not tackle, either, its dialectical and equally complex pair that is "the supernatural."[14] In turning away from the religious understanding of animism to something resolutely secular, the upgraded animism has been framed as a materialist heuristic which, in Donna J. Haraway's words, functions not as "a New Age wish nor a neocolonial fantasy, but a powerful proposition for rethinking relationality,

---

[13] Timothy Morton, *The Ecological Thought* (Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2012), 8.

[14] Graham Harvey drives home this point in proposing an update of animism that resists "the notion of 'the supernatural', a domain that appears to transcend everyday reality and thereby dialectically to form another domain called 'nature'. Neither 'nature' nor 'supernature' are necessary in the thinking of animists who understand that many and various persons co-exist and are jointly responsible for the ways the world will evolve next." Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 185-186.

perspective, process, and reality without the dubious comforts of the oppositional categories of modern/traditional or religious/secular."[15]

In this scholarly discourse, then, if the animist worldview is to be taken seriously by everyone regardless of cultural background and belief, the expulsion of its enchantment—evoked in its association with particular traditions, a time in the pass, a pure nature untainted by culture, and metaphysics—is, perhaps somewhat paradoxically, the necessary condition: disenchantment helps animism achieve a certain degree of universal applicability. The implication of this move is varied. To begin with, as ecocriticism rejects the projection of "a neocolonial fantasy" by carefully not speaking for any particular group of subject (subaltern or not), curiously it seems much more comfortable speculating about the agency and the intention—indeed, the voice—of the nonhuman. Therefore, while the contemporary update of animism has placed its accent on stringing and valorizing assemblages formed collectively by humans and nonhumans, an unfortunate but not uncommon move is that the role played by the former remains, in fact, indistinct if not obliterated altogether. Consider how this shift of emphasis from the human to the nonhuman is negotiated in the flagship text of new materialism, Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, which openly declares the affinities of her political philosophy with "several nonmodern (and often discredited) modes of thought, including animism."[16] Despite its attempt to conduct a humanistic analysis less rigid than structurally allowed in terms of subject-object binarism, Bennett's project elides the question of human subjectivity, including "the nature of human interiority, or the question of what really distinguishes the human from the

[15] Following Viveiros de Castro's study of Brazilian Amerindians, Haraway proclaims that "'Animism is the only *sensible* version of materialism'." Haraway's rejection of the "supernatural," is evident, however, when her envisioned relational kinship between the human and the nonhuman seems hesitant to save a space for divinities crucial to the Brazilian Amerindians: "Making kin as oddkin rather than, or at least in addition to, godkin and genealogical and biogenetic family troubles important matters, like to whom one is actually responsible." Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 2, 165.
[16] Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2009), xvii-xviii.

animal, plant, and thing," for fear that these conventional humanist inquiries will soon hijack the critical attention away from the objects themselves, again "down the anthropocentric garden path."[17] One cannot help but recall Derrida's famous coinage of *animot*: a word (*mot*) that underscores how all animals cannot be lumped together in animality. In a parallel fashion, shouldn't the concept of "the human" also reject the illusion that the dynamic linkage and dissonance of all humans could be united under one single banner and thus bracketed altogether? Especially when postcolonialism and various schools of identity politics have convincingly demonstrated the operation of power that determines, within the category of the human itself, which groups of human subjects get marked or unmarked.

Moreover, the shared rejection of animism's non-empirical baggage signals that the contemporary upgrade, while voicing vicariously for the nonhuman, aspires to what it conceives as "reality" without an inkling of fantasy and its (long but simplistic) perceived link with escapism. Speaking to the discontent of political ecology, Latour, for instance, has insisted on the existence of the scientifically factual and a thorough separation of it from everything else. In his words, "Every time we seek to mix scientific facts with aesthetic, political, economic, and moral values, we find ourselves in a quandary. […] If we concede too much to values, all of nature tilts into the uncertainty of myth, into poetry or romanticism; everything becomes soul and spirit."[18] In this rather dichotomous view, then, fantasy undermines the valance and authenticity of the upgraded animism. Given the undeniable persistence of toxic anthropocentrism that has led to sundry ecological calamities, to a certain extent this conceptual compromise of animism—if its application to earthly politics in consensus reality is to be taken seriously—seems to be a

[17] Ibid., 120.
[18] Bruno Latour, *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 4.

practical move, maybe even an effective one. Nevertheless, the exclusion of "poetry or romanticism" from the discursive field of animism, if not of political ecology more generally, raises important questions with regards to the studies of artistic creation in the age of ecological crisis. Indeed, while the fluid, sometimes outright fantastical human-nonhuman relation envisioned by sundry artworks across media has inspired the formation of many ecological thoughts, one senses in them a general conflation of textual worlds and reality. As the principles by which the former operates have been used to describe how human and nonhuman entities might relate to one another in the latter, aesthetic inquiries become secondary even in disciplines traditionally devoted to them.

Against this prevalent methodological turn, one recalls Hal Foster's reminder that art criticism today must be careful when the studies of artworks learn from the core ideas of political ecologies that initially emerged from "disciplines (e.g., science studies, political theory, anthropology) at a remove from artistic practice."[19] This is not to deny that a dominant trend of both contemporary art and art writing fervently personifies the nonhuman, not least the image itself. One cannot ignore, however, that this trend sometimes conspires with the supremacy of fetishization that attaches a price tag to practically everything in the context of late capitalism. In order to speculate about the power of the nonhuman in an artwork, if not itself as an artwork, without turning a blind eye to processes of commodification, aesthetic inquiries must intervene and work closely with ecological thoughts in order to discern how a given work's stylistics or medium specificity shapes both its potential meanings and the spectator's experience. That is, the old job of art criticism before a skepticism of depth—and thus of the act of interpretation itself—labelled our era "post-critical." On this note, I fully concur with Foster's claim that

[19] Hal Foster, *Bad News Day: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (New York: Verso, 2015), 120.

"defetishization should not be conflated with demystification, which does target the fictive." And if in the recent past, the domain of aesthetics was condemned by critical theory as a dubious site where reactionary ideologies disguise themselves, we must also trust that art critics have grown not only "more alert to the dialectical connections between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic" but also "more attuned to the critical dimension in aesthetic experience and vice versa."[20] Herein lies the power and necessity of criticism in studying artistic imaginations of human-nonhuman relation today.

In response to these two problems that hover above the contemporary mobilization of the animist worldview, how might we—namely, students of the moving image with special interests in ecological topics—rethink the boundary of personhood without sacrificing the admittedly conventional questions of human identities and subjectivities, on the one hand? As we learn from the human-nonhuman dynamics in any given film, how could we conduct the (equally conventional) exploration of the aesthetic conditions that allow such dynamics to take shape in the first place, on the other hand? In the current academic landscape where nearly everything from dirt to cloud has been conceptualized as an inter-medium of everything else, the animist imagination of cinema attempts to address these yet unexhausted questions by tackling the encounter between two animist mediums considered "old" in (new) media studies: film and the human characters within.

Cinematic Animism

An inquiry into the affinity between cinema and animism already generates special tautologies. Although a host of modern technologies have been described through the language of animism,

[20] Ibid., 122.

the power of animism finds its fullest expression on screen.[21] By no means invisible, cinema is nevertheless dependent on the immaterial energy of electric light to come into being—or more precisely, to emerge as "not life but its shadow" as per Maxim Gorky's renowned description.[22] That the moving image is alive can thereby be understood not simply in the familiar notion that movement equates or indicates signs of vitality. Cinema's vitality, rather, is the result of an invisible energy channeled into the image, manifested then on screen in the form of movement: motion inscribed as life. Indeed, as Tom Gunning emphasizes, "If movement endows the image with the appearance of life, projected light gives it vibrant energy. The light beam piercing darkness made the cinema image glow with intensity and constituted one of its chief means of viewer fascination."[23] In (literally) this light, cinema not only records life in motion but also brings its vital energy to the world through motion. A more animist interpretation—predatory in essence—that reverses the vector stands as well: in order to move, cinema actively steals the vital energy away from the world and possesses it as a source of nourishment. This motif plays out, most demonstratively in Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher*, when the painter

[21] From the symbiosis between photography and Spiritualism onwards, the spirit world has been technologically charged. In John Durham Peters's words, "Spiritualism was one of the chief sites at which the cultural and metaphysical implications of new forms of communication were worked out, as I have suggested, and it is also the source for much of our vocabulary today (medium, channel, and communication)." John Durham Peters, *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 100. A tendency in American cultural history, as Jeffrey Sconce highlights in *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), has also constantly associated the advent of such technological devices as telegraph, wireless communication, radio, network broadcasting, television, and computer with metaphysical preoccupations. Each of these electronic media serves, both discursively and practically in its own historical context, as a medium who opens up a portal to the nether realm, through which various ideological agendas could be carried out: from the positive utopian potential of the electromagnetic communication to the annihilating anxiety against fantasies of technological alienation. The energetics of technology in nineteenth and twentieth centuries (and, inarguably, still today with virtual reality) has revolved around the enthrallment of a paranormal encounter in our daily usage of the technological devices, as if they are not only dead matter or cold machines but also beings just like us—alive and animated, and thus uncanny and ghostly.

[22] Maxim Gorky, "Lumière Projections," in *Kino, A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, ed. Jay Leyda (London: Allen and Unwin, 1960), 408.

[23] Tom Gunning, "Animating the Nineteenth Century: Bringing Pictures to Life (or Life to Pictures?)," *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 36.5 (2014), 464.

sucks out the sitter's vitality to form not a still portrait but a projection of her face in motion—cinema as a vampire of vitality.

The source of cinema's vitality, whether bestowed to the apparatus or clutched bloodthirstily from the world, has inspired a century-long fascination that generates numerous attempts of theorization. As Sarah Cooper demonstrates, a running thread in the history of Western film theory (from classical through modern to contemporary) has centered around the soulful quality of cinema.[24] Attesting to the popular notion that cinema is emblematic of the industrialization, scientifization, and technology in the modern condition and hence related primarily to the paradigm of mechanism, Inga Pollmann also traces the tango between cinema and vitality in records of early spectatorship and film theory. Pollmann advances that, on the one hand, "cinema could become part of the answer to questions about what constitutes life, how life can be defined, and how life can be identified or perceived" and, on the other hand, by seeing cinema as an image that partakes in life, we can begin to redefine the concept of "the picture"—not so much an object awaiting animation to become "the living picture" as life per se.[25] Building on the theoretical accounts of cinema's soulful, lively quality, recent scholarly discussions have started to explore how cinema has self-reflexively staged its own *anima* through the construction of an onscreen animist universe: representing animist activities on set or location; fantasizing the elusive spirit that has been said to haunt cinema through a constellation

---

[24] See, for instance, Sarah Cooper's *The Soul of Film Theory* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013). Rachel Moore also offers insights into cinema's entanglements with "primitive religion," particularly abundant in classical film theory in *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999).

[25] Central to these accounts of cinema's vitality is the generation of movement in cinema by means of replacing one discrete image after another at a certain speed, which produces movement on screen, movement in time (duration), and emotion in the embodied and moved viewer. Worthy of note here is that the movement on screen is not necessarily tantamount to the movement in the profilmic world recorded on film in the manner of photographic realism. Abstract film, as Pollmann suggests, is likewise lively with movements generated from "the formal, and formative, properties of the cinematographic apparatus and of the film itself, including mechanical movement, projection, and montage." Inga Pollmann, "Cinematic Vitalism—Theories of Life and the Moving Image" (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2011), 14, 32.

of image-making devices; the animation of still objects or the reanimation of the deceased.[26] From the *Harry Potter* series to elements of Korean shamanism in K-horror; from the folk religions in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's screen Thailand to the shamans of the Amazon rainforests in Latin American cinema, animism has become one of the central themes of cinematic imagination today.

To an extent, then, animism seems inherent to film. But the animist imagination of cinema does not claim a quasi-ontology, partially because of the aforementioned specters of fetishization and commodification that haunt our attempts to acknowledge the vitality of the nonhuman, not least works of art. But the sheer representation of animist practices does not define the animist imagination of cinema either, insofar as it does not necessarily address the question of personhood from the perspective of a shamanic figure. To reiterate, the animist imagination of cinema rethinks personhood from within the human. The specific configuration of a thematic concern (human-nonhuman relation) and a structural component (the shamanic figure), whether or not it features ethnographic depictions of religious activities or events of (re)animation, categorizes a narrative film as an animist imagination that solicits a certain spectatorial engagement. Such a definition further justifies the centrality of film criticism for this dissertation. To categorize a film as an animist imagination requires looking at it closely, teasing out how its style and plot work with or against each other, and determining the distinct ideologies regarding human-nonhuman relation that it conveys.

---

[26] Some fine works on this topic include Lesley Stern, "'Once I've devoured your soul we are neither human nor animal' : The Cinema as an Animist Universe," *The Cine-Files* 10 (Spring 2016); Tom Gunning, "To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision," *Grey Room* 26 (Winter 2007) and "The Ghost in the Machine: Animated Pictures at the Haunted Hotel of Early Cinema," *Living Pictures: The Journal of the Popular and Projected Image before 1914* 1.1 (2001); Murray Leeder's *The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema (*New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017*)*; Stefan Andriopoulos's *Possessed: Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008).

Given that the animist imagination of cinema treats anthropocentrism critically as a heuristic to open up personhood, it does not take a rain check on elaborating upon those intermediary moments of encounter between humans and nonhumans—a quasi-humanist project with one foot in the nonhuman realm, so to say. Straddling worlds, the shamanic figure holds onto and articulates precisely the presence and process of this intimate encounter, ever so rarely in and out of the screen these days. As such, the shamanic figure transcends the ethnographic ground into the realm of an idea, which imagines the shape and contour of certain groups of people still enchanted and communicative with the nonhuman in spite of all. They might no longer be leaders as they used to be in tribes or villages, but quietly they perform magic in corners least anticipated. As the actions, stories of the shamanic figures unfold within the filmic worlds, so they transform their milieus into one magic circle after another where wonders could take place. And the range of their milieus encompasses not only physical places and the concrete objects within but also, cinematically, the formal devices and generic idioms mobilized to fashion their audiovisual presence. A reading of the shamanic figure is thus a reading of film style as an imagistic portal to the animist regime. My interpretation of the film interprets, in essence, the shamanic figure's deciphers and exegeses of his or her filmic world, one full of clues and signatures left undeclared by the nonhuman.

I want to clarify that my decision to focus on the shamanic figure is not motivated by my own viewing experience alone. Indeed, as most of the filmmakers featured in this dissertation admit, characterization constitutes a key aspect of their work. (Here, what I mean by filmmakers include not only the directors but also their necessary collaborations and negotiations with the screenwriters, cinematographers, actors, special effects specialists, among other creators and technicians.) To describe the specificities of each shamanic figure as accurately as possible, I feel

the need to consider the broader context of its reception constructed both within the film and in the artistic discourse surrounding the film. I have thus taken seriously several sources of para-filmic information, especially interviews where filmmakers explicitly articulate how they envision their characters to be perceived by general viewers. Rather than taking these paratexts cynically or as non-sequiturs external to the films as organic unities in and of themselves, I treat them in good faith—whether I agree with them is another story—and think about the films along with these additional clues. The hermeneutic cycle of the animist imagination of cinema covers, then, an expanded range of the text and its context.

Certainly, this method does not preclude the possible fissures between what a character is said to be doing and what it actually does. But even if a filmmaker's artistic vision runs against the grain of his or her design in obvious ways, it is still worthy to ruminate on the effect produced by the seeming discordance rather than ignoring the former for the sake of an illusion of the latter's autonomy and integrity. The payoff is a more nuanced understanding of the shamanic figure's pedagogical value in relation to spectatorship. Indeed, in advancing that the shamanic figure functions as a model for the viewer, I am proposing that there is something to be learned from paying special attention to it in our encounter with the animist imagination. But by no means am I downplaying each viewer's interpretive freedom or agency and thus reproducing the problematic discourse of the viewer as a mere textual construct. This is because the lesson of the shamanic figure is not a given but a product of criticism that emerges most prominently as each individual's interpretation of it clashes with that of the filmmaker's. My attempt to clarify the latter aims not so much at locating an arbiter of meaning as at establishing a critical common ground, upon which various possibilities of reading, including the ones I offer, can further negotiate and debate with each other. Film criticism as such thereby takes in a public domain

where civil disagreement, which I believe constitutes the true form of diversity, unfolds. Within this public domain the animist imagination of cinema generates a variety of approaches to conceptualizing nonhuman personhood.

Itineraries

The shamanic figures in my selected films take up four modes of being, each offering unique tactics of navigating the animist moving image: the child, the autistic, the martial artist, the leper. A quick note concerning my choice of language, especially "the autistic" and "the leper," before I proceed to the chapter breakdown. Insofar as this dissertation reads these two shamanic types as two modes of being in and with the world, when I describe these shamanic figures—themselves functional constructs created for the expression of the filmmakers' artistic visions—I align myself with a movement in disabilities activism that rejects person-first language ("person with autism"; "person with leprosy") and favors, instead, identity-first language that foregrounds the centrality of these medical conditions to their subjectivities. By no means does this strategically essentialist move downplay the physical and emotional plight as well as the ethico-political weight that these conditions of life carry. Rather, considering these markers as more than politically incorrect labels rethinks the affirmation that "person" stands for value, to which "with autism/leprosy" is detrimental, and to acknowledge that whatever challenge that follows the word "with" is unapologetically part and parcel of the person's being. Doing so, I believe, also helps us think closer with the filmmakers with regards to their conscious decisions to create characters with disabilities and diseases.

Because of the shaman's particular situatedness between the human and the nonhuman, to an extent the animist imagination acknowledges and deals primarily with human

exceptionalism, thus not only bringing the human back into the cosmic collective but also avoiding the pitfall of homogenizing and flattening the diversity of human subjectivities. The beginning of the dissertation, however, begins consciously and critically with a "universal" state, commonly understood as the beginning stage of human life. Chapter One sets up the foundation for this dissertation—literally the birth of any human/shamanistic activity—by exploring what has been regarded as the animist capacity that each one of us has once possessed at the curious phase of childhood, itself a contested notion that first emerged out of the context of modernity. Tracing the evolving concept of childhood and the representations of children and childlike figures in Hou's and Kore-eda's films, including *Café Lumière* (2003), *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007), *Air Doll* (2009), and *I Wish* (2011), the chapters teases out the ways in which, even in the most modernized space where possibilities of wonder have withdrawn along with traces of nature, the sphere of childhood enables, still, a garden where animism sprouts. I focus on three particular objects that play special roles in childhood's transformation of the world into an animist sphere: the balloon, the doll, and the train. Each of them functions as a privileged device for the shamanic figure of the child. And based on their material specificities, these devices allow the animist imagination to crystallize into assorted forms on screen.

It is not a novice idea, across psychological and artistic discourses, that the child possesses a sort of raw, primal energy which can be channeled to the construction of positive, creative kinship. The four films, however, rethink this convention and envision some inconvenient problems that it inevitably leads to, as childhood animism runs into the reality principle of contemporary life. Dramatized through this collision, distinct temporalities—those of childhood and adulthood; those of the primitive and the modern—reciprocate, out of which a recurring theme throughout this dissertation transpires: the ethical boundary of any human-

nonhuman interaction, particularly when the wide attribution of personhood simultaneously runs the risk of leveling everything, and thus losing some bottom line as existing communal routines are overhauled by an excess of vitality. Through the eye of the child, this chapter seeks the most comfortable distribution of animism in contemporary life as well as the condition that allows this comfort.

As the child's animist capacity fades with the advent of adulthood, so the rest of my inquiry turns to grownups. Chapter Two follows the protagonist of Hou's *The Assassin* (2015), Nie Yinniang, whose character set-up is shaped by the director and the screenwriters as an autistic person—with Asperger syndrome, to be specific. Taking a cue from the overlap between the film's preproduction stage and the filmmakers' involvement of animal welfare movements in Taiwan, the chapters explores the ways in which *The Assassin* builds, in its imagined premodern China, a space where humans and animals—even as few perceptible ones appear throughout—correspond to one another based on a relational principle embedded deeply within the film's intricate mise-en-scène arrangements. Because of the protagonist's autist set-up, she has a natural in the communication with animals, which the film intimates as causally connected to her supreme skills of assassination in the narrative. I demonstrate how said skills are performed on screen by Shu Qi, the actress who plays Nie Yinniang.

If the first half of the dissertation follows inherited animist capacities—the universality of young age and the largely innate factors that contribute to the pathogenesis of autism—the second half turns to those that have been acquired, willingly and unwillingly alike. Chapter Three expands on the discussion of Nie's identity as an assassin and considers the practitioner of martial arts more generally as another shamanic mode of being, characterized by its control of routine exchange of vital energies across the interior and the exterior of the body. Wong's *The*

Grandmaster (2013) well illustrates this mode with its idiosyncratic use of digital effects. Through frame-by-frame scrutiny of selected sequences in which characters interact with the ubiquitous falling snow created by particle systems, this chapter details how the film's visual effects visualize the invisible flow of energy in traditions of Chinese visual culture, medicine, and martial arts—all prominent or related motifs of the film. Moreover, such energy is endowed with *anima* because of the very medium of particle systems, with its ideology related closely to the animist worldview and its cinematic offspring, animation. Growing out of the film's use of visual effects—specific to the diegetic sociohistorical context of the early- to mid-twentieth century China—and the animist concept behind its technology, the chapter explores a relational perspective for contemporary studies of visual effects to conceptualize the interactions between martial arts actions performed profilmicly and visual effects created digitally during postproduction. Such interactions if not tensions, I think, are particularly crucial in our contemporary digital culture where the foundation for audiovisuality, if not the world, has gradually been taken over by computer-generated graphics in animated forms.

Passing childhood and adulthood, the shaman's cycle of life continues to unfold. But as the dissertation comes to an end, so the protagonist of my story perishes. Like Chapter Three, the last chapter also focuses on an attained animist capacity, but it is decidedly more agonizing for the bearer, physically and psychologically, than martial arts: Hansen's disease or leprosy. Fundamental to this chapter are the ethico-political conundrums that arise as leprosy sufferers in Japan have been allowed legally to exit the confine of leper colonies since 1996: In what ways can the "decolonization" of their bodies and mobility be conducted? Does "the leper" still define their identity? How can we make sense of their "return" to the thick of everyday life? On both narrative and stylistic fronts Kawase's emphatically melodramatic *Sweet Bean* (2015) addresses

these questions—and, here, the melodramatic mode is taken up for a good reason, as it shall become clear. Unlike her previous films set in Nara or other rural sites relatively "untainted" by urbanization, for the first time Kawase places her protagonists in contemporary Tokyo. The film follows Tokue, an old leper and supreme pâtissière, as she tries to, at the dusk of her life, re-connect with and adjust to the urban sensorium and its logic outside the leprosarium where she has dwelled since childhood. A causal connection is drawn between her culinary skill and her contraction of the disease: leprosy allows her to take up a unique mode of being open to and communicative with nonhumans, including the titular red bean of which her confection is made. The medical and bodily condition of the leper, then, carries an animist weight pertinent to the above questions that the Japanese society still faces today, not least against the backdrop of post-Fukushima food security crises.

From the East

I want to conclude this introduction by addressing what might have appeared to be an elephant in the room: the fact that most of the films I analyze fall into the category of East Asian cinema. Indeed, if the four types of shamanic figures are selected based on various specificities related to their identities, what role does their cultural background play? Can their animist capacities mediate different cultures the same way that they mediate the human and the nonhuman? And what might be the implication for this dissertation, devoted to the intersection of film aesthetics and planetary ecology, to dwell on a number of films from geographically neighboring areas?

To address these tricky questions concerning the tension between film studies and area studies, consider the roads not taken. One common form for a book-length study of global cinema that this dissertation could have taken up is to amass a sizable cycle of films from across

the world, with each chapter dealing with a particular geographical area. (Though in current Anglophone film studies, such a project typically centers on Western cinema, with scant accounts of non-Western films as supplementary supports.) A slight variation of this form compares, in each chapter, works from distinct areas based on certain common grounds (usually thematic). But whether the comparison takes place within or across chapters, the thesis of the entire project would routinely transcend the scale at which each particular operates to make a more general claim about global universality.

I reject these approaches not simply because of my limited linguistic capacities, or the fact that my personal background as a third-world scholar—despite, if not thanks to, the higher education I later received at a first-world institute—makes me uncomfortable to commit to this comparativist framework, the shortcomings of which have been well discussed in postcolonial and area studies in the past few decades. Something about this mismatch of scales between parts and the whole is troubling, insofar as it underestimates the power of cinema which has always transcended geopolitical divisions from the outset. As I hope to demonstrate, each film—if not each shot, each frame—could itself contain hints of geographical and historical interconnectivity that implodes any fantasy of a comfortable home base. Modes of transregional co-production; collaborations among international filmmakers; the convenience brought by digital technologies; and the pursuit of profit on the global film market (commercial and art films alike)—these characteristics and concerns of contemporary film industry have only furthered the communicative potential of the moving image, for better or for worse. One of the main objectives of transnational film studies, I think, should be mapping out the plural within the singular rather than assembling an unattainable whole out of as many fragments as possible. In this dissertation, therefore, I will not only study each of the core films in its own time and space

constructed by the filmmakers but also explore how the films themselves braid unexpected genealogies, traversing a welter of practices—cinematic, virtual, sportive, ethnographic, ritualistic, and otherwise—that undertake formally and conceptually intimate inquires outside of their familiar East Asian context. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate the ways in which they spin and bind idiosyncratic drifts in webs, through their shared aesthetic project founded on the animist worldview that has been revived and re-membered into our contemporaneity as an ecopolitical stance cum artistic mode.

But another question remains to be addressed: if the point of my project on animism is not to collect as many case studies as possible, why focus on films produced mainly from select areas in East Asia? Intuitively, one might think that this is a logical choice, for what better place than the East could one locate Western modernity's Other? Indeed, in recent scholarship on ecopolitics, there is a parallel discourse that promotes the instrumental value of non-Western cultural traditions, said to provide a model of planetary sustainability that modern culture has failed to deliver. On principle, I agree that, in face of planetary ecological crisis, culturally specific ways of understanding personhood can function as inspiring resources for all human beings. And if our shared goal is to understand personhood and its potentials as holistically and creatively as possible, there is no reason not to consider all the brilliant thoughts that different sectors of human civilization have collectively produced. However, which cultural traditions get to be mobilized and who holds the power of narrating a tradition, itself always a process of retroactive (re)construction, are still complicated issues. In our post-Orientalist landscape, how can we engage planetary ecology without reviving the quandaries of Orientalism, without imposing historically specific notions as fantasies in the disguise of transhistorical solutions to our contemporary problems?

Not just a hot topic in ecopolitics, the dialectical tensions between autochthony and modernity have guided several studies of film in dialogue with area studies. Many filmmakers, including ones discussed in this dissertation, have also talked about their works in relation to the West versus the Rest, or modern versus the traditional. But as my decision to save such theoretical questions to the end of this introduction indicates, the animist imagination of cinema is primarily a method of film criticism rather than a politics of representation. My heuristic does not tie aesthetics with (geo)politics by inherently promoting or critiquing the mobilization of East Asian or any regional culture. Rather, it recognizes the singularity of each film and what it might say about these dialectical tensions. For instance, all the core films studied in this dissertation tackle the collision between an animist past and the disenchanted, modern present by teasing out multiple temporalities that co-exist within a certain location. Whether these temporalities exist in hierarchy, in opposition, or in any other form is a case-by-case position for each film which we need to examine closely and discuss openly. In some cases, the films carve out a separate layer of temporality in an urban landscape dominated by sleepless twenty-four-seven consumption and production (Chapter One); in some others, they address present-day crises by way of visiting comparable instances in period drama set in dynastic and republican China (Chapters Two and Three); still others embrace the outcome of the inevitable collision of temporalities when, under specific circumstances in contemporary Tokyo, they can no longer be segregated (Chapter Four). By pitting markers of national and regional cinema against an ecological imagination that transcends regional boundaries, my objective is by no means a rejection of the area studies model *tout court*. To do so is to throw the baby out with the bathwater. Staying with a group of films from a tightly selected area while accepting the possibilities that the films themselves might implode any regional framework delivers the much-

needed critical reflection on the inherent intricacies, plasmaticities, and uncertainties of such determining labels as Chinese, Hong Kong, Taiwan, Japanese, or East Asian cinema.

Admittedly, there are inherent values to studies that address the exclusion of underrepresented films, including Chinese- and Japanese-language art films, from the field of ecocinema or Environmental Humanities more generally. Indeed, one simply cannot ignore the unhappy fact that few writings in film studies to date have systematically explored what we might call an ecopolitical unconscious on screen outside of the modern West. But if we acknowledge that ecology is very much an urgent concern that defines and transforms our engagement with the world, including film production and viewing, then there should be a way to conduct film criticism ecocritically, even if the work in discussion might not seem to be about environmental issues at first glance. And while a film might emerge out of a specific site, it should give us a philosophical appreciation of broader questions that transcend cultural specificities. Ultimately, this dissertation proposes a methodological intervention that acknowledges the importance of area studies but does not see area studies as the end in and of itself. Rather, the discipline of Chinese, Japanese, or East Asian studies serves as an interlocuter with broader ecological and philosophical inquiries through the medium of cinema.

A note on transliteration and translation: all Chinese names, locations, and textual titles are romanized according to the conventions of the regions where they are from. Transliteration of Japanese follows the modified Hepburn style, with macrons avoided in commonly known Japanese words. I preserve the typical order of Chinese and Japanese names, with the surname always preceding the given name. English translations of film subtitles and other written texts follow the circulating official versions whenever they are available. Where no English translation

exists or when I feel the necessity to modify existing English translations, all translations of Chinese and Japanese into English are mine.

CHAPTER 1. THE CHILD

> *He indicated that the System would solve this little problem without any help from harebrained professors who thought the whole subway trains could jump off into the fourth dimension.*
>
> —A. J. Deutsch, "A Subway Named Möbius"[1]

After the opening title sequence of Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007), the sixth shot of the film captures, from screen left to right, the arrival of Route 76 bus of Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens at a street stop. Off the vehicle comes Song (Song Fang), a Chinese student of film production and nanny newly hired by Suzanne (Juliette Binoche) for her grade-school-age son, Simon (Simon Iteanu). Placed across the street, the camera continuously reframes to follow Song's pendular drift in front of a variety shop as she equably locates and orients herself. After consulting the information on her cell phone and a piece of paper, in the subsequent shot she arrives at the marionette theater where Suzanne works as a voice performer.

Before the film settles into the narrative following Song's and Suzanne's encounter, something about the 76 bus beckons. Framed at the center of the middle ground but obscured by other vehicles on the bustling street, it does not solicit spectatorial curiosity until the camera pans right to follow its movement before arresting simultaneously as it does (figure 1). All other entities on the street have been upstaged by this initially unremarkable vehicle, with the surface of its left side (in the direction of travel) occupying now the entirety of the static frame for a good 35 seconds before the bus eventually pulls away to reveal the lone, disoriented Song. In the ample time we are granted to run our gaze across this glossy surface, a face that might be recognizable to viewers of contemporary American and British cinemas stands out. In the lower-

[1] A. J. Deutsch, "A Subway Named Möbius," in *The Platform Edge: Uncanny Tales of the Railways*, ed. Mike Ashley (London: The British Library, 2019), 209.

left quadrant of the screen, English actor Clive Owen's frowning face, the top two-thirds of which are framed within a sizable circular glass crack, stares intensely into the camera. A short cast list—Owen, Julianne Moore, Michael Caine—next to the face and, below it, a legible line of "*Les Fils de l'homme*" in enlarged font size indicate the printed image as a promotional visual for Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006).

Figure 1.1. *Children of Men* on the bus.

Prearranged or contingent, the cameo of Owen's foreboding presence behind shattered glass complicates an otherwise commonplace shot of the everyday. In Cuarón's thriller set in a near future of long-term human infertility and therefore complete childlessness, Homo sapiens stands on the brink of extinction. Lives have consequently been taken or sacrificed so that first known pregnant woman on earth in 18 years can survive and deliver. Such a dystopian undercurrent that confronts the viewer of *Flight of the Red Balloon* through Owen's gaze stands in drastic contrast with the film's opening shot, which demonstrates a child's animist power by depicting, on a glorious sunny day, carefree Simon beseeching a reluctant cerise orb to follow his

descension into the Art Nouveau entrance of the Bastille Métro station. Without and with no need for a rationale, in this spacetime Simon simply *is* what I call a shamanic figure, namely, a human agent of animism who recognizes and participates in the vitality of the nonhuman—in this case his anthropomorphic (or at least zoomorphic) helium-filled companion. Simon is naturally animist, naturally affirmative with regards to an expanded definition of personhood that considers both the human and the nonhuman as potentially personal. And it is this mystic aptitude, seemingly intrinsic to the child's worlding, that the film intimates to be the fundamental lack in Cuarón's tumultuous world deprived of newborns.

This chapter submits that the profound affinity between childhood and animism serves as a key to keeping the futurity of humanity alive in those animist imaginations that feature the shamanic figure of the child, with *Flight of the Red Balloon* being one of my main examples. Commissioned by the Musée d'Orsay, Hou's homage to Albert Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon* (1956)—a classic that is equally animist—thus not only self-reflexively acknowledges, as per Michelle E. Bloom, the geographical enmeshment that defines the industry of transnational cinema today (with *Children of Men* being an "international co-production par excellence").[2] The film also opens up a temporal inquiry that travels from Lamorisse's post-war classic, featuring the cobblestone alleyways and plaster-peeling buildings in the neighborhood of Ménilmontant, to Hou's loose remake set in a metropolitan Paris characterized by the mobility and flow of mass transit, international students/workers, and all the images they produce and transmit. Across these two films, child's animist capacity remains but something about its (Parisian) ground has metamorphosed.[3] Situated between Lamorisse's bygone wonderland and

---

[2] Michelle E. Bloom, *Contemporary Sino-French Cinemas: Absent Fathers, Banned Books, and Red Balloons* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016), 125.
[3] Noel Brown has made a distinction between the "apparent universalism" of *The Red Balloon* that has earned the film international popularity and its specificities as a post-war production in response to the social, economic

the impending dystopia of *Children of Men*, the opening of Hou's outlines the condition of a global metropolis in which the shamanic figure of the child currently dwells, albeit facing a potentially bleak future.

Such an association of the child and animism dramatizes a familiar discourse of childhood: a special category that distinguishes itself from adulthood in terms of its ambiguous ontological position somewhere between the human and the nonhuman, especially animals—in fact, frequently closer to the latter.[4] Following Philippe Ariès's canonical account of the "discovery of childhood" as a constructed stage of human life in French (and Western more generally) society from the seventeenth century onwards, scholars of childhood studies have suggested various ways to map the categorical function of childhood in relation to the socio-economic changes of modern life, especially the notion of family.[5] It is commonly held that the invention of childhood as a unique developmental phase bespeaks the (grown) modern subject's desires to delineate the contour of himself or herself on cultural, political, and philosophical fronts. Here, one of the implications of being modern is to grow out of the murky stage that childhood denotes through education and discipline: a state of confusion when one is biologically personal but socially not-quite-human yet.[6]

---

aftermaths of World War II. Noel Brown, *The Children's Film: Genre, Nation and Narrative* (London: Wallflower Press, 2017.), 80-81.

[4] Translated to performance theory, this ontological ambiguity has rendered children acting and animal acting comparable insofar as both of them are more likely to enact unpredictable behaviors and actions in front of the camera. In Karen Lury's words, "As child actors are unlike adult human actors, there is frequently an uncertainty as to the value of qualitative judgements made about their performance. In the majority of contemporary films, a good performance may be recognised as naturalistic, one that is integrated into the fictional narrative, and in tune with the other actors' performances. Ridout suggests that this kind of assimilation is akin to the domestication of animals as household pets." Karen Lury, *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales* (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010), 146.

[5] The quoted terms come from the title of chapter two of Philippe Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*, trans. Robert Baldick (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962).

[6] As Heather Keenleyside points out, for instance, one argument in political philosophy sees childhood and manhood as "primarily political categories, and only secondarily biological or psychological stages. To make the child a man is thus to make him the king of being that social contract theorists like Locke envision: an independent being whose

In this context of the modern subject's self-differentiation and self-fashioning, early-twentieth-century developmental psychology appropriated the vocabulary of animism, first used by Victorian anthropologists in their studies of the "primitive" worldview, to describe children's conception of nonhuman entities. When Jean Piaget famously terms the initial stages of the human psyche with the term "animism," he consciously associates children's attribution of consciousness to nonhuman entities with the anthropological study of "those beliefs according to which primitive people endow nature with 'souls', 'spirits', etc., in order to explain psychical phenomena."[7] In Piaget's account, all human individuals undergo a developmental stage that is comparable with the animist worldview characteristic of an early stage of human civilization. But the relation between anthropological animism and child animism is not exactly one that operates according to a part-whole logic, insofar as the latter serves as an umbrella term that groups different types of culturally specific belief systems. Piaget's notion of child animism, rather, claims universality to the extent that the formation of the child's world could be scientifically observed, documented, and further schematized into finer categories.[8]

For Piaget, child animism is but a stage that, under normal circumstances, passes as each person starts to work out the relation between his or her subjective self and objective reality. But if the general relation between modernity and the primitive worldview on which his concept

---

political status is secured by speech." Heather Keenleyside, *Animals and Other People: Literary Forms and the Living Beings in the Long Eighteenth Century* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016), 176.

[7] Jean Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, trans. Joan Tomlinson and Andrew Tomlinson (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007), 169-170.

[8] Piaget proposes four successive stages in child animism. In stage one, everything could potentially be viewed as animate. In stage two, children attribute consciousness to mobile but not stationary entities. In stage three, moving objects are further divided into two groups: movements originate from the objects themselves and movements introduced by outer forces. The former alone is held to be alive. In stage four, children view only animals but not other nonhuman entities as conscious. Ibid., 173. Some anthropological writings, however, have pushed back against this universalism by suggesting that the concept of animism, itself, is something that children learn through education and experience in lived reality. Based on them, Graham Harvey has presented a counter argument against Piaget that "childhood animism is (a) inculcated by comforting adults and (b) is quite different to the animism of those adults among whom it is considered and practised." Graham Harvey, *Animism: Respecting the Living World* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 14.

draws has been regarded as anything but teleological in the sense that the former succeeds and replaces the latter, might the same thing be said regarding the line between adulthood and childhood? To rephrase Bruno Latour's celebrated claim that we have never been modern, in what ways might we have not grown up either?

The question of how the animist childhood could be prolonged or otherwise transformed into the guiding principle by which we live has indeed been the subject of sundry aesthetic inquiries. Most famous is perhaps Sigmund Freud's speculation, building on Ernst Jentsch's reading of E. T. A. Hoffmann's work, that the titular aesthetic effect of his essay "The Uncanny" is related, both to the castration complex that define our childhood experience and to a phase of individual development that corresponds to an early stage in the development of human civilization.[9] This early stage, in Freud's words, "did not pass without leaving behind in us residual traces that can still make themselves felt, and that everything we now find 'uncanny' meets the criterion that it is linked with these remnants of animistic mental activity and prompts them to express themselves."[10] At moments least expected, it generates the feeling of the

---

[9] By attributing the cause of the uncanny to the threat of castration complex, Freud eventually offers a psychoanalytic means to work through this experience. According to Stanley Cavell, however, this move is based on Freud's erroneous reading of Hoffmann's "The Sandman," which symptomatically reflects his "repeated dissociation of psychoanalysis from philosophy." Stanley Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," in *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* VIII, ed. Sterling M. McMurrin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988), 87. One could speculate that Freud's diagnosis based on his misremembering of "The Sandman"—whether it is authentic or not—reveals some core paradoxes in his own attempt to construct a theoretical framework: the way that a rationalist discovers the irrational foundation of thought; the way that a progressivist comes to understand the value of the primitive; how something structured in the unconscious might actually be overcome if not replaced. But my objective here is neither to exercise a Freudian reading of Freud himself nor to offer an evaluation as to whether the developmental trajectories of both a human individual and the human as a collective should be best described as teleological or cyclical. Bracketing the psychoanalytic cause of and solution to the uncanny, one of the goals of this chapter is to explore the aesthetic dimension of this effect, not least how a given text establishes the necessary conditions that render both the characters within the text and the readers of the text susceptible to it.

[10] Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Uncanny*, trans. David McLintock (New York: Penguin Books, 2003), 147. The comparison between the early developmental stage of an individual and that of human civilization is made, too, in Jentsch's original account, though the belief system of animism plays a less prominent role. In Jentsch's description, the feeling of the uncanny occurs when "*a wild man* has his first sight of a locomotive or a steamboat, for example, perhaps at night. The feeling of trepidation will here be very great, for as a consequence of the enigmatic autonomous movement and the regular noises of the machine, reminding him of human breath, the giant apparatus can easily impress the completely ignorant person as a living mass. There is something quite related to

uncanny: the horrific transgression of the categorical boundary between the living and the dead in an otherwise ordinary scenario. Given that the return of animism could only engender a defamiliarizing, disturbing experience in a spacetime governed by non-animist beliefs, the formation of the uncanny is predicated on a specifically *modern* anxiety: a dark, irrational side of modernity.[11]

A cluster of animist imaginations that similarly addresses this aesthetic inquiry constitutes this chapter's object of study. While they do not necessarily follow the Freudian route, they, too, tackle questions of animism in relation to modernity and childhood together. In Hou's oeuvre, *Flight of the Red Balloon* and Tokyo-based *Café Lumière* (2003) distinctly explore the promise of animism among the urban institutions and built environments—where 55% of the world population now dwell, a number projected to increase to 68% by 2050.[12] I pair these two films with, respectively, Kore-eda Hirokazu's *Air Doll* (2009) and *I Wish* (2011), which either complicate or supplement Hou's films in surprising ways.

In these four films, childhood is not so much a temporal period between certain ages as a heuristic through which traces of animism inconspicuously manifest their presence in the shadow of the disenchanting paradigm of urban modernity. Childhood conceptualized as such means that it takes up not just the form of the child at the representational level as a character. Rather, something about these films allows childhood to bleed out from individual characters into a

---

this, by the way, when striking or remarkable noises are ascribed by fearful or *childish souls*—as can be observed quite often—to the vocal performance of a mysterious being [emphases mine]." Ernst Jentsch, "On the Psychology of the Uncanny," trans. Roy Sellars, *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 2.1 (1997), 11.

[11] According to Anneleen Masschelein, a group of interpretations has contextualized Freud's concept within the socio-historical context of the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Western society, with particular emphases on modernity, disenchantment, secularization, and Enlightenment thought. Anneleen Masschelein, *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011), 68-69, 130-131.

[12] United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision* (New York: United Nations, 2019), 1.

larger milieu and attach itself to sundry nonhuman entities, thus transforming them into agents of animism as well. Intriguingly, the states and behaviors of these personified figures can be best described as childlike, as if childhood becomes a semiotic tag that can readily attach itself to and detach itself from any entity. And as this childlike entity navigates its urban surroundings, unique processes of worlding unfold, which demonstrate how an animist way of being and living could have transpired more generally in an otherwise ordinary cityscape. It is in this way that all the children and childlike figures model for the viewers pedagogies of seeing their own realities from an animist perspective. Specific questions that this chapter addresses thus include: How does the shamanic figure of the child think, perceive, and move about? In the absence of the child in the narrative, how can such an exceptional case of human subjectivity be maintained or otherwise reworked regardless of the confinement of age? And in what ways can viewers of these art films, which undoubtably do not position children as their target audience, learn how to be childlike in the process of viewing? Ultimately, this chapter aims to explore and exhaust the formal ramifications of childhood on screen in order to tackle such issues as wonder, urban spaces, futurity, and the nonhuman. While animism is primarily a worldview through which the shamanic figure of the child approaches the world, each of the four films tests the parameter of how and whether animism can also be a method of world-making for childlike entities internal to the films or childlike viewers in front of the screen. Each case demonstrates an attempt to explore how far the kind of animism associated with the child—as either an active figure or an emblem—can be pushed.

Regardless of the precise form that childhood takes up and its aim in these four films, on principle the animist imagination recognizes the animist childhood as positive and worthy. All of the films share, on the one hand, a "pro-life" consensus that the barbarism of human extinction

implied in *Children of Men* is to be avoided despite the varied and numerous problems of humanity. This is because the animist imagination is fundamentally in pursuit of the potential forms of human-nonhuman co-flourishing, which the shamanic figure of the child mediates and helps us envision. On the other hand, the films consistently situate the animist worldview as something at risk if not already obsolescent. A pronounced sense of nostalgia permeates in them, driving forward narratives that center around the act of recuperating the state of childhood or re-educating adults as to how to be childlike again.

Devices of Animism: Balloons, Dolls, and Trains

Before I delve into the four films, a clarification on my decision to group Hou's and Kore-eda's works. A commonplace for attentive followers of East Asian art cinemas, the reciprocally acknowledged influences between the two filmmakers manifest themselves on multiple fronts.[13] For the purpose of my inquiry into the cinematic aesthetics of personhood, I will focus on two aspects of their filmmaking and, based on them, introduce three particular devices that allow the child's animist capacity to flourish on screen: the balloon, the doll, the train.

First, the centrality of childhood to understanding human-nonhuman relation has been one of the thematic concerns from the outset of Hou's and Kore-eda's careers. Consider, for instance, a group of elementary school children's involvement in an activist campaign against

[13] Biographically, the scenes filmed on location in southern Kaohsiung in Hou's *The Time to Live and the Time to Die* (1985) visualized and virtually channeled Kore-eda to the childhood memory narrated by his father, born in the same city when Taiwan was under Japan's colonial rule. With regard to personal and technical collaboration, composer Chen Ming-chang who worked on Hou's *Dust in the Wind* (1986) and *The Puppetmaster* (1993) was introduced to Kore-eda for the score of *Maborosi* (1995) by Hou himself; cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-bing, Hou's long-term and prolific collaborator since the mid 1980s, also handled the camera for *Air Doll*. On stylistic front, Kore-eda openly acknowledged that Hou had played a decisive role in the shaping of his approach to filmmaking: his gradual avoidance of storyboard (after *Maborosi*) during pre-visualization process; use of non-professional actors; location shooting and natural lighting; long-take aesthetics; and experiments with a mobile long shot that flows to follow the actor's improvised movement. For more on the last point, see Kore-eda Hirokazu and Wu Yi-fen, "Zhangjingtou yu feirenzhongxin zhuyi: fang shizhi yuhe," *Dianying xinshang* 36.3-4 (2014), 154-156.

illegal electrofishing in a local river in Hou's *The Green, Green Grass of Home* (1982); or, Kore-eda's documentary *Lessons from a Calf* (1991) which chronicles a two-year "integrated study" experiment in a Japanese elementary school: an education program that asks students to collectively raise a calf, affectively named Laura.[14] Second, such thematic concerns have invariably informed the two filmmakers' aesthetic choices. I want to highlight an observation by Kore-eda on the stylistic combination of long take and long shot with which Hou's work has frequently been associated—a formal feature that has also acquired a broader geopolitical connotation given its privileged position in the works of other contemporary East Asian auteurs including Jia Zhangke, Tsai Ming-liang, Hong Sangsoo, and Chang Tso-chi. In a 2014 interview for a Taiwanese film magazine, Kore-eda rejects what he considers as the dominant but insipid framework of realism through which such aesthetics has habitually been described as an attempt to stage a "neutral" or "objective" view of the world. His preferred modifier, instead, is "non-anthropocentric," which he attributed to cultural factors specific to East Asia. When asked about the reason behind the centrality of this aesthetics to East Asian art cinemas, Kore-eda speculates that "it is likely because of the drastic difference between Asian and Western worldviews. Asian societies do not place "the human" at its center, and the Asian long shot/long take aesthetics subconsciously reflects the understanding that humans are only part of this world. […] Western civilization typically regards nature as a target to conquer, and places itself exterior to nature."[15]

---

[14] Arthur Nolletti, Jr. argues that Kore-eda has always been "mindful of the need to do justice to the child's reality" rather than treating them as merely "miniature adult." In *Lessons from a Calf* and *Nobody Knows* (2004), in particular, Nolletti demonstrates how Kore-eda "gives access to children's voices and represents their point of view in visual and narrative terms" and thus explores the "sense of self and purpose" that is specific to children, understood in these films as those human beings aged roughly between six to twelve. Arthur Nolletti, Jr., "Kore-eda's Children: An Analysis of *Lessons from a Calf*, *Nobody Knows*, and *Still Walking*," *Film Criticism* 35. 2/3 (2011), 148.
[15] Ibid., 156.

While Kore-eda's reference to an Asian collective is consistent with his long-term critique of understanding contemporary cinema through national framework, a broader pair of oppositions between the West and the East replaces the label of individual country (such as Japan, China, or South Korea). But instead of exercising another familiar critique of the cultural essentialism behind this alternative but still clichéd binarism, I am more interested in how Kore-eda welds a set of cinematic devices with an urgently needed reflection upon human-centered ideologies. The payoff of the self-restrain from immediately latching onto our poststructuralist and postcolonial toolkit is twofold: one concerning the specific intersection of planetary ecology and area-based film studies; the other concerning the role of realist aesthetics in film studies.

First, Kore-eda's view provides a refreshing understanding of the four films from an ecological perspective. Indeed, if he discursively mobilizes—based on his incorporation and modification of Hou's stylistics—certain dichotomies between the West and the East, between the human's suppression of and harmony with nature, he also regards them as problematics for his own work to tackle. Films like *Air Doll* and *I Wish* that explore the role of animism in highly developed modern environments can be read as his attempts to address the quandary of artistic production against the theoretical backdrop of the Anthropocene. Namely, when nature and culture have been inexorably intertwined to a point that, as per Timothy Morton's influential proposal, ecopolitics should jettison the concept of a transcendental nature in order to be effective.[16] Under this Anthropocene paradigm, how can Kore-eda's dichotomies still function as heuristic tools for a filmmaker like him who has positioned himself in a constructed tradition that privileges the supremacy of the natural over the cultural?

---

[16] Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009).

Second, Kore-eda's take on realism reopens some of the unexhausted promises of posthumanism in conventional approaches to film aesthetics. This is especially true in terms of André Bazin's discussion of the long take/long shot stylistics in his seminal "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," which understands, not incidentally, Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon* as an exemplar of not only the kind of realism he favors but also a critical take on anthropomorphism. When the titular balloon of Lamorisse's film, sans the interruption of montage, "actually does go through the movements in front of the camera that we see on the screen," the film maintains the unity of space and thus the objective continuity within said space. In moments like this *The Red Balloon* at once acquires a documentarian value and discloses "the relation of man to things and to the surrounding world."[17] Praising the film as a piece of children's fiction "a little on the intellectual side" due to its enlightening potentials to adults, Bazin rightly indicates that the most ingenious visions in this genre are "privileged to remain on the dream wavelength of childhood."[18] Such is the wavelength on which the four films likewise dream. They recognize the pivotal role of childhood in the pursuit of the form and site of personhood. Each of their portrayals of childhood in reciprocity with the animist worldview contributes to the spherical conceptualization—in all its directions—of animist childhood.

Bazin's insight invites, in addition to a reflection on film style, a materialist examination of the very object of the balloon. An orb that readily lends itself to comparisons with the human head; a smooth surface where projections of human visage conveniently adhere; fluid but

---

[17] André Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," in *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, ed. & trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 45-46, 52. Chang Hsiao-hung, for instance, has used *Flight of the Red Balloon* to rethink the Bazinian theorization of the long take. While it is an unfortunate missed opportunity that Chang never directly cites and thus complicates conventional readings of Bazin's piece, through the lens of Deleuzian philosophy she similarly proposes to conceptualize the long shot as the territorializing process of a milieu, which necessarily bleeds out of an individual shot. The entire city of Paris filmed through this conceptual long take emerges as an affective assemblage in which the hierarchy of "everything under the Parisian sky" dissolves. Chang Hsiao-hung, "Bali zhangjingtou: Hou xiaoxian yu hongqiqiu," *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly* 40.4 (2011), 64.
[18] André Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," 42.

unpredictable movements that give off the impression of autonomy; and an attached thin string that enables discreet manipulations from the offscreen—the constitutive components of a regular balloon declare its role as a device favorable to the animist imagination of cinema. Due to these qualities, when the red balloon traverses across profilmic spaces, the ideal spectatorial response that it solicits is not the analytical pleasure that contributes to what Neil Harris terms the "operational aesthetic," namely, the pleasure in discovering and explaining how the visual effects work.[19] The how-to question that leads to the exposure of trickery simply misses the point here, as Bazin also insists.[20] To be "on the dream wavelength of childhood," rather, the more relevant question to ask when viewing the balloon is perhaps a childish but decidedly animist one: "can we play together?"

Similar to the balloon in terms of its function in the animist imagination is the doll—an object crucial to Freud's account of the uncanny, too, as he analyzes the motif of the animate doll in Hoffmann's "The Sand-Man." The doll's likeness to the living, excessive at times especially when combined with movement, has made it susceptible to anthropomorphism even more than the balloon throughout film history. From all the dolls that have been abandoned and replaced in the *Toy Story* series to numerous killer dolls in the horror genre, the doll bespeaks a rather different way to dramatize the childhood fantasies, one not as untroubled as stories featuring the balloon typically unfold. Both *Flight of the Red Balloon* and *Air Doll*, I shall demonstrate, work with these varied and sometimes conflicting discourses surrounding the two privileged devices of animism. In the former, the two objects delineate different contours of animism and the grave limitations imposed on it in an alienating urban setting. The latter responses to the former's vision by pushing further its agenda. It centers upon the life and death of an inflatable blowup

---

[19] See chapter three of Neil Harris, *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981).
[20] André Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," 45.

doll—namely, a composite of the balloon and the doll—to sketch the ways in which animist energies would *not* flourish in a screen Tokyo defined in relation to late capitalist and neoliberal ethos.

To an extent, then, *Flight of the Red Balloon* and *Air Doll* serve as an urban survival guide for animism comprised of negative examples. That said, their pessimism of varied degree does not declare the banishment of the animist worldview from the modern world *tout court*. If they hypothesize an urban milieu where animism cannot take root, *Café Lumière* and *I Wish* both issue a conviction that, despite the general condition of disenchantment, animism sneaks back through the seams and camouflages itself all the same. They do so by thematizing on yet another privileged device of the animist imagination: the emblematic construct of modernity that is the train. The former unearths from the massive Tokyo electric train and metro systems a veiled but fizzy animism at the chthonic core of the city, tellingly in the form of an infant. The latter, via several primary school children's heartfelt longing and vision, presents a truly fantastical depiction of Shinkansen (bullet train) railway lines through which novel spatio-temporal coordinates are opened up, and wishes can be fulfilled.

In their shared celebration of the train, *Café Lumière* and *I Wish* not only reverse the fate of animism outlined in *Flight of the Red Balloon* and *Air Doll*, but also reinterpret one of the founding myths of cinema from an animist perspective: the spectators who react and scatter in horror to the on-rushing train towards them during the screening of Lumière's *The Arrival of a Train* at the Salon Indien of the Grand Café. If the balloon and the doll generate animist wonders because of certain properties and qualities internal to the objects themselves, the train seems to acquire its animist power most forcefully when it is technologically mediated into an attraction, to use Tom Gunning's famous concept, on screen. As the myth goes, it penetrates the boundary

of the ghostly realm described by Maxim Gorky as "the kingdom of shadows" into the realm of worldly vitality and threatens to take lives as it proceeds.

It is, admittedly, a curious move to revive the image of the naïve—indeed, childlike—spectator after studies of early cinema have thoroughly complicated this founding myth. Still, I think, there is something to be gained from viewing the two films in relation to the childlike spectator, insofar as the relation between animism and modernity is concerned. In Gunning's revisionist account, the thrilling shock that the train-image generates is "not only a mode of modern experience, but a strategy of modern aesthetics of astonishment. […] Attractions are a response to an experience of alienation, and for Kracauer (as for Benjamin) cinema's value lay in exposing a fundamental loss of coherence and authenticity."[21] The sheer capacity of being excited by the image thus lays bare the emptiness of modernity and recognizes the false illusion that it promises. But in an era when children—much more so than adults—have been exposed from an early age to the nature and operation of sundry image-producing technologies and apparatuses, where could this experience of astonishment that cracks open the fissure of modern life transpire, still? The most sophisticated city child who nevertheless believes in fantasies surrounding the train and marvels at its movement—such is the childlike figure that the animist imagination both idealizes and seeks to transforms its viewers into.

A Neglectful Nanny

Much has been said about the intertextual complexity between Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon* and Hou's *Flight of the Red Balloon*.[22] Mentioned only in passing in most of the scholarly accounts

---

[21] Tom Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," in *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, ed. Linda Williams (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995), 128.
[22] Hou's adaptation, as per James Tweedie, updates the city film genre to which Lamorisse's original belongs through the lens of contemporary urban media landscape. In comparison with the titular object in the latter, that in

is Adam Gopnik's *Paris to the Moon*, through which Hou first learned about Lamorisse's classic. But if intertextuality is truly crucial to our understanding of Hou's film, this mediating text that depicts the author's personal observation of Parisian life deserves much more attention, not least because it leads to a hermeneutically uncharted territory of the film. Indeed, a key event in the film's formation was Hou's discovery of Gopnik's text through his long-term collaborator, novelist and scenarist Chu Tien-wen. Even though Chu was not listed alongside Hou and French producer François Margolin as one of the co-writers of the screenplay, Hou made it clear that she was much involved during pre-production. Chu was not credited simply because "she couldn't care less," whereas Margolin was nominally listed because eligibility for funds that subtended this Taiwan-France collaborative project entailed the recruitment of a certain ratio of French staff—a fact that immediately raises the question of just how transnational is the enterprise of the so-called "transnational co-production."[23] To speculate on what initially piqued Chu's and Hou's curiosity, one has no reason to overlook the portrayal of Lamorisse's film in Gopnik's text.

A short essay by Chu, titled "Hongqiqiu zai erlinglingliu nian" (literally meaning "the red balloon in 2006"), offers some clues. It contains a lengthy block quote of Gopnik's depiction of *The Red Balloon*, his self-proclaimed first impression of Paris (at around the age of 8). A part of it relates:

---

former receives little screen time and bears "near irrelevance," insofar as tangible objects have been transformed into "mere image and mirage that occupy a crucial place in the contemporary world city, with its combination of concrete and glass materiality and ambient LED displays." Such diminution of the balloon points to the ever growing—in terms of both number the scale—processes of mediation and the resultant forms of materiality that have come to characterize our screen-filled world. James Tweedie, *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 175-177. Another reading of Hou's film, offered by Sing Song-yong, focuses not so much on this city of mediation as on the status and site of the classical cinematic image vis-à-vis a welter of heterogenous media, ranging from painting to photography to digital video across the film. The diachronous and transcultural encounter between Lamorisse's and Hou's works thus reflexively opens up the plastic potentiality of cinema and, in this process, identifies a contemporary strategy of filmmaking that the latter distills from the former and exercises. Sing Song-yong, "'Fufangdianying' de youling xiaoying: lun hou xiaoxian de 'jiabei shiguang' yu 'hongqiqiu' zhi 'kuayingxiangxing'," *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly* 39.4 (2010), 165.

[23] Bai Ruiwen, *Zhuhai shiguang—hou xiaoxian de guangyingjiyi* (Taipei: Ink, 2014), 265.

> Curiously, it was neither a cozy nor a charming landscape. The Parisian grown-ups all treated Pascal, the boy, with a severity bordering on outright cruelty: His mother tosses the balloon right out of the Haussmannian apartment; the bus conductor shakes his head and finger and refuses to allow the balloon on the bus; the principal of the school locks him in a shed for bringing the balloon to class. The only genuine pleasure I recall that he finds in this unsmiling and rainy universe is when he leaves the balloon outside a tempting-looking bakery and goes in to buy a cake.[24]

Intrigued by this cloudy account, Chu watched Lamorisse's film. Her impression of it, however, could not differ more from Gopnik's:

> A first grader got out of school. No one picked him up. Like all first graders of that era, he walked a long way home either alone or accompanied—long, because he constantly detoured and wandered. Unbounded by extracurricular activity or cram school; unconcerned about getting kidnapped or hit by urban mishaps, Pascal's meander always slipped through the all-encompassing mesh called life. At the end of a steep slope he patted a sitting cat; after descending the stairs he saw a red balloon hanging above the grillwork. Only in that world with a low skyline decorated by a cathedral spire and, therefore, what seems to be a limitless sky does the melancholic friendship between Pascal and the red balloon transpire.[25]

Vulnerability versus breeziness; depressive restriction versus anything-goes latitude; a rainy day versus an open sky—one would think that Gopnik and Chu had in fact watched two distinct films. Their respective description of the grownups' regulation of the child-protagonist and of the degree of connectedness between the human and the nonhuman defines the general air of Lamorisse's screen Paris. In a tranquil milieu where the unguarded Pascal freely attends to various forms of nonhuman lives, including the animate balloon, his companionship with the airborne entity becomes possible. Imposed distantiation from the adults, on the contrary, leads to Pascal's desertion of the balloon in pursuit of a commodity.

---

[24] The Chinese translation of this passage appears in Chu Tien-wen, *Hongqiqiu de luxing: Hou xiaoxian dianying jilu xubian*, 114-115. The English passage quoted here comes directly from Adam Gopnik, *Paris to the Moon* (New York: Random House Trade Paperback, 2000), 5.
[25] Chu Tien-wen, *Hongqiqiu de luxing: Hou xiaoxian dianying jilu xubian* (Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2009), 115.

An interpretive framework helpful for our conceptualization of the marked distinction between these two passages is Pamela Robertson Wojcik's brilliant socio-historical account of the shifting view of childhood and parenting policy in select American literary and cinematic texts from the early twentieth century to today. In those fictional works that Wojcik terms "the fantasy of neglect," particularly those set among cities, neglect from parents and other authoritative figures enables the child's mobility, adventures, and thus unexpected encounters with various others. A spatiality of urban childhood is mapped out as the neglected child navigates assorted public spaces in ways that deviate from the "safe" routes and areas sanctioned by adults. Depending on the given text, the unmoored drift could result in a fantasy or a catastrophe. But regardless of the final outcome, Wojcik posits that neglect itself fashions a "room for play" in the same way that, following Miriam Hansen's proposal, cinema allows the viewer to experience and reconfigure the effect of modernity.[26] In the mode of play, neglected children on screen (and thus their viewers turned childlike) negotiate the still oscillating trajectory of temporality, border of the space and the body, and their relations to the world. Returning to the two writers' distinctive takes on *The Red Balloon*, whereas the neglect of Pascal produces, for Chu, a fairy-tale playground characterized by non-anthropocentric togetherness, Gopnik regards the discipline and punishment of the child as part and parcel of Paris's urban geography. Not surprisingly, Wojcik herself categorizes *Paris to the Moon*—not just its depiction of Lamorisse's film but the entirety of the book—as a survival guide for city parenting, "as if being a parent in those places is an adventure akin to touring challenging or exotic foreign locales."[27]

[26] Pamela Robertson Wojcik, *Fantasies of Neglect: Imagining the Urban Child in American Film and Fiction* (New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016), 30-31.
[27] Ibid., 15.

Thinking with Chu's positive reading of *Red Balloon* and the dystopian implication of *Children of Men*, I would submit that *Flight of the Red Balloon* draws a nostalgic picture of childhood. Hou's film occupies a middle position on a timeline that flows generally in accordance with the modern notion of teleological historicity: from an animist Paris in the past to a future where animism deceases along with the increasing disappearance of the figure of the child. In reaction to this fatalistic trajectory, the act of filmmaking and the production of image more broadly serve as ways to archive the still-animist present. They might even, if lucky, reenchant those—children and adults alike—who are childlike no more through reviving or recreating the memory of childhood. Such recuperation, indeed, is one of the narrative functions of Song who, acting as Hou's surrogate, is in the process of shooting a short film in homage to *The Red Balloon*. Although hired as a nanny, Song in fact facilitates the liberating neglect of Simon, whose presence throughout the film is otherwise associated with formal educational sites and activities. Unlike Pascal in Chu's observation, Simon is twice picked up from school; a tutor gives him a private piano lesson; and he attends a guided group visit to the Musée d'Orsay at the end of the film. Much of Simon's companionship with Song, in contrast, takes place outdoors as they roam about in the city, frequently pausing to play pinball or detouring for a leisurely promenade in a park.

With a video camera in hand, Song ceaselessly records Simon (the Pascal in her short) during their unhurried meanders. We glimpse two shots of Song's ongoing production on her laptop. In the first shot, Simon carries the balloon in tow and exits the subway station. The camera pans right and then up to capture his ascension up the stairs. Before he reaches the ground level, the video cuts to Simon walking down the street he habitually takes on his way home—the same street through which he has previously guided Song in the sequence following

their first encounter. (The beginning of that earlier moment sees Song share with Simon her cinephilic passion of Lamorisse's film and her desire to make a video tribute. She suddenly pauses to film a mural on the side of a building, the top of which depicts a floating red balloon. The second shot of the video shown on the laptop thus retrospectively reveals this move as location scouting.) Simon then stops in front of Chez Fernando, a café in the Latin Quarter. As Simon gazes into the window, he carelessly releases the balloon. The camera promptly pans right and tilts up at an angle of slightly more than 90 degree to capture its flight until it exits the frame, before panning back to focus on the mural balloon. This course of camera movement anticipates the red balloon's succeeding return from screen left to momentarily "gaze" at its two-dimensional counterpart. The orb then flies away again but remains hovering above the area within the camera's purview.

These two shots acknowledge that all direct interactions between Simon and the anthropomorphic balloon throughout the film are results of tricks. They speak to my aforementioned references to Bazinian realism and Kore-eda's rejection of understanding long shot/long take as a naïve pursuit of documentation, into which Bazin's concern has frequently been translated. Indeed, both Hou and Kore-eda participate in developing an alternative genealogy of realism defined not by the creation of illusion per se but by the specific type of illusion that is created, i.e., the flight out of anthropocentrism. Like Bazin who does not consider the use of tricks in *The Red Balloon* as a violation of the film's realism, *Flight of the Red Balloon* comfortably offers meta-commentaries on the apparatus behind its own illusion. This is not only because, at one point, Song explains to Suzanne that the person, hired for her video to physically control the balloon's movement, is dressed entirely in green to facilitate digital erasure in post-production. The same holds true in terms of narration. The display of Song's video on the laptop

retroactively establishes the first five shots of the film, featuring Simon's aforementioned descension down the metro station and his later train ride followed by the balloon, as footage from Song's video-in-making. In the chronological order of the story, these five shots precede the two shots shown on Song's laptop. Collectively the seven shots present Simon's voyage from one metro station through another to Chez Fernando—the identical clothes and bookbag he wears across these two sequences offer an additional evidence of linkage. The five-shot flashforward that opens *Flight of the Red Balloon*, then, is itself a reflexive declaration of the imaginary, constructed nature of the animist imagination: the once naturally animist world of *The Red Balloon* now only exists as a meticulously arranged scenography, triply framed by Mac DVD Player, Song's laptop, and the film screen (figure 2).

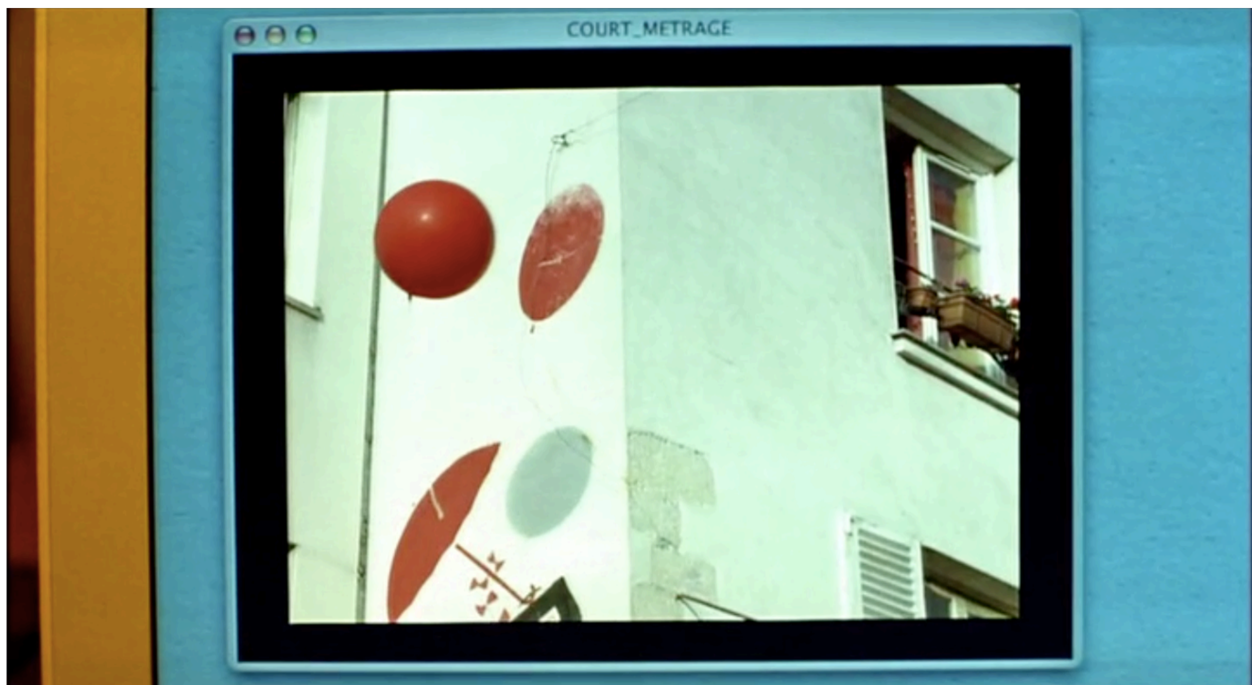

Figure 1. 2. Animism within a frame within a frame within a frame….

This layered image is but one moment that instantiates the crystallization of the peculiar combination of childhood and animism throughout *Flight of the Red Balloon*. Consider, for instance, how another film within the film juxtaposes, too, a child and an act of animation. Early

in the film, Suzanne mentions to Song that she has seen her previous film, befittingly titled *Origins*. It reminds Suzanne of her own childhood, not least all sorts of sensory memories: "Sounds, images… You know, that darkness that's sometimes there in your imagery. […] Your film touches on very deep feelings I'd almost forgotten." An ineffable sentiment has since surfaced and haunted Suzanne, most evidently in the following sequence when she appears pensive alone in the bathroom, at once absentmindedly applying eyeliner and humoring her tenant's and his guest's attempts to chitchat from the living room. Prompted by an urge to fathom these "deep feelings," Suzanne embarks on her own pursuit of images. She commissions Song to convert some old 8mm films to a DVD; the resultant transfer is said film within the film, a family video which she shows Simon on a Necvox monitor installed in her car. On this small screen, an old man whom Simon cannot recognize but Suzanne identifies as her grandfather demonstrates the control of a rod puppet— Pulcinella, judging from its aquiline nose—to Louise (Louise Margolin), Suzanne's daughter who now lives with her ex-husband in Brussels. This literal act of animation on screen is further animated when Suzanne dubs this silent video—the kind of animating work that she has chosen to be her profession. One wonders if Suzanne was once similarly immersed in the world of (marionette) animation when she, too, was a child. Did it motivate her to become a voice performer who aurally animates the puppets on stage? And could this past affinity with animation be one of those sediments of memory stirred up after her viewing of *Origins*?

So much about Suzanne's childhood connection with animism remains speculative, though the film upholds its existence through interposing the marionette as an essential mediating object. Indeed, we see this when Suzanne communicates with Taiwanese palmar drama master Ah Zhong through Song's French-Mandarin interpretation on a train to Paris.

Suzanne gives him a timeworn postcard as a token of her appreciation. Itself a memory-object, the postcard hints at a parallelism between Suzanne and Song: it was when the former was likewise an au pair in London during her adolescence that she found this postcard and has since kept all these years. (One couldn't help but wonder, again, if Suzanne once facilitated the neglect of a child somewhere in London as well?) Here, the motifs of puppet and puppeteer invite an intuitive reading of intertextuality that points to Hou's incorporation of some familiar elements from *The Puppetmaster* into *Flight of the Red Balloon*. Thinking through their meanings to Suzanne as well as their associations with animation, however, the reversal of this vector seems more apposite: the latter, in fact, retroactively endows an animist significance of the marionette in the former. The significance of the marionette has thus qualitatively changed from a professional tool used by the autobiographical subject of *The Puppetmaster* to one of the privileged devices of the animist imagination. What the puppet—controlled either by hand or rod—once meant to Suzanne is what the balloon now means to Simon. Both function as key animist objects associated with their childhood, which Song's filmmaking directly constructs or indirectly summons.[28]

The two videos shown within *Flight of the Red Balloon* belong to a larger part of Hou's film, which devotes itself to creating and collecting images within images—as if the more it does the more fleeting memories it preserves. Ian Jones has noticed that the film's "frequent recourse to images shot through windows, often with a myriad of layers of reflections blocking any clear view," which, by his calculation, "constitute 24% of all the shots in the film, translating to 14% of the film's total running time."[29] Jones isolates these shots to demonstrate how the film has

[28] As Chapter Two will extensively explore, Hou would later exhaust the animist potential of the marionette in his 2015 martial arts film, *The Assassin*, with regards to its comparative qualities with animality.
[29] Ian Jones, "Flight of the Red Balloon (2007, France)," *Cinematrics*, May 2009, available at http://www.cinemetrics.lv/movie.php?movie_ID=3104.

staged “a muddied dialectic of visual penetrability and impenetrability.” But if we think *superficially* about the function of these filtered shots as the recording of reflections in general, the 24 % of the total shots amount to but some fragments of the film’s ubiquitous registration of the imprints of the world upon a wide range of reflective surfaces. The red balloon; the yellow plastic seats in the subway station; windows of the subway train; windows of the 76 bus; the red glass walls that flank the entrance of the puppet theater; car windows; windows of various buildings and rooms; the windows of the train on which Song, Suzanne, and Ah Zhong talk; the screen of a jukebox that appears in a flashback of Simon and Louise’s wander; the glass protection of Félix Vallotton’s oil painting *Le ballon*—the list goes on. Boundaries between bodies and matter, between the animate and the inanimate dissolve in these moments when floating images occupy the city. As faces and bodies attach themselves onto the surfaces of things, a kind of symbolic unity of the world transpires as if the film consciously evokes the child’s phenomenology. Reflections of the present thus conjure both an idealized past and an anticipated but never realized continuation of this past: the could-have-been that undergirds the film’s romanticism. The representative instant of such a memory-image appears on a sunny day, when Simon draws with the aid of a toy camera lucida, the surface of which reflects a shadowy Louise, backlit by the sunshine that casts in from a living room window. He has just finished a drawing and is about to start a new one. But even with the aid of the optical device, Simon’s playful endeavor to materialize the here-and-now of his sister would only produce a hazy silhouette, which foreshadows their now estranged relationship. The melancholic undertone of this attempt to hold onto as many as images as possible—however distorted the results might be—is further amplified when we consider that this scene exists as part of Suzanne’s flashback of her once wholistic family life.

Such a mummy complex, to borrow a term from Bazin's ontological quest of the image, foregrounds the instability of temporality. That said, for the film the practice of embalming the past in its totality is not as imperative as the act of staging a séance. Images of the past regard the present from the other side; in between them stands an unbridgeable abyss. Like benevolent specters, they do not force themselves upon the characters. Memories, fantasies, and the unfulfilled promises of childhood constitute the elusive realms where they silently stay. Ghost, indeed, is the impression that a visiting school kid has, in the penultimate sequence of the film, of the two small figures who stand on grass in the tenebrous background of Vallotton's 1899 *Le ballon*, hosted in the Musée d'Orsay. Their relationship with a boy who runs in pursuit of the titular entity in the bright, sandy foreground appears ambiguous. A felt connection of some sort bond the two groups. Yet the pictorial boundaries marked by the shadow of the tree as well as the vibrant versus barren grounds upon which they respective stand draw, at the level of composition, an unmistakable line of distinction. Another child suggests that the two figures might as well be the boy's "parents," which seem equally plausible if the neglect allowed by such nearby but withdrawn parenting is truly indispensable to the formation of the boy's animist interactions with the balloon.

On the role of the two figures in *Le ballon*, the description that Hou himself would likely offer is neither ghost nor parent but "old soul," a term he has used to portray the titular object of his film in relation to that of Lamorisse's in an interview with Bai Ruiwen (Michael Berry). "Visiting the present from fifty years ago," Hou explicates, "[the old soul] returns to be in touch with the children today, checking what they are like now. It understands that things have changed in the past fifty years, so it only observes from afar."[30] This characterization aptly

[30] Bai Ruiwen, *Zhuhai shiguang—hou xiaoxian de guangyingjiyi*, 267.

depicts the balloon's presence when it does not serve as a carefully controlled prop in the naturally animist world within Song's video. Throughout the film, the red balloon appears five times in total: twice in Song's video above discussed; thrice as an autonomous animate being (given that the flexible and far-reaching trajectory of its flight inarguably escapes the manipulation of any single technician that Song could afford to hire). In these three instances, the balloon traverses the Parisian cityscape to sneak about outside Suzanne's apartment. Unobtrusively it lingers outside the windows and peers in to check on Simon who is shown either filming Song as she makes pancakes on the dining table or napping in his room. Contra Simon's intimacy with the balloon in Song's video, here he does not at all notice it, let alone interact with. Particularly in the sequence when Simon films Song's culinary production, he remains oblivious to the balloon right behind her, even if one intriguing shot—Shot 48 of the film—seems to align with his point of view and clearly registers its existence for a good 14 seconds. When asked by Suzanne's lawyer what he is filming in the next shot, Simon simply says "I'm filming… what she's doing. How she makes the pancakes."[31]

Thus far my reading of *Flight of the Red Balloon* has established two kinds of animisms and their associated forms within the film: a phantom animism from the past that hides in plain sight; and a staged animism, the sole site where enchantment transpires (such as the video on the screen of Song's computer). Just when we think that the film presents a stable paradigm of representation, however, the final sequence advances another possibility. The turning point takes place when Simon, sitting among fellow school kids in front of *Le ballon*, diverts his attention

[31] On this intriguing shot, Jones suggests that "The narration has taken on the characteristic of being either somewhat of a baiting trickster (manufacturing arbitrary evidence to cue the viewer to hypothesize character POV when none was in fact in operation), or, alternately (an perhaps more interestingly), one who points: the visual narration suggests a narrator that does not remain "neutral," but that can attempt to prod a character to notice something (such as a balloon outside a window), but cannot ultimately intervene upon these characters and their world." Ian Jones, "Flight of the Red Balloon (2007, France)."

away from the ongoing discussion of the oil painting to the glass skylights of the gallery, above which the red balloon effortlessly glides. As the other kids offer impressive visual analyses of the painting's high-angle perspective and its potential reference to Lamorisse's film, Simon notices something else and raises his head. The next shot cuts to his point of view, looking through the skylight at the hovering balloon. This editing pattern that cuts between Simon and his point of view repeats itself for another three shots until the balloon relocates to the side of the building and peers in from another window in the following shot. A second set of exchanged gazes follows suit as the film cuts back twice between the balloon and Simon, who has also slightly adjusted his seated posture for a better view of the balloon. In the last three shots of the film, the red balloon takes off, high into what Chu would have described as "a limitless sky" above a low panorama of the Parisian skyline. In these nine shots that crosscut between Simon and the balloon, which amount to only 106 seconds in this film of 115 minutes, the former actually sees and experiences some sort of interaction with the latter for the first time outside of Song's video. Unlike the puzzling Shot 48, here two unmistakable POV shots testify to the authenticity of Simon's animist vision, one which he has mysteriously acquired after playing the role of Pascal in Song's video-homage.

Like *Origins* which triggers Suzanne's recollection of a childhood replete with (marionette) animation, the making of Song's new film gently turns Simon into an agent of animism. Song's arrival into Suzanne's family parallels Hou's visit to Paris. With their cameras, both of them recuperate the possibility of animist childhood in an environment from which animism has long extracted—at least according to the setups of their respective artistic visions. Cultural outsiders as they might be, their means of recuperation derive from the very cultural traditions of their temporary residence. Instead of opening this site of Western modernity par

excellence up to a transhistorical construct imported from an exotic elsewhere (something that claims to the cultural specificity of the East, for instance), the film tries to think about animism in relation to what the city itself has to offer: the mediation of Lamorisse's film, Vallotton's painting, and the memory of rod puppet that the film evokes by bringing in the comparable Taiwanese hand puppet. *Flight of the Red Balloon* thus demonstrates how the animist imagination is by no means an Other's outré fantasy horizontally implanted in the soil of Paris as a solution to its detrimental anthropocentrism; rather, it explores the possibility of Western culture, itself, as an autochthonous source of the animist worldview. The final flight of the balloon, in fact, offers a way out of Kore-eda's aforementioned characterization of contemporary East Asian film aesthetics based on certain conceptual dichotomies. The largely optimistic tone of the final sequence derives at once from its promise of transcendence, embodied by the balloon's ascension into the heaven, and from a definitive sense of clarity and confidence—always there across Hou's oeuvre—that the animist imagination is not a fixed, forever aesthetic-cum-geopolitical stance.[32]

The awakening of Simon marks the conclusion of the old soul-balloon's spontaneous observation. However, an unstated but felt undercurrent beneath the levity of the balloon's self-release still distinguishes this ending from the triumphant final sequence of Lamorisse's film, in which all the balloons across Paris gather for the sole purpose of elevating Pascal. One recalls

[32] David Scott Diffrient and Carl R. Burgchardt have suggested that Hou's homage to Lamorisse transcends cinephilic fetishism by staging "a critical intervention in the nostalgic framing of *Le ballon rouge* as an evocation of adolescent longing. Such longing, diegetically expressed via the young boy's desire for companionship, speaks to certain audiences' extradiegetic yearning for intercultural connection—a desire, hinted at in the final scene of Lamorisse's film (showing a 'rainbow cluster' of balloons sweeping Pascal away from the city), which necessarily transcends geographical barriers and which is only fully realised in Hou's border-crossing film." The final point of this long quote, a belief in the universal commutativity of the film, echoes Michelle E. Bloom's abovementioned emphasis on the transcultural and intertextual horizon opened up by *Flight of the Red Balloon* and other recent Sino-French co-production films. David Scott Diffrient and Carl R. Burgchardt, "A Tale of Two Balloons: Intercultural Cinema and Transnational Nostalgia in *Le voyage du ballon rouge*," in *Transnational Film Remakes*, ed. Iain Robert Smith and Constantine Verevis (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), 160.

Derek P. McCormack's apt description that all releases of balloons are haunted by a lingering void. Materially, at some point somewhere the vaporous hope to which contained helium gives spherical forms will disperse as the balloons deflate and fall back to the control of gravity. (Inevitably they turn into plastic wastes that pollute the environment and threaten numerous lives of animals.) The co-existence of these contractions at the material level conceivably informs, then, the symbolic significance of balloon release as a ritual, which has been performed "in events of memorialization for all people of all ages… [with] an especially strong affinity between balloon release and *the death of children* [emphasis mine]."[33] With its association to death, the red balloon's gradual ascension into its evanescent disappearance implies an agreeable melancholy. Such a seeming contradiction characteristic of the pneumatic entity has itself been a cinematic motif. Hou's film, on this note, pays tribute not only to Ozu Yasujiro's *Early Summer* (1951) in which a character, upon sighting a floating balloon, comments that "A child must be crying somewhere," but also to another exchange between French and East Asian cinemas: the iconic final image of Yamanaka Sadao's *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (1937) where a thin paper balloon delivers the weightiest message of death, itself a nod to a similar moment in Jacques Feyder's *Pension Mimosas* (1935).[34]

Insofar as the affective sphere around the orb carries just as much loss and gloom as hopefulness and delight on screen, the ending of *Flight of the Red Balloon* does not fully promise a utopia. Indeed, doesn't all the care that the film has invested into fostering a cozy environment for animism to flourish already points to an underlying alleviation of a profound anxiety that animism likewise generates: the fear that an animated entity could stop being animate; the

---

[33] Derek P. McCormack, *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2018), 86-88.

[34] Hasumi Shigehiko, "Sadao Yamanaka or the New Wave in the 1930s in Kyoto," *Cinemaya* 2 (1988), 48.

vulnerability of life that manifests itself when vitality suddenly dissipates? The sorrowful lyrics of Camille Dalmais's rhythmically peppy chanson, "Chin Chin"—a remake of iconic Taiwanese songstress Tsai Chin's "Bei yiwang de shiguang" [The forgotten time])—that accompanies the balloon's buoyant flight from the museum into the distant sky, further amplifies this hermeneutic ambivalence of the film's conclusive note. "In the blue of the evening," as the narrator mellifluously chants, she overwhelms herself with alcohol. Be it Pomerol or Pommard; La Veuve Panee or Saint-Amour, in momentary dizziness Dalmais coos "flowers I've forgotten" and a former life "on the banks of the Loire […] where I lost hope." With no explanation of the cause of her loss, nightly she indulges herself in remembrance of sweet things past—"hot milk, cinnamon, clear water"—and drinks to her memory of the red balloon by the dim light at the bar, against an increasingly weighty sky.

Releasing the Air from the Air Doll

Just such unbearable lightness of Hou's airborne animism guides the unfolding of Kore-eda's *Air Doll*, during which Lamorisse's red balloon briefly drops by for a quick visit. In Cinema Circus, the DVD rental store where the protagonist Nozomi (Bae Doona) works, a poster of *The Red Balloon* hangs behind the counter (figure 3). Placed in adjacent to other posters of such cinematic classics as *The 400 Blows*, *Girl Crazy*, *King Kong*, and *Signing in the Rain*, this lightly colored image shows a close-up of Pascal and the red balloon, with the former casting a sidelong glance at the store. Nozomi applies for a job here because she has been smitten, at practically first sight, with store clerk Junichi (Iura Arata) towards the end of the first day when she, originally an inflatable sex doll owned by discontented waiter Hideo (Itao Itsuji), mysteriously comes to life. Unlike the old soul who maintains a respectful distance from world in *Flight of the Red Balloon*,

Lamorisse's balloon stays grounded in *Air Doll*. Not only is it literally inches away from the Nozomi at the store, the hovering spirit, in fact, has reincarnated into the thick of the everyday by dwelling in or, more accurately, "possessing" a much larger plastic container that is Nozomi's body.[35]

Figure 1.3. A poster of *The Red Balloon* hangs behind the counter.

Reaffirming the affinity between childhood and animism, in the morning of Nozomi's enigmatic animation, she approaches the world with childlike curiosity. Still an unclothed plastic doll in appearance at this point, she walks from Hideo's bed to the window and exposes herself to an elemental environment outside. Refreshing air and gentle sunlight bath her; morning dew on the metal bar of the window drips and moistens her right hand. These contacts with natural elements finalize her transformation. As the camera pans back from the window to her naked

[35] In a perceptive comparison, Diane Wei Lewis has identified the influence of Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987), a film about an angel's transformation into a human being and subsequent love affairs with a trapeze artist (to which the name of the rental store, Cinema Circus, likely refers). Diane Wei Lewis, "From Manga to Film: Gender, Precarity and the Textual Transformation of *Air Doll*," *Screen* 60.1 (2019), 111.

body following the retraction of her hand, in the precise location of the plastic doll stands now Bae the South Korean actress, who utters, in her accented and thereby otherworldly Japanese pronunciation, “beau-ti-ful” in reaction both to the sight of the dew and the sensation that it has left on her palm.

Everything, including the Japanese language, seems novel to Nozomi, and she cannot wait to explore the outside world. Recalling Wojcik’s proposal that neglected children produce an alternative geography of the city during their unguided urban adventures, Nozomi’s first solo egress stages her fresh and playful interactions with the residents and objects in the neighborhood. The first shot of this sequence already sees her deviation from standard social codes when she walks out of Hideo’s apartment in an erotic French maid costume that she selects from the closet. (Other peculiar clothing options she has tried on include a standard men’s polo shirt, a high school girl’s sailor uniform, and an equally eroticized mermaid costume that hints at another intertextual reference of becoming-human, Disney’s 1989 *The Little Mermaid*.) With a stiff mid-torso that barely swaggers, Nozomi proceeds like an unoiled robot. Her uncooperative body and clumsy movement are sharply contrasted with those of a little girl, Moe, who dashes from the center of the background to the fore. Moe’s father chases her out to hand her a bag she has forgotten to bring; upon receiving the bag, Moe runs off from screen right while saying “I’m off!” Five seconds later, Nozomi parrots the exact term with a tinge of hesitancy in her elocution, as if she is unsure of the precise usage of what she has just picked up. In reaction to her odd and abrupt behavior, the father who has just exited the frame walks a few steps back into our view and appears baffled. He awkwardly nods out of politeness, nevertheless, before promptly scuttling off. The confusion he has experienced is promptly reflected on the stylistic front when the camera jumps the 180-degree line to show his hurried departure in the next shot.

When Nozomi walks down the sidewalk and squats to observe a pile of street-side trash, she acquires her first logic of categorization from a waste collector who comes to divide the pile into burnable and non-burnable subsets. Nozomi also receives a lesson in the etiquette of interpersonal interaction as she follows an elderly, kimono-wearing woman who tours the neighborhood to salute a number of people. As Nozomi tails the woman, she similarly playacts by imitating her movement and gesture; as a consequence, of course, she beckons more quick glances of bafflement. The juxtaposition between the woman and Nozomi's respectively formal and frisky attires as well as their mirroring behaviors produce a comical effect until the woman drops by the police station to gossip with an officer about a recent murder case. Initially Nozomi squats outside of the entrance to observe some potted plants on the ground. Intrigued by the details of the brutal murder motivated by a hindered love affair, she stands up and concentrates on the officer's narration. This 15-second shot sees the camera gradually pan up and track in to capture her reaction to the novel concept of death. Her expressionless face does not grant us a legible interiority, but the slowness of the track-in and the extra beat that the camera takes on her do register a subtle change of inner state.

As this episode implies, while Nozomi's first outing can generally be described as a lighthearted encounter with the world during which she playfully familiarizes herself with societal norms, the process has been shadowed by sundry ominous signs. The logic of trash categorization and the murder case anticipate her later placement of the corpse of Junichi, whom she unintentionally kills, in a trash bag for pickup by the street among other "burnable" wastes. Her mimetic approach to learning is also put into question when she, after walking away from the police station, follows a group of little girls who hold one another's hands and sing on their way to school. The telling lyrics—"Don't copy me, Mr. Echo, Mr. Copycat"—is physically

enacted as the girl in the very rear refuses to grasp Nozomi's hand due to its coldness. Such a denial of interaction between the childlike Nozomi—herself a newborn, in a literal sense—and the child immediately recurs in the next two shots. The first shot captures, in a medium scale, Nozomi's carefree play in a park sandbox alongside several children. One by one, however, all other children are summoned back by their mothers. When Nozomi comes to realize her isolation within the squared borders of the sandbox in the next shot, she stands as the sole figure in the foreground of this long shot, with everyone else walking into the back. Nozomi's sartorial and behavioral eccentricity likely motivates the unexplained mass exodus; this we retrospectively confirm from a later sequence wherein Nozomi's attempt to play with an infant in a stroller is directly denied by its mother nearby.

Throughout Nozomi's first outing, the competing forces of integration and exclusion point to the film's attempt to map animism's potential trajectories in an urban environment. We can think of this move as an audiovisual experiment that places, borrowing Ian Bogost's term, a truly "alien phenomenology" into a particular environment defined by its lack of the animist worldview.[36] Nozomi's status as an alien creature becomes even clearer when we compare the film with the fourth installment of Gouda Yoshiie's manga *Kuki Ningyo* (the official translation being "The Pneumatic Figure of a Girl"), titled "Kuki ningyo" (Air doll), from which the film is adapted.[37] The first panel of "Kuki ningyo" starts in medias res with a page-sized depiction of the homecoming of an ordinarily-attired air doll named Jun. Rather than departing for adventures like Nozomi does at the beginning of the film, Jun returns to the familiar domesticity of her apartment and habitually inflates herself with an air pump. Three thought bubbles from Panels 4

[36] Ian Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).
[37] Gouda Yoshiie, *Gōda tetsugakudō: Kūki ningyō* (Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2000), 47-66.

to 6 indicate her interior monologue: "Every day I inflate myself. Since the air would always gradually leak out, every day I inflate myself."[38] The same line that bookends the manga's opening statement firmly situates Jun in the cyclicality of the everyday that is literally suffocating. Her normal outfit, her daily routine, and her mastery over the know-how of self-sustainability for the sole purpose of "fulfilling [her male master's] sexual desire" characterize Jun as the exact opposite of the childlike Nozomi.[39] Not just an old soul but a jaded one, Jun has come to accept her given role in a sexually abusive and emotionally alienating society. Unlike Nozomi who faces an uncertain future that could be positive or negative, futurity itself has been foreclosed from the outset for Jun. Without Nozomi's aesthetic appreciation of natural elements, her attentiveness to street-side wastes, or her attempts to befriend children, Jun is not much associated with any key concern of the animist imagination. Despite the fact that Jun is a mysteriously animated object too, she functions to offer a gendered critique of social alienation. On this note, "Kuki ningyo" hardly counts as an animist imagination, insofar as Jun does not structurally occupy the mediating position of the shaman in terms of human-nonhuman relationship but, rather, the oppressed position of the woman in a heteronormative society. In Diane Wei Lewis's words, "the air doll represents the plight of a society in which men are compelled to contain or dispose of their emotions, resulting in forms of emotional damage and blockage."[40] The manga downplays Jun's unique nature as an animated being most significantly in an epiphanic moment when, after surviving an accident at her workplace, she notices at least 15 women around her on the street who are crying, suffering, or depressed. She identifies with

[38] Ibid., 48-49.
[39] Ibid., 49.
[40] Diane Wei Lewis, "From Manga to Film: Gender, Precarity and the Textual Transformation of *Air Doll*," 100-101.

them and shares, as well, the sources of all their negative emotions, which the manga implies to be men.

If, unlike Jun, Nozomi is structurally not so much a woman as a shaman, what might her function be? Like Song's arrival which somehow brings back the animist potentiality in Suzanne and Simon, Nozomi's unexplained advent carries, too, a pedagogy as she endeavors to make a number of people's lives meaningful throughout the film.[41] This is not an easy task as virtually all other major and minor characters are lonely or self-alienating social misfits who have, in one way or another, failed to accomplish the heteronormative ideal of establishing a conventional nuclear family. Hideo, for instance, names all his air dolls "Nozomi" after his ex-girlfriend; Junichi first sees Nozomi as a substitute for his former partner and later as a specific device to fulfill his perverse desires; Moe turns out to be a child of divorce; the elderly woman obsessed with criminal activities later develops a hallucination that she is responsible for one of cases she learns from late night TV. Other characters as such include Nozomi's middle-aged supervisor at work who, through blackmailing, forces her into having sex with him in the supply room; an office concierge who feels diffident about her age and appearance, especially around a younger and popular colleague; an unkempt and reclusive hoarder who swamps her tiny room with wastes and feeds solely on instant noodles, alcohol, and apples; a young man who frequents Cinema Circus to take upskirt photos of Nozomi; and a retired old man who always sits alone on a park bench after the death of his several dogs. Indeed, in the old man's words: "These days, everybody is [empty] […] especially, everyone living in this kind of city."

[41] One recalls Vittorio De Sica's *Miracle in Milan* (1951), another postwar film classic that features a childlike man who makes magic happen in order to help the residents of a destitute cityscape. More recently, Alice Rohrwacher's *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018) seems to be doing something along this tradition as well.

Following her unique animist logic, Nozomi takes what the old man means by emptiness literally as a physical rather than emotional state: those who feel empty are, just like her, animated air dolls in essence. In Michelle Cho's words, Nozomi is human "only in failed identification, because Nozomi's intersubjective relations with others, including her projection onto others of her desire to identify, capture her in the reciprocal bind of (mis)recognition."[42] Such a categorical confusion between the human and the nonhuman—are people air dolls or are things animate?—informs Nozomi's attempt to foster intersubjective bonds and build an alternative community with others. If Nozomi has previously established her "human" identity through imitation, from this point onwards her act of imitation acquires a different significance: a secret code she has devised that not only ensures a sense of solidarity among whom she mistakes to be her fellows but also fosters collective prosperity by satisfying their physical and emotional needs.

In the sequence of Nozomi and Junichi's dinner date, for instance, Nozomi sees Moe who sites nearby discreetly toss a carrot onto the floor from her plate and pretend that she has eaten it in front of her father. Misrecognizing Moe as another animated doll who does not need to eat to survive, Nozomi repeats the sham with exaggerated movements. The little girl catches Nozomi's signal and the two of them exchange winks that confirm an established connection, though what they respectively take as the nature of the connection obviously differs. In another sequence, Nozomi attempts to alleviate the concierge's social appearance anxiety. The solution she comes up with is to offer her a whitening foundation which she could use to cover the wrinkles on her face in the same way that Nozomi has herself used it to cover the seams that hold together the

[42] Michelle Cho, "A Disenchanted Fantastic: The Pathos of Objects in Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Air Doll*," in *Simultaneous Worlds: Global Science Fiction Cinema*, ed. Jennifer L. Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 236.

surface of her plastic body. Needless to say, this gift is considered confusing, pointless, if not slightly insulting.

But if these misrecognition and misidentification amount to innocuous slip-ups at the end of the day, the next instance of imitation takes the tone of the entire film on a hairpin turn: Nozomi's involuntary manslaughter of Junichi, caused by a well-meaning act of reciprocation when Nozomi attempts to "deflate" and "inflate" Junichi following what he has performed on her again and again. The incident begins when, earlier in Cinema Circus, a sharp edge of a bookshelf pricks through Nozomi and triggers her rapid deflation. Junichi comes to rescue by sealing the cut with tape and performing a mouth-to-belly-button resuscitation through her air hole. This fort/da game of vitality somehow satisfies Junichi's sadist fantasy and a kind of god-playing desire. Having once told Nozomi that he, too, feels empty inside, Junichi asks Nozomi to do something for him that no one else can: let him release and refill her air. In order to both please Junichi and reciprocate the absolute singularity with which he has endowed her through this act, Nozomi cuts him open with a pair of scissors while he is asleep. As Nozomi innocently asks Junichi "where is your plug?" and blows air into his mouth when she cannot locate it, Junichi painfully bleeds to death.

In viewing Air *Doll* as an animist imagination, I read this tragic development of Nozomi and Junichi's relationship as part of the film's broader quest for the right dose of animism that an alienating urban environment can handle. On this note, my interpretation differs from a number of symptomatic readings that see *Air Doll* as a reflection of gender dynamics or self-other relation more broadly in contemporary Japanese society. From a gender studies perspective, for instance, Lewis has suggested this plot development is tragic only because the film "exemplifies the failure to think beyond the reproductive family." Unlike the original manga which "questions

the rigid gender norms that underwrote [Japan's] high-economic growth," the emphasis of *Air Doll* on Nozomi's sentimental failure to find love typifies, instead, "a melancholic attachment to the heteronormative social organization that helped drive Japan's 'economic miracle'."[43] In many ways the film certainly maintains heteronormative ideology in its pursuit of collective flourishing. But to condemn its means and end altogether seems to mistake the part for the whole. From an ecological perspective that recognizes the role of animism in our collective pursuit of happiness, I would suggest that, like a child's learning experience, Nozomi's given time in Tokyo constitutes a series of trial and error on the feasibility of animism in the contemporary condition. Forging a romantic relationship—heteronormative as it might be—is a way through which she can test out animism's instrumental value of generating joy and even meaning. Unfortunately, Nozomi's exploration ends on an appalling note. But the outcome alone should not reduce her attempt to a worthless waste. Indeed, the risk of any utopian-driven project should not override its necessity, not least in face of an impending crisis of humanity which the animist imagination of cinema strives to resist.

Such a reading of the air doll's journey reverberates with what McCormack identifies as a key characteristic of "atmospheric things," with his privileged object of study being none other than the balloon. One of the balloon's appeals, in McCormack's insightful analysis, lies in its ontological vagueness as an entity always in the process of formation towards an impossible completion, thus itself exceeding "entity" as a category altogether. While the balloon encloses, gives shape, and makes tangible the atmosphere on both meteorological and affective fronts, the

[43] Diane Wei Lewis, "From Manga to Film: Gender, Precarity and the Textual Transformation of *Air Doll*," 121. For Cho who investigates the politics of community formation in the film, the tragic calls for a new kind of human subjectivity without "a common inhumanity," namely the treatment of others "as objects of use and consumption, the logic of which involves the limited recognition of the other as an element of fantasy, a projection of desire." Michelle Cho, "A Disenchanted Fantastic: The Pathos of Objects in Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Air Doll*," 236.

resultant fantasy of immediacy still remains immersed within the atmosphere whose totality cannot be contained, fathomed by something in the depths of its plentitude. What McCormack calls “envelopment” that describes the material shaping of the balloon is thus a relational process “by which entities emerge within a milieu from which they differ without becoming discontinuous, in the same way that a cloud is a process of differentiation with an atmosphere without necessarily being discontinuous with it.”[44] As such, the figure of the balloon befittingly serves, across a wide range of artistic creations, as a heuristic for “modulating and distributing geographies and experiences of grief, sadness, and terror” with regards to our ethico-political inquiry of “how to live in relation to the elemental energies of air and atmosphere, and in ways that balance the twin requirements of envelopment and exposure as necessary conditions for the flourishing of forms of life.”[45]

As Nozomi, a thoroughly anthropomorphized balloon, similarly tests out the conditions under which animate beings can flourish, does Junichi’s death terminates the possibility of animism in the chronotope of *Air Doll*? Insofar as the cycle of animation, de-animation, and re-animation takes place exclusively in the nonhuman realm, are there other ways through which the human can still experience animism? Nozomi’s reactions after the manslaughter gives us more to think with. After depositing Junichi’s bagged body in the burnable waste pile, she voluntarily sits in the unburnable one and accepts her return to the atmosphere as the airy spirit enclosed within her body gradually leaks out. Moe happens to walk by and stops at the sight of Nozomi’s gleaming ring, which she takes off from her finger in exchange for a talking doll in the form of a little girl. Pushed by more bags of trash lobbed in from screen right, Nozomi falls leftwards to the ground. A sharp hiss indicates that the covering tape on her wrist wound now

[44] Derek P. McCormack, *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment*, 5.
[45] Ibid., 9, 12.

completely peels; the fall also triggers a prerecorded audio of "mommy" from the talking doll that plays on a loop. This acoustic ensemble that comprises a sound of fading vitality and an uncanny call for familial union reaffirms the weight of childhood in the animist imagination. If from the perspective of gender studies *Air Doll* has been criticized as ideologically conservative in its pursuit of the heteronormative family ideal, it is because the film considers a future without children as one wherein animism is severely hindered. More precisely, the lack of generational reproduction and hence the animist capacity that children preserve leads to the end of animism *tout court*. With Moe's discard of the mother-seeking doll in exchange for a shiny commodity, and with the suicide of the childlike air doll, the attempted resistance of Kore-eda's film against this fatalistic trend—much more embodied and involved than the taciturn, intimate route taken by *Flight of the Red Balloon*—ends up as self-destruction. Indeed, the only instance of what can remotely be considered as a success story of heterosexual coupling comes at the very end of the film when the old man and the elderly woman are shown, in the middle ground of a nine-second extreme shot, chatting with each other. But even if any romance beyond friendship and companionship is to transpire between the two minor characters, biological fecundity is probably not something we would associate with their relationship.

Such pessimism of *Air Doll* stands out if we, again, compare this ending with that of the original manga. In the concluding four panels of the latter, Jun (who has not killed anyone) also ends up as a waste only because her owner notices her taped wound and decides that the time has come to replace her with a new model he happens to have just purchased. But even as Jun is physically confined in a trash bag by the street, she looks up at the clear sky through her transparent plastic prison and believes confidently, that her capacity of feeling the beauty of the blue sky must index her "possession of a heart"—a conviction twice stated in the last two

panels.[46] Nozomi's abject state, in contrast, is not the result of force majeure but her voluntary submission to the emptiness of life. Rather than staying firmly on the ground like Jun does in spite of the condition under which she falls, Nozomi's spirit withdraws to the ethereal, leaving an empty vessel behind. Indeed, Kore-eda himself has noticed this change of tone as the story relocates from page to screen. Inspired by the manga's hopefulness, his origin vision for the film was a positive account of "void as potentiality": a kind of relational fulfillment that transpires when air travels from the other to the self. But as he delved into the process of adaptation, especially with the addition of Nozomi's manslaughter, such an air of positivity turns "dilute" and the film much more ambivalent than initially conceived.[47]

As Nozomi's spirit disperses back to the air, it carries numerous dandelion seeds, each visiting a minor character in a series of shots, including Moe and her father, the police officer, the old man, the elderly woman, Nozomi's supervisor, the upskirt snapper (who now conveniently works in Cinema Circus), and Hideo lying in bed with his new plastic playmate. This last attempt to breathe a refreshing air into someone's life proves largely futile, as most of them do not notice or simply ignore the dandelion seed (except for the old man and elderly woman whom we see later chatting on his usual bench). A sense of hope seemingly emerges as the film ends in the hoarder's shadowy and claustrophobic room. Even though she has no direct exposure to the airy spirit and the dandelion seeds it carries, she promptly wakes up from her sleep on the floor and walks to the window. After pulling back the curtain and opening the window, she exposes herself to the bright day and notices something. Paralleling Nozomi's direct encounter with the elemental world in the first morning of her awakening, the penultimate shot of the film also sees the hoarder utter "beautiful" with a tinge of smile on her face. The final

[46] Gouda Yoshiie, *Gōda tetsugakudō: Kūki ningyō*, 66.
[47] Kore-eda Hirokazu, *Eiga o torinagara kangaeta koto* (Tokyo: Mishimasha, 2016), 231.

shot cuts to her high-angle POV in which Nozomi lies closely to the center of the frame, with her back against a mound of white trash bags. Variously colored glass bottles and apples that Nozomi has collected symmetrically surrounds her, marking the proper boundary of this burial site she has prepared for herself. Perhaps this is the only viable form that animism can take up in, recalling the old man's words, "this kind of city": a cluster of unalterably dead or decaying matter aestheticized from afar into a still image. If the final ascension of the titular object in *Flight of the Red Balloon* generates an overall sense of optimistic transcendence, hope in *Air Doll* remains down below, soon to be buried underground where what remains of Nozomi rests among other unburnable wastes. What lies with Nozomi is the dialectical moment of our contemporary fable of animation: excessive vitality yields a corpse. The fulfilment of a child's wish that a balloon would come to life ultimately proves be a nightmare for the animated balloon itself.

A Chthonic Infant

If a single device of animism like the air doll ultimately proves not enough to enact large-scale reenchantment, how else is it possible to resurrect animism from the morgue of the abject where Nozomi perpetually lies? In what other forms might the abandoned and suppressed return again to the thick of our urban modernity? Just such desires of rebirth propel the unfolding of Hou's *Café Lumière*, set too in Tokyo. The tool for re-animation it offers is a horizontally laid out network that has come to organize the topography of Tokyo's cityscape: the extensive and complex metro and electric train system, through which the protagonist, freelance writer Yoko (played by singer and first-time actress Hitoto Yo), navigates the city in her search for the traces left by the subject of her current biographical research: Jiang Wen-Ye, a late composer born in

Taiwan under Japanese colonial rule. From the first shot of the film that shows the rightward traveling of an electric railcar to the final shot that records the magical encounter between five multi-car trains, about 70 minutes of this 108-minute film take place either on trains—ground level, elevated, or subway—or in train stations and the surrounding areas.[48] Intriguingly, despite the ubiquitous railway network, Tokyo as depicted in the film does not follow a by now stereotypical representation of the city as technologically advanced but dehumanizing (consider, for instance, the familiar images of passengers being stuffed into commuter trains during rush hours). As Hasumi Shigehiko observes,

> The Tokyo of this film, Hou's first foreign work, includes none of the bustle of government and business in the downtown areas, none of the city's skyscrapers, and none of the neon signs of the entertainment districts. Hou's view of the city is characterized rather by the fact that his camera ignores completely the expressways that have been the image of cities of the future ever since Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972). Whenever he can, he avoids putting his young characters in automobiles, filling the screen instead with the motion of trains, something he refrained from showing on film after his earlier autobiographical works.[49]

Once a privileged device that allowed Hou to introduce pleasant motions into the frame and explore interpersonal intimacy in changing times, what might have inspired this full-on return of the train? Which aspect of Tokyo does this peculiar kind of representation of its train system accentuate?

Café Lumière thematizes the widespread train network as a covert sphere that quietly harbors the possibility of animism in an urban environment. While animism might have largely

---

[48] The use of train in the film not only serves as an attraction in its own right but also depicts the centrality of the train system for a regular train commuter's navigation of the city in his or her everyday life. According to Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, this fairly accurate mapping of the urban space through its train system "provides a correct sense of the spatial distance between the landmarks, confirming many viewers' spatial orientation and knowledge of Tokyo, which creates a kind of déjà vu during their film-viewing experience." Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, "A Dialogue with 'Memory' in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003)," in *Reorienting Ozu: A Master and His Influence*, ed. Jinhee Choi (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018), 65.

[49] Hasumi Shigehiko, "The Eloquence of the Taciturn: An Essay on Hou Hsiao-Hsien," *Inter-Asia Cultural Studies* 9.2 (2008), 193.

retreated from the modern life, the film suggests that it hides, in fact, in places closer than expected and occasionally returns to drop a reminder of its existence. Through determined recollection and deciphering of its clues, the protagonist reconnects with the animist realm of childhood. The shift from the balloon to the train as the privileged device of animism fashions an enchanted sphere that qualitatively differs from the pronounced distance between the balloon and the child in *Flight of the Red Balloon* or the childlike sex toy excluded from the society in *Air Doll*.

As the second shot of *Café Lumière* fades in languorously from black, a medium long shot of Yoko's apartment shows her hanging some clothes in a small balcony. The bright sunlight that casts in from the window, the amplified sound effect of lively insect chirping, and the steady white noise from a spinning fan at the lower left corner of the frame indicate summertime. About 25 seconds into this long take that lasts three and a half minutes, Yoko receives a call from her friend, Hajime (Asano Tadanobu), who owns a secondhand bookstore and, whenever free, roams about in the city with his recording equipment to capture the soundscape of trains and train stations. He calls to notify Yoko that an order has arrived at the bookstore. As their conversation resumes after a brief interruption by the visit of Yoko's landlord, she mentions that she has had "another weird dream about an unhappy mother. She's sad because something happened to her baby. Its face has changed, it's all wrinkly. It looks so old… but the face is made of ice… And suddenly it's all melting! Very scary… I can't remember the rest. You know any story like that?" Later in the film, Hajime identifies the similarity of her dream with the content of Maurice Sendak's acclaimed children's book *Outside Over There*: in a world characterized by the absence of adults, a little girl named Ida embarks on a journey alone to the titular realm in order to rescue her baby sister after she has been stolen by

goblins (to be their bride) and replaced with an ice sculpture. Hajime gives Yoko a copy when she visits the bookstore, and she has been deeply enthralled since. On her train ride back home and in her apartment; from daytime to late night, all she does for the rest of the day is to read, re-read, and ponder its significance in relation to her troubling dream. One shot even gives us a generous view of the book when it presents, in close-up, ten pages that cover the specific period of Ida's journey: from the goblin's stealing of her sister through her discovery of the ice sculpture to the beginning of her rescue (figure 4). Shortly in the middle of a stormy night, it finally hits Yoko, as she eagerly shares with Hajime over phone, when and where she has previously encountered this bewildering text: in a large hall where she and her biological mother—who left her at the age of four—partook in an unspecified religious ceremony.

Figure 1.4. A glimpse of Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There*.

Outside Over There which haunts Yoko's unconscious from the beginning of the film deserves our sustained engagement. This is not only because it features a mystical realm populated by children and nonhuman creatures, it also anticipates the later revelation of Yoko's

pregnancy and her decision to deliver the child despite being a single mother with unstable income. A key intertext between the film and the children's book, overlooked in all scholarly writings on *Café Lumière* to my knowledge, that sheds light on the latter's significance to the former is Oe Kenzaburo's 2000 novel *The Changeling*, through which Hou first learned about Sendak's book.[50] The title refers to those nonhuman creatures—trolls, goblins, fairies, witches, demons—swapped in for human infants that appear throughout northern European folklores (though similar belief narratives have also been found in Egypt, India, China, and the Pacific Northwest).[51] The novel depicts the attempt of a writer named Choko Kogito—a nod to the Cartesian philosophical principle—to search for what drove his childhood friend and brother-in-law, filmmaker Hanawa Goro, into committing suicide. To this end, he listens to some forty audiotapes Goro has left and tries to approach his interiority.[52] Choko Chikashi, Goro's sister and Kogito's wife, also partakes in the investigation in her own way.

In the epilogue of the novel, directly titled "Outside Over There," Chikashi finds two thin books in Goro's luggage: *Outside Over There* and a booklet that records an academic symposium devoted to Sendak at the University of California, Berkeley. Out of curiosity Chikashi reads Sendak's book, and a sense of thorough identification with Ida emerges: "The more she read and reread this uncanny picture book, the more certain Chikashi felt that she was Ida, and Ida was herself."[53] After meticulously analyzing both the form and content of the book and delving into some scholarly accounts of the figure of the changeling across European folklore traditions,

[50] Bai Ruiwen, *Zhuhai shiguang—hou xiaoxian de guangyingjiyi*, 252.
[51] Joyce Underwood Munro, "The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as a Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children," in *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, ed. Peter Narváez (Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991), 251.
[52] The novel has generally been received as modelling off of real-life events, with Kogito based on the author himself and Goro Oe's brother-in-law, director Itami Juzo, who committed suicide after a scandal of extramarital affair.
[53] Oe Kenzaburo, *The Changeling*, trans. Deborah Boliver Boehm (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 403.

Chikashi arrives at an intriguing conclusion: at some point when Goro was young and still positive, he was also stolen and replaced with a detached, otherworldly substitute who merely shared his outer semblance. This thought sends her down a self-reflexive journey into the labyrinth of her own psyche. Chikashi wonders if her brother's abrupt change of character was what unconsciously prompted her to marry Kogito, against Goro's vehement disagreement, because he was the last person to be with the "real" Goro whose essence had remained trapped "outside over there." The novel dwells on a small pictorial detail in Sendak's book, which Chikashi uses as a visual evidence that supports her reading of the self: when Ida sets out to rescue her sister, she jumps out of the window *backwards*—the final image of the book shown in the aforementioned close-up as well. Paralleling Ida's unreasonable and dangerous movement, Chikashi infers that her impulsive decision to have Kogito's child was motivated by her deep desire to, in place of her mother, re-deliver an infant into whom Goro could reincarnate.

Chikashi, however, has failed to achieve this fantasy because, according to a mythological account offered by Kogito,

> The secret of life and death isn't in the bright heavens above; it's hidden in the subterranean darkness. That's why it's a mistake to fly looking up. You have to fly looking down or else you won't be able to observe the chthonic secrets.[54]

She nevertheless gains a second chance in the final sections of the novel when she meets a young German college student named Ura Shima, with whom Goro had an affair in Berlin one year prior to his suicide. During their conversation, Chikashi finds out Ura is four months pregnant; the father is someone with whom she casually sleeps simply because of his outer resemblance with Goro. Ura had considered abortion until she read a piece of autobiographical writing by Kogito, which mentions how his mother once told him, in response to his fear of death when he

[54] Ibid., 401

experienced severe illness: "Even if you die, I'll give birth to you again, so don't worry." When the little Kogito questions whether the new child will still be him, the mother says with firm resolve:

> No, it would be the same. After I gave birth to you again, I would tell the new you about all the things you've seen and heard and all the things you've read and all the things you've done up till now. And the new you would learn to speak all the words that you know now, so the two children would end up being exactly the same.[55]

This exchange somehow empowers Ura and gives her the same idea of reanimating Goro by giving birth and raising a child who will grow to be exactly like him. Having had this thought herself before, Chikashi reaches a kind of mutual recognition with Ura. Chikashi even makes plan to financially sponsor Ura's delivery in Germany and the subsequent expenses for accommodation and postnatal care: "If Kogito asked about her reasons for doing all this, Chikashi thought she would answer that she didn't want to let any goblins (whatever deceptive form they might take) get close enough to kidnap Ura's baby." The novel's affirmation of the child's potentiality, which points to a past-oriented future where the dead could be revived, reaches its peak when it ends with a quote from Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, a play non-incidentally about how ritualistic suicide is perceived differently under the distinct frameworks of indigenous animism and colonial modernity: "*Now forget the dead. Forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn.*"[56]

Unlike *The Changeling* which details Ida's and Chikashi's correspondence, Hou's film does not provide us with too much information about Yoko's past or any access to her inner thought in relation to *Outside Over There*. We learn from a brief conversation between Yoko and her parents, shot in a long take of about three and a half minutes, that she is three months

---

[55] Ibid., 450.
[56] Ibid., 468.

pregnant and will not marry the father, a Taiwanese man whose family owns an umbrella factory. Some more information about this man comes out as Yoko continues to "inform" her parents. Indeed, the conversation is overall unidirectional, with a couple of questions occasionally posed by Yoko's mother and hardly any response from her father, until it is interrupted by a sushi delivery. The film's denial of dramatizing Yoko's interiority is reflected on the formal front throughout this medium long shot, too, when her bodily movements and facial expressions have largely been obscured from our view by her mother who sits closer to the camera. A wall in the near foreground which blocks out more than one-fourth of the screen from the right margin creates an additional layer of mediation that separates the camera from this slightly awkward family scene.

Given that the film was commissioned for the centenary of Ozu's birth, such an Ozuesque plot executed in Hou's stylistics of detachment seems adequate. But if, according to Hasumi's brilliant observation that Ozu is a "bright-daylight director" whose films "almost always take place under sunny skies," Yoko's epiphanic remembrance of *Outside Over There* that transpires in a stormy night in an otherwise hot, sunny film surely signals estrangement of some sort.[57] Deep into the night and surrounded by water—such is the spacetime in *Café Lumière* when a much more profound and dramatic desire manifests its presence, prompting Yoko to keep to her child. In fact, what Yoko never explicitly says she enacts in her daily drift. Like Chikashi's conceptualization of giving birth as a chance to start over again, the film implicitly draws a mystic connection between Yoko's decision to give birth and a general project of reenchantment which allows the past to re-emerge to the surface of the city. Yoko's search of Jiang's traces across Tokyo is, itself, also a remapping of the city by superimposing its past

[57] Hasumi Shigehiko, "Sunny Skies," in *Ozu's Tokyo Story*, ed. David Desser (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 124.

contour onto the current cityscape. Indeed, Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano has aptly described that, for a viewer familiar with Tokyo, the various shops chosen as the filming locations evoke an embodied but anachronistic experience of the everyday that does not exactly describe the contemporaneity of Tokyo:

> Seishindo used bookstore in Jinbocho (a district of Tokyo famous for its bookstores); the host of the Cafe Erika sporting a bowtie, a rarity in this day and age; the potato tempura shop, a long-familiar sight; the Tomaru bookshop in Koenji (which closed its doors in 2013), a fixture since before the war; the Cafe Momoya in Yurakucho (also now closed), and more.[58]

Even the seemingly ordinary episode when Yoko borrows some sake from her landlord who lives next door—a nod to a similar move in Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953)—enacts a temporal displacement of the past onto the present given that, Wada-Marciano quotes a friend's critique, "'In this golden age of convenience stores, and especially in a metropolis like Tokyo, what planet is she from that, having run out of alcohol, she would make the effort to go begging to a neighbor, landlord or not!'"[59] All these subtle arrangements that implode the multiple spatio-temporal layers within a given chronotope culminate in the moment when Hajime brings Yoko an old map of the city that marks the location of a café called Dat, Jiang's favorite during his time in Tokyo. Such a cartographic vision no longer accurately corresponds to the layout of the present-day cityscape, but with the help of the owner of a café they manage to find the old site of Dat, on which stands now a company that manufactures all sorts of specialized papers. Even though Dat has been completely obliterated, Yoko still approaches this site with curiosity and makes sure to leave photographic records.

---

[58] Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, "A Dialogue with 'Memory' in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003)," 65.
[59] Ibid., 72.

Later that day, Hajime visits Yoko in her apartment. She has been napping the whole afternoon after their outing due to slight illness. Hajime decides to stay and makes her dinner. While she eats, he shares with her a digital image of his own creation on the laptop screen. At the center of it lies the profile of an infant who wears recording devices and a pocket watch around its neck—a reference to Yoko's gift to Hajime brought from Taiwan. The infant is surrounded concentrically first by shadows, then by a large loop comprising of numerous Yamate Line trains, and finally a sphere of dark red covered with several rails that extend centrifugally outward as well as the names of a number of Tokyo train stations (figure 5). Hameji describes the image as "the womb of the trains" and admits that the infant is a self-portraiture, to which Yoko adds that it has a lonely eye and "looks a bit sorry for himself." Hameji concurs with her observation, jokingly replies that it is "close to tears" and "on the edge." Intrigued by Hameji's creation, Yoko asks him if the ultimate aim of his train sound recording is to locate "the essence of railways. Are there some clues in the sounds? What do you hear?" In response, he doesn't give any concrete answer but only says that "maybe my recording will help in an investigation one day. […] Someone might need to hear a tape as evidence of something."

Figure 1.5. The womb of the trains.

The complexities of this digital image have inspired many insightful readings on the corporeal and affective connectivity between the city and its resident. Lin Wenchi, for instance, has suggested that the fragile infant reflects both Hajime's and Yoko's current situation in this global city: a space that both nurture and imprison them to the point that the human and the machine seem to form an inseparable and organic whole.[60] Following the pursuit of a past-oriented future in *The Changeling*, might we further hypothesize that this state of connectivity between the animate and the inanimate is itself a desirable state that once existed but was, at some point, substituted by the evil goblins? (Or did it commit suicide like Goro and Nozomi?) Trapped in the netherworld, the lonely, sorrowful infant awaits a chance of reincarnation, which

[60] Lin Wenchi, "Yiwai de chuntian yu jiafei shiguang de taocengmicang shixue," *NCU Journal of Art Studies* 5 (2009), 95-99. Even though Chang Hsiao-hung does not directly comment on this image, from a Deleuzian perspective she similarly offers a reading of the entire film as a process of Tokyo's "becoming-train": the city as a "zone of indiscernibility" that incorporates the train, the café, the bookstore, among other places. Chang Hsiao-hung, "Shenti chengshi de danrudanchu: Hou Hsiao-hsien yu jiafei shiguang," *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly* 40.3 (2011), 26.

Yoko, in her own reconstruction of both Jiang's and the city's pasts, can deliver. It comes as no surprise that the image which crystalizes this point is produced by Hajime, a mysterious character whose precise relation with Yoko have remained elusive and kept the critics wondering. Adam Bingham, for instance, describes him as "a sturdy companion throughout, more like a female friend than a potential partner as one may expect (he in fact seems entirely asexual)"; Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh more straightforwardly infers that the film is "a love story, though implicit and understated."[61] While I do not necessarily think that their relationship needs to be defined, Hajime does seem to anticipate Song's role in *Flight of the Red Balloon*: both of them show animist images of their own creation on their laptop screens; both of them function as guardian angels who come to facilitate the protagonists' engagement with childhood.

Indeed, not only is Hajime consistently associated with the past as an owner of a used bookstore and recorder of fleeting sounds, but he also materially provides Yoko the necessary supports during her pregnancy (food)—one recalls, on this note, Chikashi who willingly takes care of Ura—as well as her tracing of the past (Jiang's CD; the old map). It is with Hajime's companion, instead of the biological father's or her parents', that Yoko ultimately gains the confidence in herself and the assurance that things will be just fine. The film recognizes and visualizes this peculiar form of togetherness in the penultimate shot where both of them stand on a platform. Placed on the other side of the train station, the camera registers their transitory presence in a medium long shot only through the gaps of a train that speeds pass, continuously, right in front of the camera. But however blurry their images have become, however brief the

[61] Adam Bingham, "Café Lumière," in *Directory of World Cinema: China*, ed. Gary Bettinson (Bristol: Intellect, 2012), 138; Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh, "Remaking Ozu: Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière*," in *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema*, ed. Gary Bettinson and James Udden (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 104. Hasumi also reads from Yoko and Hajime's interactions "a love that needs no sexual language. While the man and woman are older than the middle-school students in *Dust in the Wind*, they speak just as little to each other." Hasumi Shigehiko, "The Eloquence of the Taciturn: An Essay on Hou Hsiao-Hsien," 193.

time we are granted to observe their faces, we see enough to know that they stand right next to each other: the two sole figures in that narrow space, patiently recording the "evidence of something" when everyone else won't stop moving on.

The film then ends with a magnificent shot that brings Hajime's digital image to life. Across a river that runs diagonally from the upper right to the lower left of the frame, five trains emerge from screen left or right. Not just a graphic mirroring between the natural and the technological as the trains flow through the space like the river does, the trains themselves produce wonder: one by one the first four trains come into our vision from different directions, culminating in a good 7 seconds when they co-exist in the frame. It is during these 7 seconds that the prelude to the film's theme song, "Hitoshian" (written and performed by Hitoto, the actress who plays Yoko), joins the diegetic sounds of the train's progression. The gradual disappearance of the fourth train into the background, then, is followed by the entrance of the fifth from a tunnel in the foreground. The camera gently pans down to capture its departure from the frame, accompanied by Hitoto's recitation of a poem, before the film fades out to black. Such a symphony of the trains is a rare moment captured by the crew after days of waiting. Collectively they form a continuous loop that encircles this space in the same way that the Yamate Line trains surround the infant in Hajime's creation. In this inconspicuous corner of Tokyo, the film transforms the waterbody and the trains' protection into a real-life scenography of the womb of the trains, where hidden vitality is tranquilly nurtured.

Not so much the flight of transcendence above Paris that concludes *Flight of the Red Balloon* as a commitment to looking down into the depths of Tokyo in search of all its possibilities, this ending recalls Kogito's account that "The secret of life and death isn't in the bright heavens above; it's hidden in the subterranean darkness." "Hitoshian" which bridges the

final shot and the ending credit sequence further marks such a tonal distinction between the two films by Hou. Unlike Dalmais's mournful confession in "Chin Chin," Hitoto's song acknowledges her character's decision by fully embracing the potentiality of life. No more nightly regrets momentarily appeased by alcohol, in a section of the song's poetic lyrics Hitoto calmly and firmly recounts: "Casting a backward glance as an adult / Look / All the sweats that could not fruit / Finally, finally blossom into clumps of daphnes / How nice it was to be born."

The Miracle Train

In *Café Lumière*, the implied affiliation between the train and a chronotope within but alternative to the ordinary spacetime of global urbanity points to what Lynne Kirby has called the "parallel tracks" between the train and cinema since the outset of film history. Describing the modern institution of the railroad as a "*protocinematic* phenomenon," Kirby posits that

> the cinema finds an apt metaphor in the train, in its framed, moving image, its construction of a journey as an optical experience, the radical juxtaposition of different places, the "annihilation of space and time." As a machine of vision and an instrument for conquering space and time, the train is a mechanical double for the cinema and for the transport of the spectator into fiction, fantasy, and dream.[62]

The precise nature of such "annihilation" or "conquering" of space and time begs clarification. On the one hand, it indicates the fantasy of instant communication frequently found in fictional accounts of the magical ability of not only the train but also the telephone and the telegraph around the turn of the nineteenth century.[63] On the other hand, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch suggests, what has been annihilated or conquered by railway networks "is the traditional space-time continuum which was characterized by the old transport technology. Organically embedded

[62] Lynne Kirby, *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997), 2.
[63] Tom Gunning has explored both the utopian promise and dark side of such a fantasy in "Heard Over the Phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology," *Screen* 32.2 (1991).

in nature as it was, that technology, in its mimetic relationship with the space traversed, permitted the traveler to perceive that space as a living entity."[64]

In devitalizing space, one of the experiences that the train generates is thus a transformation of an animist landscape (animated by the human's lived experience and physical trajectory). Unlike other modes of land transportation—coach wagon, for instance—which are more embedded in the mountains and rivers of a given area, the train appears to forcefully "strike its way through it."[65] In this process, it opens up not only new routes to previously unexplored terrains but also novel conceptualizations of spatiality. The train, on this view, is analogous to an otherworldly being who transforms the existing landscape with its own cryptic logic and autonomy. The routine association of the train and the supernatural across the world, then, comes as no surprise. In Britain, as Rebecca Harrison has suggested, both Victorian ghost literature and train films in early cinema, including phantom rides, participate in a broader "aesthetic of the inexplicable."[66] In Japan, according to Michael Dylan Foster, a series of tales and memorates stage a clash between the transformative train and its older counterpart in folklore traditions: the cunning, shapeshifting *tanuki*, which has conventionally been depicted as "a beast of the borders, ecologically skirting the line between culture and nature. […] simultaneously of this world and the other world."[67]

Throughout film history a host of works have staged this otherworldly quality of the train: from the aptly titled *The Ghost Train* (1903) to the citation of it in *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992); from the play with light and shadow in *Interior New York Subway, 14th Street to 42nd*

---

[64] Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014), 36.
[65] Ibid., 37.
[66] Rebecca Harrison, *From Steam to Screen: Cinema, the Railways and Modernity* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018), 27-47.
[67] Michael Dylan Foster, "Haunting Modernity: *Tanuki*, Trains, and Transformation in Japan," *Asian Ethnology* 71.1 (2012), 4. The most famous presence of the *tanuki* on screen is inarguably Takahata Isao's *Pom Poko* (1994).

Street (1905) to its uncanny return in *Ulysses in the Subway* (2016); and who can forget Ken Jacobs's reanimation of early train footage in *Disorient Express* (1995) and *The Georgetown Loop* (1995)? Commenting on *Interior New York Subway, 14th Street to 42nd Street*, Petra Löffler has situated the film in what he terms "a spectrology of cinematic spaces" insofar as it fashions an abode of phantoms "normally invisible to observers—the dark underworld of the subway's urban infrastructure."[68] I would add onto this spectral pedigree Kore-eda's *I Wish*, which expands on the final shot of *Café Lumière* where five trains cross one another. Indeed, the film revolves around the advent of a new bullet train line and its impact, as imagined and experienced by several school children: when two trains whoosh pass each other, a portal to an alternative spacetime is momentarily opened up, where wishes can be fulfilled—a miracle, that is, as the Japanese title, *Kiseki*, literally means.

Before I delve into the intriguing ways in which the train functions in *I Wish*, I want to dwell on the visual motif of two (or more) trains that run pass each other and its significance to the animist imagination. Earlier in this chapter, I have identified the train as one of the three privileged devices of animism with which the shamanic figure of the child has a special connection. It is apposite now, after my reading of *Café Lumière*, to further clarify this connection. If a thematic tradition in film history has advanced an alternative ontology for the train (which Hou's film describes as infantile), it is crucial to bear in mind that the train rarely stands on its own as a single vehicle but, rather, evokes a network comprising numerous routes, stops, and other trains. One recalls Gunning's account of another canonical train film, D. W. Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), which stages the complexities of the modern world by showcasing its immense scale that exists beyond the single location that is the Lonedale

[68] Petra Löffler, "Ghosts of the City: A Spectrology of Cinematic Spaces," *communication+1* 4.1 (2015), 9.

Station.[69] If the train enacts a transformation of existing landscape into an animist topography of spacetime, it does so by constructing a system—as topographical attempts invariably do. When we discuss the train's affinity with cinema, therefore, the seed of a single vehicle's astonishment in Lumière consistently germinates to become part of a larger whole. And this whole is what both *Café Lumière* and *I Wish* have evoked through the deceptively simple but effective motif of trains passing each other: the moment when the impressions of linkage and disconnection identify the presence of a nexus and pinpoint its exact coordinates. Such a system marks the fundamental difference between the train and the two other devices of animism previously discussed. While certain material conditions of the balloon and the doll endow themselves with animist potentiality, the train is here conceptualized in relation to animism due to not only its motion but also its systematic quality. This distinction, we shall see, is crucial to *I Wish*, in which animism exists in an occulted system of space and time. The access to one of its nexuses awaits the child's registration.

The film begins in Kagoshima where Sakurajima, an active composite volcano, has been in a state of calm eruption. We catch a glimpse of it on the distant skyline through the point of view of weary six-grader Koichi (Maeda Koki) when he stands on a small balcony. His subsequent actions of dusting a white rag and, then, using it to sweep out a film of ash that covers everything in his room indicate the pervading impact of the eruption. Koichi has lived in Kagoshima for the past six months with his mother and grandparents after the break-up of his parents. His father, a guitarist in an underground band, stays in Fukuoka with his younger brother, Ryu (Maeda Ohshiro), with whom Koichi stays in touch on his mobile. Koichi's

[69] Tom Gunning, "Systematizing the Electric Message: Narrative Form, Gender, and Modernity in *The Lonedale Operator*," in *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, ed. Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 27.

constant fuss about life in Kagoshima: Why was his school built on top of a hill? Why don't people seem to be affected by the permeating ashes? The source of all his trivial complains points to Koichi's general discontent with the status quo of his family and desire for its reunion.

Koichi hatches an unconventional plan to catalyze the reunion after hearing an urban legend from a couple of fellow students in a science class that takes place in a lab (the air of empiricism in this setting enhances the legend's credibility for him): when two trains first pass each other, wishes come true for the person standing in front of the specific point of their contact. What if Sakurajima is to fully explode and thereby force a large-scale evacuation away from the area? Surely they will have no choice other than moving back together. Koichi and two of his best friends witness the supernatural power of the train when a woman who stands on the other side of a level crossing from them suddenly disappears after two trains pass in front of her. "Time travel?" so they wonder, as if the passing of the two trains grants her access to "the fourth dimension" fantasized by Deutsch's tale quoted in my epigraph. The bewilderment of this moment is especially contrasted with a previous scene that takes place at the same level crossing: the first time when we see Koichi on his way to school, a train similarly passes in front of him but all that it effects are stirred ashes that blind and suffocate him. Further convinced by the train's power, that night Koichi draws a picture of the volcano and hangs it high up a wall in his bedroom. He knees in front of it and worships the sublimity depicted on paper and in his imagination.

With his two best friends, Koichi skives off school and heads to Kumamoto, the site where, according to their calculation, two trains of the new Kyushu Shinkansen will meet. Joining them in Kumamoto are Ryu and three classmates of his. In a truly "neglectful" fashion, recalling Wojcik's proposal, not only have the seven children contrived to fool the adults to gain

a day off, but several adults have, in fact, actively facilitated their journey, including Koichi's grandfather and an old couple who generously accommodate them for a night and drive them to their targeted focal point in the morning. Each of the seven children has his or her wish to make. To run faster; to paint better; to be an actress—several of their wishes hardly require supernatural forces to realize. But two of them beckons, in particular, given their relation to animism: a friend of Koichi brings along the corpse of his recently deceased dog, Marble, hoping that the trains can miraculously revive it; Koichi's wish of a violent eruption essentially points to a thorough animation of Sakurajima. Indeed, in Koichi's case, we recall his grandfather's language of personification that views the volcanic eruption as an evidence of the mountain's vitality: "It's alive, so it has to let off energy once in a while."

Despite initiating and organizing this group adventure, Koichi ends up as the only child who remains silent in front of the passing trains as he has come to be aware of the high stakes of his wish during the journey. Earlier in the film, in a crucial phone conversation between him and his father, the latter tells Koichi that "I want you to grow up to become someone who cares about more than just your own life." When Koichi asks his father to clarify what this form of care entails, he responds: "for instance, music, or the world…." Confused and slightly irritated, Koichi dismisses what he says as incomprehensible gibberish. But as the narrative unfolds, he comes to the realization that "the world" is predicated on a collective flourishing which a forceful volcanic eruption will only hinder. Consider, for instance, when Koichi is first questioned by his friends regarding the likelihood of their death should his wish do come true, Koichi answers with a sense of conviction that they can surely manage to escape from the tragedy in time. But as he awaits Ryu and his friends on the platform of a train station in Kumamoto, a conductor's words implant doubt in his mind. As the conductor introduces Mt.

Fugen to Koichi and his two friends, he mentions how twenty lives were taken during its last eruption twenty years ago: “I don’t want to live through that ever again.” While the two other children’s gazes remain fixated on the distant mountains, the camera captures the contemplative look on Koichi’s face as he turns to look at the conductor. It is as if Koichi allows Kore-eda to reiterate one of the lessons of *Air Doll*: a wildly animated entity results in a state of general devitalization. Unlike Nozomi, therefore, Sakurajima is not to be awakened this time. Indeed, later as Koichi bids his brother farewell and confesses his silence in front of the trains, his simple but powerful reason drives home this point: “I chose the world over my family.”

In the film’s climactic scene when the two trains pass each other, Koichi’s determined silence distinguishes himself from the other six children. As the others anxiously anticipate the advent of the trains, the camera shows Koichi absorbed in his own thoughts, looking not at the rails ahead but his drawing of Sakurajima. The drawing suddenly occupies the entire frame, but what we get here is more than a simple rendition of his point of view. Accompanied by the diegetic sound of the approaching trains’ mechanic uproar, the whole image is in a state of tremor. Another soundtrack that evokes a trembling earth joins, further augmenting the feeling of something to come. The intensity lasts for five seconds until explosive molten lava gushes out from the crater and fills the entire frame. A soothing non-diegetic melody, then, emerges and gently replaces the violent sound of the volcanic explosion. This acoustic shift signals the transition from this pictorial animation to the following 30 shots of various entities, with the majority of them being close-ups of everyday objects and minor gestures that the film has previously shown but not endowed any legible significance. Some of them include the light blue soda popsicle that Ryu is savoring when on phone with Koichi after his swimming class; potato chips crumbs at the bottom of the bag that Koichi saves to the last; the pigments and palette

Koichi uses for the volcano drawing; the digital thermometer, the top of which Koichi rubs to feign fever; a coin that lies underneath a vending machine, to be collected by Koichi when he tries to gather enough money for a train ticket to Kumamoto; a newly planted vegetable in Ryu's garden; a nuclear family of four that walks up the stairs at the train station where Koichi's journey begins; the hand movement of Koichi's grandmother when she dances hula; the hand of Marble's owner as he gently caresses its dead body; Koichi's hand as he dusts off the ashes on the left shoulder strap of his backpack; the white and mellow *karukan* cake made by Koichi's grandfather; the train conductor's hand that points to the distant Mt. Fugen; the wind in the flowering shrubs where the seven children visit during their journey; the piece of white fabric upon which the children write down their wishes; four photos of Koichi and Ryu shown in four successive shots; two shots of the sky; and two shots of numerous wooden plaques (*ema*) that carry prayers' written wishes in a Shinto shrine. This sequence of slightly longer than 2 minutes concludes as the camera returns to Koichi's sustained gaze at the drawing. The music ends, as well, shortly before the two trains pass each other, at which the children yell out their yearning for happiness.

At the end, Marble the dog is not revived, and neither does the volcano erupt. But even if no sign of animation manifests itself in the diegetic world, the film wonderfully expresses the quietly animated "world" that Koichi has come to notice and, indeed, begin to *care*. Bookended by Koichi, this extradiegetic sequence gives us a glimpse of such a world. What gets animated is not life in the literal sense but a transformation through which Koichi—unquestionably a child insofar as age is concerned—regains a childlike view. The film's literal use of animation becomes contagious as the energy of the train that animates Koichi's pictorial volcano penetrates the boundary of the paper. It overflows into all aspects of his everyday life and, in this process,

transform the everyday into a site where animism thrives. Just like the all-encompassing ashes that steadily cover everything in Kagoshima, this energy leads the camera to afar, to the ordinary fragments of life either familiar or at times overlooked. But unlike a real volcanic explosion which will wipe out all these people and objects, this permeating energy elevates their significances for Koichi. The intimately framed things and gestures forms a kind of "silent soliloquy," as famously theorized by Béla Balázs, that gives faces to and reveals the souls of both the human and the nonhuman through the magical power of the close-up in silent cinema. As if affirming Balázs's words, all the entities shot in this series of fine close-ups "radiate a tender human attitude in the contemplation of hidden things, a delicate solicitude, a gentle bending over the intimacies of life-in-miniature, a warm sensibility."[70] How could anyone bear to wish for their annihilation?

Balázs's language of personification that revolves around the camera's revelation of the soulful quality of things is echoed throughout the canonical writings on cinema by other classical film theorists, such as Walter Benjamin and Jean Epstein—the latter most explicitly explores an animist worldview that cinema affords. Here, I want to emphasize an aspect of Balázs's cinematic Romanticism: the phenomenological connection between the camera and children. One of the functions of the close-up, according to him, is to restore a childlike view of the world, insofar as

> Children are more familiar with the secret corners of a room than adults because they can still crawl under tables and sofas. They know more about the little moments of life because they still have time to dwell on them. *Children see the world in close-up.* Adults, however, in hot pursuit of distant goals, hurry past the intimate experiences of these nooks and crannies. They may know their own minds, but they often know nothing else. Only children at play gaze pensively at minor details.[71]

[70] Béla Balázs, *Theory of Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*, trans. Edith Bone (New York: Dover Publication, 1970), 56.
[71] Béla Balázs, *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory:* Visible Man *and* The Spirit of Film, ed. Erica Carter, trans. Rodney Livingstone (New York: Berghahn Books, 2010), 62.

On screen, the utopian immediacy between the viewer and the viewed allowed by the close-up meets the child's thick engagement with the world. At stakes is a call for a refreshing artistic expression that, through approximating the child's interiority, perceives the world anew and thereby reshapes the viewer's vision. *I Wish*, on this note, continues a tradition in experimental filmmaking that attempts to interrogate the possibilities of cinema by taking up the vision of "the untutored eye" found in the renowned opening of Stan Brakhage's "Metaphors on Vision": "How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye?"[72] While the overall aesthetics of *I Wish* can hardly be described as avant-garde, the two-minute sequence reverberates with this visionary search of the lost universalism embodied by the child's unmediated, pre-linguistic access to the world. It is only befitting that Koichi remains silent in this otherwise cacophonic spacetime, for his wish of animism exceeds the domain of language, at least not easily expressible in the extremely brief duration of the two trains' passing. The film thereby constitutes an exploration of the child's worldview not simply because it represents children, fantasizes irrationality, or lowers the camera height to imitate their physical conditions—elements conventionally mobilized in the genre of children's film. These thematic and stylistic features establish but a prelude to a spectatorial attitude that the film takes over from Koichi and models for the viewer. Such is the pedagogical function of the animist imagination: through specific configurations of cinematic elements ranging from themes to formal devices (in this case, the close-up, the intricate use of

[72] Stan Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision," in *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking by Stan Brakhage*, ed. Bruce R. McPherson (Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 2001), 12. It is also this term that Marjorie Keller borrows for her study of the concept of childhood in other experimental filmmakers. See Marjorie Keller, *The Untutored Eye: Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell, and Brakhage* (Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986).

sound, and the editing pattern that have been mobilized to stage the encounter between the child and the train), we, too, partakes in imagining what an animist sphere might tangibly look, sound, and feel like.

The opening of one such animist sphere, on the narrative front, leads not only to Koichi's choice of the bigger world over his nuclear family but also his recognition of the wonders that fill his life in the precise location of Kagoshima. In sharp contrast to the opening sequence, the final sequence again sees Koichi look into the distant skyline from the balcony outside his bedroom. Instead of repeating his morning routine of dusting around, however, this time he performs a trick previously learned from his grandfather. Rather than turning to the rag that hangs on the railing, he puts the index finger of his right hand in the mouth before holding it in the air for a moment. The coolness that the breeze has left on his wet finger allows him to decipher the direction from which the wind blows. A moment later, he confidently asserts: "It won't pile up today." No longer an outsider who is constantly trying to accommodate to the environment, Koichi acts like a true local today. Despite the ashes, he is now ready to embrace a place he has been reluctant to call home.[73]

Suppose that the Changeling Stays

---

[73] Such an ending can be seen as a response to a trend in contemporary Japanese horror film (J-Horror) that, as per Karen Lury, routinely renders "the traumatised, abandoned child—children living on the margins, all but invisible to adult society" as a malicious ghost who consistently threatens, if not outright destroys, the temporal and social orders of the adult-centered, normative world (consider, for instance, the *Ring* series, *Dark Water*, *The Grudge*). Under this generic framework, namely, the child presents itself as the adult's other. *I Wish*, however, enacts a rather distinct vision. Like Kore-eda's *Nobody Knows* which Lury analyzes, the film invites us to go "'back stage' into the children's lives and examine not their brief interruptions into the adult world but instead explore, without judgment, their 'hiding places' and strategies for survival." As the ending of *I Wish* indicates, I would take a step further and submit that the film not only attends to the child's interiority but also actively reconciles the difference between the world as perceived by children and adults. Karen Lury, *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales*, 41.

As *I Wish* manages to articulate the child's animist vision, so my charting of the topography of animist childhood comes to an end. But in lieu of a conclusion, I would like to dwell on the changeling tale referenced in *Café Lumière*. A typical changeling tale goes like this: a child is believed to be stolen and swapped by some nonhuman creatures, usually fairies, with a human-like substitute that nevertheless demonstrates certain traits distinct from the original, including newly developed medical symptoms, or changes in physical appearance or personality that are considered abnormal. A common reading of the changeling tale today thus sees this corpus of writings as a premodern medical discourse that explains the emergence and development of certain diseases and disabilities. In particular, historians of medicine have observed similarities between some folkloric descriptions of changeling children and those of children with autism spectrum disorder in modern medical records. Commenting on writings surrounding "one Brother Juniper, who was naively innocent and lacking in any social intuition or common sense," for instance, Lorna Wing posits that while his peculiarity, according to these texts, indexes his connection to divinity, "Nowadays he may well have been diagnosed as having Asperger syndrome."[74] Similarly, a number of scholars in folklore studies also point out that modern psychology have promoted a reading of the supernatural intervention in the changeling narrative as a depiction of a certain condition of disorder, disability, or parental mistreatment that results in, quoting Joyce Underwood Munro, "failure to thrive in infants and children."[75]

---

[74] Lorna Wing, "The History of Ideas on Autism: Legends, Myths and Reality," *Autism* 1.1 (1997), 14. J. Leask, A. Leask, and N. Silove have also suggested that "[s]ome of the features of these stories, including the initial health and beauty of the human child, the change after some period of 'normalcy,' and the specific behaviours of the changeling (listed above) are well matched to symptoms in some presentations of autism." J. Leask, A. Leask, N. Silove, "Evidence for Autism in Folklore?," *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 90.3 (2005), 271. Wing's description of Brother Juniper recalls Roberto Rossellini's *The Flowers of Saint Francis* (1950), a retelling of precisely Brother Juniper's story. One wonders if an animist reading of the film could generate something interesting about the titular character who does interact with several nonhuman animals throughout the film.

[75] Joyce Underwood Munro, "The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as a Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children," 252. Other writings from folklore studies that explore the intersection between the changeling tale and disability studies include C. F. Goodey, Tim Stainton, "Intellectual Disability and the Myth of

I fully concur with careful historians' caution that a flawless, transhistorical correspondence between certain cultural traditions and lived experiences is oftentimes, if not always, a disguise of an ideological construct. Here, nevertheless, I emphasize this covert aspect of *Café Lumière* not only to exhaust the intertextual potential of this complex text but also to probe the limitation of childhood in relation to the animist imagination. Consider a series of hypothetical scenarios that would have complicated the utopian promises offered in *Café Lumière* and *I Wish*: What if Yoko never re-delivers the child? What if the changeling brought by the goblin to swap the human infant actually stays and grows? What if the cold, expressionless surface of an ice sculpture, rather than the child's vision and the inner lives of things that it discloses, is all that we have? We shall address these inquiries in the next chapter by following the conventional account of the changeling tale and exploring another agent of the animist imagination: people with autism spectrum disorder. Hou's *The Assassin* which, in perhaps an ethically daring move, conceptualizes people with Asperger syndrome as shamanic figures capable of communicating with nonhuman animals will serve as my main object of study.

---

the Changeling Myth," *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 37.3 (2001); Susan Schoon Eberly, "Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids and the Solitary Fairy," *Folklore* 99.1 (1988).

CHAPTER 2. THE AUTISTIC

> *They're just kids, they had to describe their favorite animals. One little girl of eight chose a bird. It went: "A bird is an animal with an inside and an outside. Remove the outside, there's the inside. Remove the inside and you see the soul."*
>
> —Paul in *Vivre sa vie* (Jean-Luc Godard, 1962)[1]

Unlike the shamanic figure of the child, explored in the previous chapter, who easily recognizes the sentiments and emotions of various nonhuman entities, the little girl from *Vivre sa vie* proposes the opposite of such pathetic fallacy in her anatomy of a bird. Rather than anthropomorphizing the creature's interiority, she pares it off as if it is a removable layer of rind. As a result, she sees straight to its soul. Her eccentric schematization of the nonhuman reverberates with my submission in this chapter of an aesthetic paradigm that explores the fine line between human and animal subjects by short circuiting emotional expressivity. This paradigm has manifested itself across artistic practices from different media and temporo-spatial intersections. A line of trajectory runs through Heinrich von Kleist's performance theory to Robert Bresson's method of screen acting, culminating in the performance of the titular character in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Assassin* (2015), the privileged object of study in this chapter. What holds these texts as a group is their shared exploration of certain formal characteristics in performance that signal the subtraction of interiority and, consequently, the emergence of animality. Hou's film is particularly intriguing because it analogizes these formal features to core symptoms of autism spectrum disorder that have been described as none other than the withdrawal of expressivity—consider autism's Greek etymological root *autós* and the modern Chinese term that signifies this disorder, *zibi* (meaning literally "self-enclosure"). Even though

[1] These lines appear in an anecdote shared by Paul that concludes the opening sequence. This translation is from the English subtitles of the DVD released by Fox Lorber.

the film, at first glance, does not seem to be about either autism or animals, this chapter demonstrates how it consciously mobilizes a positive correlation between the performance of autism and animality. My proposal is that *The Assassin* marshals and performs the autistic as a shamanic figure who is able to communicate with animals.

In order to establish an autistic figure, *The Assassin* accentuates certain symptomatic traits in its artistic discourse. I want to be clear that 1) many aspects of autism remain uncertain; 2) this is a move with high ethical stakes and varied problematic implications—perhaps the reason why, to my knowledge, to date no critical writing on this high-profile film has even mentioned autism. But instead of avoiding this aspect of filmmaking, I want to take these chosen traits as seriously as possible, insofar as they are turned into the formal properties of a work of art. How and why have certain medical conditions or scientific research been incorporated by the filmmakers into the shaping of this figure and its realm of experience? How is this figure performed? How does such a performance help us reevaluate the cinematic representation and performance of autism more generally? And in what ways might the film contribute to our contemporary rethinking of human-animal relation, and of the boundary of personhood? Tackling these questions means that, rather than seeing medical and scientific discourses as the key to explaining why a film is made in one way or another, I consider them as integral components of *The Assassin*.[1] The aesthetic paradigm that this chapter advances, on this view, is

[1] My method echoes Annette Michelson's treatment of Marcel Duchamp's art in relation to autism. Michelson has proposed that "[t]he study of Duchamp's general thematic concerns and formal strategies must, then, proceed, somewhat on the order of an analytic study of a syndrome as *a form of language* [emphasis mine]." Following Michelson, Rosalind E. Krauss has likewise explored how symptomology of autism has been turned into artistic materials and dramatized in Duchamp's later work. Annette Michelson, "'Anemic Cinema': Reflections on an Emblematic Work," *Artforum* 12 (October 1973), 68-69; Rosalind E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985), 199-200. One could also think about Fredric Jameson's renowned interpretation of the postmodern condition through schizophrenia: "I have found Lacan's account of schizophrenia useful here not because I have any way of knowing whether it has clinical accuracy but chiefly because—as description rather than diagnosis—it seems to me to offer *a suggestive aesthetic model* [emphasis mine]" Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke

based on formal characteristics and an animist worldview related to autism, which are conveyed by cinema not necessarily in the way that medicine does. In placing *The Assassin* and autism into conversation, my ultimate goal is to open up our understanding of the film, the ways in which it imagines the autistic figure, and the performance of this figure at once.

Symptomology of autism in *The Assassin* is suggested in Taiwanese actress Shu Qi's performance of the titular character, primarily through carefully controlled facial and bodily expressions. Under Hou's directorial instruction of repeated acting, semiotic expressivity through words, movements, gestures has been displaced or forced to recede so that the actress could act out a kind of cognitive bond between animals and autistic people that allow both of them to perceive and react to extremely minute environmental signals. In film history, such a style of acting is made famous by Bresson from whom Hou consciously learns. As this chapter will also explore, the Bressonian method which enforces a retreat of affect is, itself, connected to the animal, not least the opacity of animal to anthropomorphism. Taking Shu's performance as a point of departure, I will further examine how the ideology of interspecies correspondence bleeds out of an individual into her surrounding spaces, both within the film and the ideal form of spectatorship that the film solicits. The film's mise-en-scène, in particular, puts forward a tangible site where creative kinship among humans, nonhumans, and cinema transpires. In discreet corners of several shots that reveal themselves only to attentive viewers, the film utilizes props and such formal devices as shot length, camera position, camera movement to lay bare the relational ground of the threefold kinship. It is also in these shots that nonhuman lives leave barely perceptible traces of their presence.

University Press, 1991), 26.

Before diving into the film, I want to recognize that, in mobilizing a high-functioning autistic figure as an artistic trope, and in performing specific autistic traits, the film risks the "supercrip narrative" about which scholars of disability studies have rightfully reminded us to be cautious: the stereotype of high-functioning autistic people as perceptually acute, intelligent, but emotionally dysfunctional.[2] On the depiction of these characteristics in literature, for instance, Sonya Freeman Loftis has demonstrated how, even if executed in positive terms, it might still reinforce stereotypes. Regarding the common trope of the autistic detective in crime fiction, in particular, Loftis suggests that "the presumably redemptive fiction of the autistic hero often proves oddly *dehumanizing*: even as his incredible feats of deduction are praised as a work of genius, Holmes is objectified by his beloved Watson, who constantly compares the brilliant sleuth to *machines* and repeatedly describes him as '*inhuman*' [emphases mine]."[3] My study of *The Assassin* thinks seriously about this commonplace association of autism with the rhetorics of dehumanization.[4] My proposed aesthetic paradigm that holds the autistic and the animal together

---

[2] In a few places the film actually embraces the logic of stock character in conceptualizing and executing some of its minor characters. For instance, regarding the scene wherein courtiers and soldiers gather for a meeting in the conference hall of Tian's palace, Hou gave the screenwriter Hsieh Hai-meng this instruction: "just treat it like Beijing Opera." According to Hsieh, "What Hou meant was that I should develop every character except for Tian Ji-an—Tian Xing, Nie Feng, Hou Zang, Luo Bin, Cao Jun—based on the role categories of *sheng*, *jing*, *mo*, *chou* [leading male character, female character, supporting male character clown]. We even made a list of comparisons. Tian Xing who is outspoken and thus gets himself into trouble is the *tongchui* [volatile male character]; Nie Feng who observes the overall situation clearly but does not spell it out is the leading *laosheng* [elder male character] (but due to the styles and performances of the two master performers Lei Zhenyu and Ni Dahong [who played these two roles respectively], the two character set-ups seemed to have been reversed); Hou Zang is the supporting *sheng*; Luo Bin is the *mo*; Cao Jun is the *chou*, etc. Our transformation of the characters into various types in Beijing Opera aims to support the round character with the flat character." Hsieh Hai-meng, *Xingyunji* (Taipei: Ink Publishing, 2015), 261-263.

[3] Sonya Freeman Loftis, *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015), 23. That said, whether the film envisions a channel for the autistic and the non-autistic human characters to relate to each other remains a crucial topic. Regarding this point, the conclusion of this dissertation will offer a more sustained inquiry.

[4] The figure of the autistic savant is, according to Stuart Murray, itself a cultural product shaped through cinematic representation. Murray particularly highlights the significance of *Rain Man* (1988): "As a hugely popular cultural product that highlighted a disability that was little known at the time of its release, *Rain Man* instituted the public sense of what autism was. Hoffman's performance became the accepted account of autistic behaviour and subjectivity, especially when it became know that he had undertaken such dedicated research in preparing for the role. And, because of the force of this particular portrayal, savantism and autism largely became synonymous, the

invites a reconsideration of precisely what “the human” entails: not so much a negative “dehumanizing” or “inhuman” move that turns a person into a “machine” as a recuperative attempt to challenge stagnant anthropocentric accounts, including the bias that the animal—a collective term that comprise numerous species—is inferior to an abstract understanding of the human. Both the autistic and the animal, in this account, is by no means less-than-human but as human as can be if not more. And by “more,” I do not mean that they, perforce, reveal a more profound or enshrined humanity but an alternative mode of being that lies at the limits of the human condition.

The Making of an Assassin

Hou’s film addresses the boundary between humanity and animality by grappling with a dramaturgical challenge: the fashioning of an assassin par excellence on screen. As its title manifests, the film revolves around a character whose identity is defined by a set of lethal skills. Named Nie Yinniang, she is the consummate killer—as swift, precise, elusive as can be—in both *The Assassin* and Pei Xing’s Tang-dynasty tale, “Nie Yinniang,” on which the film is loosely based. The agential aspect (or the lack thereof) of this special identity—i.e., the will to execute

---

love and marriage of cognitive impairment. All representation that followed *Rain Man* had Hoffman’s embodiment of autism as their baseline, and the condition was established with savant skills at its centre.” Anthony D. Baker, similarly, suggests that several films have followed the characterization of autism in *Rain Man*, including “*Mercury Rising* (1998), *Bless the Child* (2000), *Molly* (1998), *Stephen King’s Rose Red* (2002), and *Cube* (1997).” What these films share in common is their offer of a discursive construction of the autistic with such features as “extreme discomfort with the unfamiliar, echolalic and monotonic speech, difficulty understanding social cues, unusual preoccupations, pronounced lack of affect, and auditory hypersensitivity. Additionally, autistic characters in films possess spectacular powers.” These features combined turn autism into an “exotic and the aggrandized” spectacle—“No wonder Hollywood is attracted to it.” According to Baker, a way that cinema could contest these spectacularized depictions of autism is to foreground, instead, the mundane, everyday, and even vulnerable sides of autism. That said, Baker acknowledges that these sides strongly resonate with him because he occupies the subject position “as an audience member close to autism” with “some element of my life with a son who is autistic.” Stuart Murray, *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008), 88; Anthony D. Baker, “Recognizing Jake Contending with Formulaic and Spectacularized Representations of Autism in Film,” in *Autism and Representation*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Routledge, 2008), 229, 231, 242.

someone else's command through the act of killing—motivates the unfolding of the narrative. Set during the last and turbulent years of the Tang Dynasty, the film sees Nie (Shu Qi) following the order of her nun-master, Princess Jiaxin (Sheu Fang-yi, who also plays the character's twin sister Princess Jiacheng), to slay corrupt government officials. On one occasion, when Nie cannot bring herself to kill a target out of sympathy for his little son nearby, the nun-master assigns her to a more arduous task: to return home and assassinate the military governor of the province Weibo, Tian Ji'an (Chang Chen), himself Nie's cousin and childhood playmate to whom she was once betrothed. In Weibo, Nie reconnects with her past and finds herself enmeshed in a series of political conflicts internal to the Tian family, initiated by Tian Ji'an's wife, Lady Tian (Zhou Yun), and her sorcerer-master (Jacques Picoux). In this process, Nie receives help from a mirror polisher (Satoshi Tsumabuki); she has also developed her own moral system as she, independently, makes the judgment of whether to kill Tian or not based on her evaluation of the overall political situation and power balance in Weibo. At the end, Nie decides to disobey her nun-master and follows the mirror polisher back to his hometown.

The cinematic figuration of Nie condenses a host of real and fictional prototypes, all of which are documented by one of the film's scenarists, Hsieh Hai-meng, in her book *Xingyunji* (*Records of an accompanying cloud*, hereinafter referred to as *Records*) published *before* the release of the film. In *Records*, Hsieh provides the film's original script and details the process of making from preproduction to the conclusion of principle photography.[5] In one section, she outlines the prototypes imbricated into the characterization of Nie: from the ex-CIA agent Jason Bourne played by Matt Damon to the autobiographical account of the Xinjiang-born writer Li Juan; from the nine-year-old girl in Guðbergur Bergsson's *The Swan* to Lute in Eileen Chang's

[5] I translated the title of Hsieh's book as such based on the other screenwriter Chu Tien-wen's description of Hsieh as a cloud that always followed Hou around during the film's production.

The Fall of the Pagoda.[6] In most cases, the reason behind the filmmakers' selection of these prototypes is event-based. The girl in *The Swan*, for instance, is forced to spend a summer in the countryside away from her parents, just as Nie is taken away from hers by the nun at the age of ten; the episode in which Lute covers her tearful face with a handkerchief is re-enacted in *The Assassin* when Nie, too, cries. Elsewhere in *Records*, however, Hsieh emphasizes two sources of inspiration that define Nie not because of what they have experienced or done but *who they are*. The common ground between these two sources is their respective association with the autistic spectrum.

One of them is none other than Hsieh herself, who has openly acknowledged that she has Asperger syndrome—a neurobiological condition originally considered as a stand-alone diagnosis located on the higher-functioning end of the autistic spectrum but, since the American Psychiatric Association's redefinition and reclassification in 2013, now falls under the umbrella term autism spectrum disorder.[7] Some of Hsieh's biography fed into the process of characterization, particularly her photographic memory, her fervent devotion to a handful of things that interest her, and her tendency to avoid eye contact when communicating with people.[8] The other prototype on which *Records* dwells is Lisbeth Salander, a computer hacker in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy and a few film adaptations, most famously David Fincher's *The Girl with the Dragon Tattoo* (2011). A survivor of childhood trauma, the heavily tattooed and

[6] Hou once considered hiring Jeff Imada, the stunt and fight coordinator of the *Bourne* series, to take charge of the choreography in *The Assassin*. Hsieh Hai-meng, *Xingyunji*, 39-41.
[7] Since autism has been understood as a continuum of sensory processing capacities, what I mean by "the autistic" conflates a variety of syndromes, ranging from those closer the high-functioning end such as Kanner's and Asperger's syndromes to those on the low-functioning end, defined by severe cognitive "disorders," such as the lack of distinction between one's bodily boundaries and the environments; the complete mixture of all kinds of sensory inputs.
[8] Hsieh Hai-meng, *Xingyunji*, 38.

pierced Salander frequently displays asocial, if not antisocial, behaviors. She has thus been suspected by a fellow character in the novels to have Asperger syndrome.

The relation between autism and Nie, à la Salander and Hsieh, is more than analogous. Rather, Hsieh states clearly that "Nie Yinniang has Asperger syndrome."[9] Admittedly, the addition of autobiographical elements into an artist's own creation is not at all uncommon.[10] But *The Assassin*, after all, is not a reflection of the nature of reality. It is neither Hsieh's autobiography nor a faithful and wholistic representation of a person on the high-functioning end of the autistic spectrum. Other than perhaps Nie's ostensible quietness throughout the film (only nine lines of dialogue), *The Assassin* does not invoke any association between the character and autism. Whether Nie is autistic or not does not seem to matter, either, for the display of her assassination skill and her decision to disobey her master as the narrative unfolds. This aspect of characterization is even more intriguing when we compare Nie with Jing, the leading character played, too, by Shu in the third part of Hou's *Three Times* (2005). Created largely based on the life of writer and model Gin Oy, Jing who suffers from epilepsy is another character with neurological disorders in Hou's oeuvre. But what marks her difference from Nie is not only the direct mirroring between this character and Oy the biographical subject but also the fact that *Three Times* explicitly shows her seizure in a memorable sequence when she sits on the backseat of a motorcycle. In other words, medical symptom truly is a matter of representation in *Three Times*. Given this point of comparison, the enigma of *The Assassin* further crystalizes: Why did the filmmakers choose to highlight autism as one of Nie's defining features, especially when these accounts in *Records* were not later reflections but materials that came out in anticipation of

[9] Ibid., 39.
[10] One could also speculate on the specific aspects of Salander that drew the screenwriters' attention. Her estrangement from her criminal father since childhood is echoed, for instance, in *The Assassin*'s subtle depiction of Nie's uneasy relationship with her father.

the film, thus serving within the public context of reception and generating a discourse surrounding Nie in relation to Asperger syndrome?[11] Put differently, why should we be prepared to see the character and performance of Nie in this way?[12]

I would submit that autism finds way into the characterization because *The Assassin* advances a conceptual trio between autism, assassination, and animality. These seemingly unrelated notions are bound by three interconnected reasons: 1) a state of animality to which the assassin aspires in the worlds of both the film and the original tale; 2) a kind of special cognitive bond, manifested primarily with regards to acute sensibility to detail, that autistic people have been said to share with animals; 3) the cinematic techniques that autism inspires, through which Nie's supreme skills of assassination come to be performed on screen. Both the film and the original tale draw a connection between the assassin's kinetic proficiency and an animalistic perception. Autism, as portrayed in a specific popular discourse, serves as a key for humans to approach, sense, feel the world as animals do.

Passionate Detachment

To start corroborating the assassination-autism-animality connection, let us first turn to three key moments from Hou's involvement in a series of animal welfare campaigns in late 2011. Coinciding with the long pre-production stage of *The Assassin* (the first draft of the script was

[11] Related to this move that helps the viewers better understand *The Assassin*: due to the obscurity of the narrative (and the film's general disinterest in story-telling), the film company uploaded the script online and actively encouraged viewers to read it in advance so as to free them from the potential bafflement caused by the narrative in the theater and, instead, enjoy other kinds of audio-visual pleasures on screen.

[12] In fact, this is a rather uncommon promotional move concerning the representation of mental disorders in popular culture today. For many reasons including political correctness, filmmakers generally deny that their characters have a specific mental disorder, even if core symptoms of it are clearly dramatized. Doing so avoids pathologizing their characters and, consequently, the charge that the representation might seem to medicate the characters one way or another. The most famous example of this operation is inarguably the eccentric physicist Sheldon Cooper in CBS's *The Big Bang Theory* (2007-).

written six years before the film's 2015 release), they clarify the various affiliations—personal, conceptual, and otherwise—that ground the film's thinking with the animal.

September 14th, 2011. Members of the organization Alliance for the Establishment of the Department of Animal Protection (*Cuisheng dongbaosi xingdong lianmeng*) assembled in the late afternoon outside the Shilin Metro Station in Taipei, where sweltering heat and stifling humidity have long become defining facts of summer life. Some held up placard slogans that read "How to *do* animal welfare?" and "Improve the current animal welfare policy!"; some broadcasted affecting speeches through bullhorns; some solicited the pedestrians' signatures on one postcard after another. Their shared goal was simple but by no means modest: to flood the Presidential Office Building with a hundred thousand signed postcards, demanding quite literally the organization's titular agenda: the establishment of a specific administrative department devoted to animal welfare under the Council of Agriculture of Taiwan's Executive Yuan. Among the participants, the faces of two figures recognizable to anyone familiar with contemporary Chinese cinema and literature stood out: Hou and writer Chu Tien-hsin.

October 14th, 2011. Exactly a month later, the city remained gripped by the late summer heat. The organization regrouped, this time right in front of the Presidential Office Building. Slowly towards the building, some twenty of the participants crawled on the road, the asphalt surface of which having been turned, in full sun, into a griddle—the sizzle evidenced by the hand gloves the participants wore for protection. Their literally self-debasing move was not simply an enactment of Georges Bataille's base-materialist reminder that human aspiration towards elevation has always been countered by an ineradicable anchoring in the muddy ground.[13] It was, moreover, the crawlers' attempt to put themselves in the "paws" of those stray animals forced to

[13] Georges Bataille, *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*, ed. Allen Stoekl, trans. Allen Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 20.

roam on the same heated ground in not only this summer but also throughout their lives. On all fours, the participants yearned to generate some forms of empathy towards the stray. Behind the crawling protestors stood an approximately two-meter-tall "Trojan dog" made of the postcards collected in the September gathering. Other participants flanked the dog; amidst them stood Hou and Chu.

November 14th, 2011. This time an air-conditioned press conference room, where nine representatives from the organization sat next to Tsai Ing-wen, then presidential candidate representing the Democratic Progressive Party for the coming election in January 2012. They asked that Tsai and other politicians take animal welfare seriously and incorporate their agenda into her future reorganization of the government. Among the representatives were researchers and administrators in animal welfare organizations, college students, university professors in fields ranging from public policy, literary theory, and international relations and, once again, Hou and Chu. What had started out as a small-scale street campaign eventually became a crucial political event that received broad media coverage and some promises from the involved politicians. The organization thus concluded its activism for the time being.

Of their presence on the three occasions, Chu's appearance came with little surprise. One of the representative figures in contemporary Taiwanese animal and ecological writing, Chu has devoted many of her recent works to the reflection on human-animal relation.[14] For a long time Chu has also been an active practitioner and advocate of the Taipei City Government's TNVR

---

[14] Chu's 2005 essay anthology *Lierenmen* (*The cats' lives*), for instance, recounts moments of encounter, exchange, and separation with the feline throughout her life in the stylistics of urban ethnography, with its narrative focusing on eight cats, each with its own name and distinct characteristics. Other Taiwanese writers involved in the promotion of animal welfare and ecological awareness include Liu Ka-shiang, Wu Ming-yi, Liao hong-ji, among others. A shared concern with the stray animals in urban setting, in particular, groups Chu and Liu together, but their approaches to the stray must be distinguished. While Liu, in general, remains an outsider to the stray animal communities he observes (as shown in his 2007 *Hill of Stray Dogs*) for fear of creating cultural interventions in a "natural" setting, Chu does not shy away from interacting with the stray animals for she sees forces of nature and culture as one entity, always already interwoven.

program for street cats, a program through which unregistered stray cats are "humanely"—insofar as it replaces euthanasia—*trapped*, *neutered*, *vaccinated*, and medically treated before they are *returned* to their original street habitats. In comparison, Hou's appearance seems unexpected, but it should not be surprising once we recognize his intimate affinity with a network of animal welfare and TNVR practitioners, two of whom have been directly involved in his filmmaking: Chu Tien-hsin's older sister, the novelist and screenwriter Chu Tien-wen, has been the long-time collaborator of Hou since the early 1980s; Chu Tien-hsin's daughter is none other than Hsieh who, as previously mentioned, joined her aunt to co-write the screenplay of *The Assassin* and published *Records*. Unlike Chu Tien-hsin who was thoroughly engaged and vocal throughout these events, however, Hou maintained a "passionate detachment" from the heated ground of activism—a balance of involvement and distancing that could be described as congruent with his film aesthetics.[15] While his presence drew much attention from the media, particularly due to his adjacency to Tsai during the press conference, he remained quiet but not indifferent. When later asked by journalists regarding the motivation of his attendance, Hou responded by saying that he showed up to offer silent support.

The pressing realities of climate change—of which the inarguably felt heat in the activist scenes is symptomatic—and the associated discourses of the ecological emergency, as I have laid out in this dissertation's Introduction, have been the driving forces behind the animist imagination's attempt to envision modes of co-existence between humans and nonhumans, including but not limited to those animals whose presence in the thick of the everyday should not be ignored. This assemblage of activism, weather conditions, and my brief biographical mapping

[15] I borrowed the term "passionate detachment" from the Chinese anthology of essays devoted to Hou's work, *Xilian rensheng—hou xiaoxian dianying yanjiu*, co-edited by Lin Wen-chi, Li Zhen-ya, and Shen Shiao-ying (Taipei: Rye Field, 2000). Its official English title is *Passionate Detachment: Films of Hou Hsiao-hsien*.

of Hou's connections with the animal welfare circle in Taiwan helps us explore the ecopolitical conscious at work in *The Assassin*.[16] Cross-referencing the film with Hsieh's *Records* further highlights how the question of the animal has formed the central problematics for the filmmakers, articulated implicitly or explicitly through the film's engagements with and references to modern ethology, autism studies, and sundry literary, theatrical, and cinematic texts.

As Easy as Killing a Bird

As much a political concern in the filmmakers' lived reality, the question of the animal is also an intertextual element that they address as the world of *The Assassin* relocates from page to screen. Consider the original tale's depiction of the training process that the eponymous heroine has undergone as well as the skill she eventually demonstrates:

> When I was first taken by the nun, I had no idea how far we had traveled. At dawn, we arrived in a large cave which spans some dozens of paces. No person dwelled in it but there were several *gibbons* and *monkeys*. Two girls were there already. They were also ten years old. They were smart and beautiful, but they never ate. They could walk on the steep mountain cliff and never fall, as easily as *gibbons* moved in the trees. The nun then gave me a pill and handed me a two-foot long sword. Its blade was so sharp that a hair blown against its edge would be cut in half. She asked the two girls to teach me how to climb too. Gradually, my body became light as air. One year later, I could attack the *gibbons* without a miss. Later, I could easily behead *tigers* and *leopards*. Three years later, I could attack all the *hawks* and *falcons* in the sky. By this time, my sword had gradually worn down to five inches. The *birds* did not even see what took their lives. In the fourth year, the nun asked the two girls to guard the cave while taking me to somewhere in a city I did not know. She pointed out a man and enumerated his crimes.

[16] Such ecopolitical consciousness is not new to Hou's work, though. In his oft-ignored first films (that fall outside of the Taiwan New Cinema paradigm), animals already play crucial roles. For instance, the zoo scene in *Cute Girl* (1980) functions, as Lin Wen-chi has observed, to associate the characters with animal-like features—in terms of both physical resemblance and inner characteristics such as innocence and frankness—and further transform the urban environment of Taipei into a combination of countryside and city. The screenplay of *The Green, Green Grass of Home* (1982) was also inspired by a newspaper report on an activist movement against illegal river fishery. Indeed, a similar movement was written into the screenplay, serving as the central event that drives the narrative progression of the film. Elsewhere, one also finds the film's ecological awareness reflected in a sub-plot featuring a couple of primacy school children rescuing and looking after a wounded owl. Lin Wen-chi, "Xiangcunchengshi: houxiaoxian yu chenkunhou chengshixiju zhong de taibei," *NCU Journal of Art Studies* 11 (2012), 23, 33-34.

> She said: "When his guard is down, behead him for me. Calm yourself down and it will be as easy as killing a bird." She then passed me a dagger made of ram's horn with a three-inch wide blade. In broad daylight, I decapitated him in the crowd, unnoticed by anyone [all emphases mine].[17]

Gibbons, monkeys, tigers, leopards, eagles, birds—animals have been sacrificed for Nie to develop the capability of taking her human target's life in a snap, unnoticed even amid the crowd. Much to the dismay of the assassin whose task is to de-animate their chosen victims, these vibrant creatures confirm the etymological affinity between "animal" and "animation" as they swing from one tree to another, leap through the broken terrains of mountain cliffs, and navigate up the sky.

The narrative functions of these animals are manifold in the original story. While all of them serve as "ideal" target practices whose injury and death might be less ethically charged than the results of similar exercises inflicted on humans, by no means are the gibbons, monkeys, tigers, leopards, eagles, and birds homogenous "guinea pigs." The speed and mobility of each animal, rather, have been specified and, then, temporalized into units of measurement, devices of evaluation that mark each of the distinct phases throughout Nie's procedural learning progress. An effective hunt of gibbons is equivalent to one year of training; that of eagles takes four years in total; that of tigers and leopards somewhere in between. Such an animalistic affiliation of her training mirrors what cultural anthropologist D. S. Farrer has described as the central role of "becoming-animal" in Chinese martial arts. "Meaning in the martial arts," according to Farrer, "is situated at the level of embodied experience, at the level of skilled practice, which lies beyond straightforward observation of the Other and beyond textual, historical, philosophical and religious inquiries that reduce animal correspondences to metaphorical, mythical or symbolic

[17] Pei Xing, "Nie Yinniang," ed. Wang Pijiang (Taipei: World Book, 2014), 404.

levels."[18] The world to which the martial artist aspires is an animist realm, where the awakening of the inner animal is achieved as the martial artist endeavors to open up and move out of the self, with the aim of dwelling and navigating the greater, immanent environment where humans and nonhumans inextricably co-exist. Not just an imitation of animal movements or an abstraction of animality into various symbolic values, the martial artist's becoming-animal, Farrer emphasizes, "involve[s] *techniques du corps* inherent in our molecular animality but hidden by our molar human form," which manifests themselves most visibly with each change of the martial artist's hands, itself an indication of a change of the animal that the martial artist takes up.[19] Given that "[h]uman hands are first of all simian," Farrer suggests, "all kung fu" necessarily beings with becoming-monkey.[20] On this note, that Nie's training begins with her becoming-monkey is perhaps not arbitrary, even though the achievement of this state is indexed, ironically, by her mastery over the skill and method of killing the simian first.

The cinematic rendering of the phenomenological world of the martial artist and its profound affinities with shamanism—to which the awakening of one's inner animal is related—constitutes the central inquiry of Chapter Three. What beckons, here, is that in each phase of Nie's transformation into an assassin, her kinetic adeptness increases along with her perceptive competence, matching up to each of the animals she learns from. The result of such a gradual process of distillation resonates with one of the states of the moving body laid out in performance theory, envisioned by Heinrich von Kleist as a flawless form of corporeal kinesis in his canonical "On the Marionette Theatre": a mechanical puppet whose physical movements are not limited by gravitational forces, whose mind is unrestricted by the partial possession of human

[18] D. S. Farrer, "Becoming-animal in the Chinese Martial Arts," in *Living Beings:Perspectives on Interspecies Engagements*, ed. Penelope Dransart (London: Bloomsbury, 2013), 147.
[19] Ibid., 159.
[20] Ibid.

consciousness. As a consequence, the puppet dances more gracefully than any able-bodied human dancer.[21] In Kleist's account, the human body's capacity to disregard the center of gravity that structures actions has everything to do with the human mind and its limitations. To illustrate their Cartesian interrelations, Kleist offers several illustrative narratives, one of which tells the story of a young man who makes a graceful movement reminiscent of a famous Spinario sculpture. When an observer challenges him to repeat the movement, however, the young man becomes conscious of his actions and thus all subsequent attempts to duplicate the initial elegance have failed. Self-consciousness hinders his recuperation of the lost spontaneity, regardless of the number of practices in front of the mirror.[22]

The religious moral of the story is evident: self-consciousness, which emerges as a result of the observer's provocation, is the original sin, irreconcilable with grace. According to Kleist, there are two ways to tackle this conundrum for those who aspire to the total command of kinetic gracefulness, not least dancers and stage performers. They could either ascend to divinity by taking more bites of the fruit from the tree of knowledge until they acquire the infinite amount of consciousness it takes to fully control their physical actions. Or alternatively, they could let go of all the possession of consciousness and turn themselves into a mechanical puppet. One way to achieve this self-mechanization is through, Kleist implies, the literal act of mutilation which would allow them to replace their cumbersome limbs with insensate but weightless prostheses crafted specifically for the unfortunately crippled, if not other bodily parts as well given that

[21] Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," *The Drama Review: TDR* 16.3 (1972), 26.
[22] Ibid., 25. Cynthia Chase has highlighted the importance of the observer, before whose appearance the boy "looks into a mirror and sees his resemblance to the work of art: grace and self-consciousness happen to coincide." Cynthia Chase, *Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986), 143.

"this same craftsman who would be capable of constructing such a strange limb would doubtless be able to construct an entire marionette according to his requirements."[23]

Such a mechanized subject is regarded, here, as equivalent to an animal defined by the lack of consciousness or any sense of self-reflexivity. Another narrative in Kleist's article, expressed from the first-person perspective, offers a telling illustration of self-mechanization/animalization featuring a one-sided contest between a human fencer and a bear chained to a stake. As the former recalls, the bear easily defeats him because

> [n]ot only was the bear able to parry all my blows like some world champion fencer, but all the feints I attempted—and this no fencer in the world could duplicate—went *unnoticed* by the bear. *Eye to eye, as if he could see into my very soul* [emphasis mine], he stood there, his paw raised ready for combat, and whenever my thrusts were not intended as strikes, he simply did not move.[24]

The narrator's proposal of obliviousness as what contributes to the bear's victory confirms Jacques Derrida's critique of the logocentric commonplace of

> the animal's profound innocence, its being incapable of the "signifier," of lying and deceit, and of pretended pretense, which gets linked here, in a most traditional way, to the theme of a cruelty that doesn't recognize itself as such—the cruel innocence, therefore, of a living creature to whom evil is foreign, living anterior to the difference between good and evil.[25]

Rather than seeing the bear as intellectually capable of distinguishing trickery from truth or itself possessive of the supplementary possibility of leading its opponent astray, the fencer ascribes to it a sense of stationary readiness outside of the symbolic order. Beyond good and evil, the bear sans self-consciousness pierces straight into the fencer's interiority while oblivious to all the reflexive mechanism that goes into his act of feinting. Perhaps not incidentally, being exterior to

---

[23] Heinrich von Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," 23.
[24] Ibid., 26-27.
[25] Jacques Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, ed. Marie-Louis Mallet, trans. David Wills (Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2008), 130.

the ideology of goodness is also a moral quality commonly associated with an assassin: one who, not unlike a marionette, lacks subjectivity and merely executes someone's order of killing so as to fulfill a vision not of his or her own.

Kleist's bear functions as a useful point of comparison with, if not a sub-text of, the characterization of Nie: an animal which is itself a master sword fighter. But a fundamental distinction between them must be clarified. The result of Nie's training might have turned her into a supreme assassin; by no means, however, do the filmmakers view her as an animal-machine without consciousness or subjectivity.[26] The animalistic figure that she is designed to be achieves the same ends of the kinetically perfect body outlined in "On the Marionette Theatre" through a means conceptually opposite to logocentrism. Approaching this question from modern ethology, the filmmakers conceptualize the assassin's combat skill to be thoroughly engaged with the reflexive process of conscious deceiving. Consider the fight between Nie and the masked Lady Tian. Hou has specified that the two actresses should behave like "two lionesses."[27] Referring to accounts of animal behavior in Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz's *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways*, Hsieh reads this directorial instruction as Hou's understanding of the behavioral science behind the fights among carnivorous animals, particularly dogs and wolves. Unlike the seemingly harmless herbivores who could actually cause significant harms in combats, carnivores are much more restrained from inflicting serious injuries to opponents of the same species. Given their abilities to cause damage of much greater degree, the latter intentionally avoid unnecessary conflicts and their lethal consequences either

---

[26] The rejection of Nie as an unconscious, inhuman machine finds conceptual reverberations in Max Ernst's early Dadaist collage, which, according to Hal Foster, also evokes an autistic system of art that subverts the masculine, heroic "armoring of the body" in Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's modernist fantasy and, more broadly, the fascist ideology of the body as a weapon. Hal Foster, *Prosthetic Gods* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004), 154-155, 168-169.

[27] Hsieh Hai-meng, *Xingyunji*, 105.

through such intimidating moves as growling, grumbling, and snapping with teeth in the empty air or carefully controlled attacks in the actual process of fighting.[28] In Lorenz's own words, this mechanism ensures the continuation of the species: "Should a dog or wolf unrestrainedly and unaccountably bite the neck of his packmates and actually execute the movement of shaking them to death, then his species also would certainly be exterminated within a short space of time."[29] Unless absolutely essential, it is unworthy to put the self, metonymic of the existence of the entire species, at risk. This is one of the reasons, according to Hsieh, why the fight between Nie and Lady Tian stops immediately once the latter's mask comes off. Given that the latter's true identity has been revealed, Nie makes the judgement that she poses no real threat and hence no need to continue the battle.[30] Indeed, this logic is consistent throughout Nie's fight scenes in the film, such as the brief fight between her and her nun-master. The outcome of this final showdown is revealed when the former, after twice dodging the latter's attacks, retaliates and, in one move, leaves a barely visible horizontal cut on her white robe, close to the right side of her abdomen. The fight promptly ends at this moment as all it takes to spell out the wide gap between their martial arts skills is this one tiny cut.

While Lorenz's writings from the 1940s have undoubtedly been challenged and revised in ethology, as texts of popular science they continue to exert profound influence, not least for general readers in Taiwan since the first authorized translations came out in the 1990s. Despite his controversial affiliation with Nazism, Lorenz's works have been marketed and presented to Taiwanese readers as popular scientific readings. Among them, *King Solomon's Ring* is especially well accepted not only due to its jargon-free narration but also because Taiwanese

---

[28] Ibid., 106.
[29] Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways*, trans. Marjorie Kerr Wilson (London: Routledge, 2002), 179.
[30] Hsieh Hai-meng, *Xingyunji*, 106.

educational authorities have routinely recommended it as a must-read for students, to the point that it was consecutively quoted in the reading comprehension sections in the 2005 and 2006 Chinese language subject of the national senior high school entrance exam. Three Chinese translations of Lorenz's books also appeared on writer Chu Tien-yi's recommended reading list, collected in her book on pedagogies of writing designed for children, *Chu tienyi de zuowenke 2* (*Chu Tien-yi's composition class 2*). Chu Tien-yi, not incidentally, is the younger sister of Chu Tien-wen and Chu Tien-hsin and, of course, Hsieh's aunt. The filmmakers' frequent references to Lorenz in their artistic discourse is thus not at all arbitrary. *King Solomon's Ring*, in particular, serves as the foundational text that structures the film's ethological worldview and hence important privileged materials for analyzing *The Assassin*.

Returning to the bear's triumph in "On the Marionette Theatre," another passage from *King Solomon's Ring*, though unquoted by Hsieh, provides an even more precise explanation. In a chapter devoted to the animal's linguistic capacity, Lorenz revisits the legends of famed animal "geniuses" capable of mathematical calculation. Imagine the following scenario:

> You are invited to set the examination yourself and you are put opposite the horse, terrier or whatever animal it is. You ask, how much is twice two; the terrier scrutinizes you intently and barks four times. In a horse, the feat seems still more prodigious for he does not even look at you.[31]

It is neither telepathy nor intelligence defined in anthropomorphic terms but the animal's perceptive apparatus that allows the horse or the terrier in question to capture fleeting environmental signals. When the horse knocks or the terrier barks the fourth time, they are prompted to stop by the smallest gestures that the surrounding humans betray, even if unconsciously and involuntarily for a split second. For the transmission of the correct signal to

[31] Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways*, 77.

the animal, a microscopic change of state or a physical movement from the human observer suffices. Should the surrounding people be unaware of the correct answer or miscalculate the mathematical equation themselves, the terrier would, respectively, go on barking until a stop sign eventually appears or simply provide the wrong answer that the people have in mind. Indeed, while this ethological account by no means denies the fact that some animals could learn the meanings of a considerable number of words in human languages, Lorenz emphasizes, "it must not be forgotten that the ability to understand the minutest expressional movements is thus acute in animals for the very reason that they lack true speech."[32]

Such an account immediately invites a comparison with and rethinking of Kleist's understanding of the kinetically consummate body in Cartesian terms: not a result of the possession of an extreme degree of consciousness—be it all or nothing—but something altogether exterior to the paradigm of consciousness. A modern ethologist would likely correct Kleist and attribute the bear's victory to its capture of the minutest expressional movements that the fencer unconsciously conveys and, hence, the "prediction" of each move he is about to make.[33] Ordinary humans are simply incapable of partaking in animalistic communication as

---

[32] Ibid., 79. The episode described here is also known as the Clever Hans fallacy. The eponymous animal was an Orlov Trotter who caused a sensation in the early twentieth century and initiated a series of studies on animal perception. Around 1907, Hans's owner Wilhelm von Osten, a retired German mathematics professor, claimed that the horse was able to perform mathematical calculations, among other intellectual activities such as spelling words and recognizing colors. When asked to solve mathematical problems, Hans would tap its foot, nod its head, or point its nose the appropriate number of times for answer to the problem in question. This attracted great attention from scholars in comparative psychology. Oskar Pfungst, in particular, devoted himself to addressing Hans's "human" behaviors. The result published in 1907 includes the explanation Lorenz has offered. For more on Clever Hans fallacy, see Tim Friend, *Animal Talk: Breaking the Codes of Animal Language* (New York: Free Press, 2004), 50-53.

[33] As philosopher Barbara Gail Montero also suggests, during (human) expert action such as sports and performing arts, the notion of "don't think; just do it"—popularized by Nike's advertisement slogan—is, in fact, a fallacy. Action always proceeds with thought (conscious thought and unconscious thought alike); deliberation always takes place during the process of acting, however brief the given reaction time might be. Echoing Lorenz's account that resorts of animalistic perception that I have outlined, Montero likewise asks us to attend to what she calls "cognition-in-action": a position that challenges the mind-body dualism so frequently used to characterize the mechanism of expert action. Barbara Gail Montero, *Thought in Action: Expertise and the Conscious Mind* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 38-40.

such, across all parts of its apparatus from the productive to the receptive end. Not even, Lorenz intriguingly notes, such performers with fine mimetic skills as "George Robey or Emil Jannings" could convey, by acting, any signal in the transmissive process—let along sensing and deciphering it.[34] How, then, does *The Assassin* stage what determines the irreversible defeat of the human fencer and what fine actors like Robey and Jannings could not have achieved in reality? In what ways is the animal-like assassin's interiority performed, particularly when there are few, if any, interactions between Nie and animals? Indeed, the film skips all of Nie's training processes detailed in the original tale and starts in medias res with her already competent decapitation of a man on a galloping horse, surrounded by an entourage of bodyguards.

Translating across Species

Even though it is not shown in the final cut of *The Assassin*, Nie's autistic character setup, as documented in *Records*, is associated with her life-long fascination with horses. In the screenwriters' imagination, Nie spends most of her childhood with horses in stables and markets, disregarding needlework, reading, and other domestic activities. She is also skilled in equestrian activities such as polo. While Hsieh admits that a major flaw of this fictional arrangement lies in the fact that people with Asperger syndrome, herself included, are generally less developed in motor coordination, such affiliations between Nie and the equestrian is not unjustified.[35] One senses a nod to Peter Shaffer's *Equus* that similarly explore the boundary of neuro-normativity through a boy's at once intimate and disconcerting interactions with horses. In addition, Hsieh has detailed the clinical fact that equine-assisted therapies featuring horseback riding,

---

[34] Konrad Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways*, 75.
[35] On the kinetic capacity of people with Asperger syndrome, Hsieh writes: "We jokingly say that Nie Yinniang would have fallen off the tree a long time ago, or accidentally mis-killed innocent passersby during the process of assassination." Hsieh Hai-meng, *Xingyunji,* 39.

hippotherapy, and equine-assisted learning have been routinely used as therapeutic treatments for autistic children. Research has also been done on autistic children's non-verbal communication with horses, one of the most renowned studies of which is conducted by American ethologist Temple Grandin, who is also an advocate of animal welfare, designer of farm animal systems, and, most crucially, autistic person herself. Grandin's *Animals in Translation*, for instance, famously begins with an intimate account of her life-long fondness of horse riding, one of the few physical activities she is capable of mastering. As if speaking directly to the kinetic flaw singled out by Hsieh, "[m]y sense of balance," according to Grandin, "was so bad I could never learn to parallel ski no matter how hard I tried […] Yet there I was, moving my body in sync with the horse's body to help him run right." What distinguishes the necessary conditions underlying the perfection of parallel skiing and that of horse riding is a kind of bidirectional, non-verbal communication that characterizes the autistic people's interactions with animals: "riding a horse isn't what it looks like: it isn't a person sitting in a saddle telling the horse what to do by yanking on the reins. Real riding is a lot like ballroom dancing or maybe figure skating in pairs. It's a relationship."[36] Both parties have to be extra-sensitive to each other's changing states and needs in order to strike a twofold balance that ensures mutual safety throughout the process.

What makes horse riding manageable for her, Grandin claims, is that while autism might have made school learning and daily social interaction challenging as per normative expectations, "it made animals easy"; as a result, it could serve as a "way station on the road from animals to humans, which puts autistic people like me in a perfect position to translate

---

[36] Temple Grandin and Catherine Johnson, *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005), 5-6.

'animal talk' into English."[37] More than just a zoomorphic attempt that views autistic people as animal-whispers, in effect, Grandin further asserts a radical conflation that frames autism as not only a human condition that enables a particular group of people's proximity to animals, but also a general characteristic of the ways in which animals themselves engage with the world: "Animals are like autistic savants. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that animals might actually *be* autistic savants."[38]

Before delving further into studies on autism, I want to pause here and think about Grandin's discourse itself as a subject of study. With numerous publications, public lectures, a BBC documentary called *The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow* (2006), and a 2010 eponymous biopic, Grandin has become one of the most visible spokespeople for the autism community to the general public globally. At least five of her books have been translated into Chinese and published in Taiwan, including those related to the animal—likely sources that the filmmakers have read.[39] Her accounts of autism, like her description of the key to horse riding, offer a sustained thread that runs across the discursive enterprise she has fostered is that autistic people and animals, including but not limited to horses, think, feel, and perceive their environments similarly.[40]

I want to be clear that I do not take Grandin's claim at face value even though her scientific authority and biographical account have certainly helped characterizing her insistence

[37] Ibid., 1, 6-7.
[38] Ibid., 8.
[39] The five books translated into Chinese include: *Thinking in Pictures: and Other Reports from My Life with Autism* (1995); *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (1996); *Animals in Translation* (2005); *The Way I See It: A Personal Look at Autism and Asperger's* (2008); *The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum* (2013).
[40] This main thesis of Grandin's writings has been contested by neuroscientists. Giorgio Vallortigara et al., for instance, have disagreed with her based on comparative animal cognition experiments but proposed possibilities that "performance more savant-like in both humans and animals" could be achieved through manipulations of brain activities. In response to this critique, Grandin reaffirmed her position by arguing that they approach and define "the concept of details" differently. See both the main text of Giorgio Vallortigara et al., "Are Animals Autistic Savants?," *PLOS Biology* 6.2 (2008) as well as Grandin's invited response attached to the article.

on the affinity between animals and autistic people as empirical facts rather than cultural constructs. One might even describe Grandin's work as an ontological project, embracing what might have been considered as stereotypical traits as part and parcel of the autistic identity. Her casual use of the term "autistic savants"—which does not seem to come with reflective attempts to problematize the potential stock narrative behind—is but one of many examples across her writings. However, I am less interested in exercising a critique of her agenda from the perspective of identity politics than joining a few animal studies scholars in considering what her work might have opened up for us in envisioning new possibilities of humanness. Cary Wolfe, for instance, has proposed that we learn from Grandin and think about disability studies and animal studies together. The theoretical payoff, as he proposes, is that this particular form of intersectionality allows us to move behind the "fetishization of agency" in disability discourse and see the structuring organizations that have come to order what we conceive of as lives. In the process of mapping such normative forces, we can also catch the heterogenous tensions and micro ruptures that emerge out of them.[41] Following Wolfe who reads Grandin critically in order to address what he sees as an impasse in the current theoretical framework of disability studies, I

---

[41] Cary Wolfe, "Learning from Temple Grandin, or, Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and Who Came after the Subject," in *Re-Imagining Nature: Environmental Humanities and Ecosemiotics*, ed. Alfred Kentigern Siewers (Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2014), 101. Kari Weil has also used Grandin's work to illustrate the "counter-linguistic turn" that has recently taken place in animal studies, disability studies, and literary studies in "Killing Them Softly: Animal Death, Linguistic Disability, and the Struggle for Ethics," *Configurations* 14.1-2 (2006). I have also been inspired by Martha C. Nussbaum's attempt to think about different marginalized groups, including people with disabilities and nonhuman species, in relation to each other from the perspective of what she calls "the capacities approach": how political justice should allow the central capacities of lives to flourish to the fullest. One of the cases that promoted Nussbaum to conduct this inquiry is her 10-year-old nephew with both Asperger's syndrome and Tourette's syndrome. Martha C. Nussbaum, *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), 76-78, 97. Through a reading of the autistic character in Mark Haddon's 2003 novel *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time*, David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder have further suggested what they term "crip ecologies," an exploration of "the ways disabled people's alternative interdependent, crip or queer existences provide opportunities to envision an ethics of living that exceeds mere inclusion alongside able-bodied people." David T. Mitchell and Sharon L. Snyder, "Precarity and Cross-Species Identification: Autism, the Critique of Normative Cognition, and Nonspeciesism," in *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, ed. Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017), 554.

take a further step in considering the mobilization of the discourse surrounding autism for artistic creation: how *The Assassin* helps us rethink the question of the animal, itself inextricably a question of the human; conversely, how autism opens up ways to reading the film and cinematic performance more broadly.[42]

Based on neuropsychiatric studies, results of brain scans, and her own experience, Grandin has suggested that what she takes to be an ontological bond between animals and autistic people can be observed in both of their environmental perceptions. A fundamental lineament characterizes their cognitive processing: all-encompassing sensitivity to details, not only through visual acuity but all other senses as well—though the former constitutes the most crucial component of the autistic perception. This allows autistic people and animals to see and amplify their surroundings in all their parts, rather than their sum:

> When an animal or an autistic person is seeing the real world instead of his idea of the world that means he's seeing *detail*. This is the single most important thing to know about the way animals perceive the world: animals see details people don't see. They are totally detail-oriented.[43]

A farm plant, a feed yard, or a slaughterhouse, broken down into one bit after another according to this cognitive processing, is composed of shiny reflections on puddles glancing off of the wet floor, or on the surface of smooth metals; chains that jiggle back-and-forth, in rhythm with which the cattle swing their heads; the clanging of metal sliding doors; high-pitched noises like hissing air produced by hydraulic system, motor, or even backup alarms on trucks; a hanging rag or

[42] My approach to autism in relation to artistic techniques, on this score, echoes what Erin Manning has called "the autistic perception," which serves "not only to honor neurodiversity, to take into account modes of existence I consider key to making our worlds richer, but to make a political case for the necessity of creating techniques and minor gestures that open existence to its perceptual more-than." Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 14.
[43] To support her empirical observation, Grandin cites results of brain scan conducted at the University of Pittsburgh, which have confirmed that the autistic people are more focused on details than on the entirety of objects. Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism* (New York: Vintage Book, 2006), 31-33.

towel on the fence, or a piece of small object on the floor, still and moving alike; small changes in the texture, color, or brightness of the environment that create subtle contrasts. Each new environmental element introduces novel colors and contrasts to the scene.[44] These minutiae to which non-autistic people remain oblivious constitute the center of attention for animals and the autistic people, triggering oftentimes a host of negative responses from fear to angst to anxiety. Such an attention to detail, practically speaking, carries an ethical stake when it comes to improving animal welfare. With the aid of the autistic translation, one could detect and remove these anxiety-inducing factors, thus ameliorating the quality of the farm animals' lives.[45]

In claiming to a reality parallel to and, thereby, no less real than the normative and consensus reality, Grandin's version of the autistic perception operates in its own sphere, one shared with animals but inaccessible to the non-autistic people. The emphasis is placed on the enclosed singularity of one sphere and its unbridgeable gap from other possibilities of bodily, emotional, and cognitive engagements with the world. Herein lies the specificity of the autistic as a shamanic figure: autism remains a condition exclusive to the autistic identity from the outset to the end. The aesthetic paradigm that this chapter puts forward thus describes a set of formal properties that offers us a glimpse into what an alternative relationship with the world might be like. We can think of it as an alien language that non-autistic people can understand through the autistic mediation but never pick up themselves.

Gazes Projected or Evaded

---

[44] Ibid., 33-39.

[45] For instance, contra the anthropomorphic view that the cattle show signs of unease in the slaughterhouse because of their awareness of the impending death, it is most likely one of these small things that makes them balk or freeze. Ibid., 167-168.

The autistic's fine ability to register tangible details, I propose, serves as the foundation for Nie's becoming-animal or, following Grandin's ontological claim, a channel through which autism's *being*-animal transpires. The way that *The Assassin* enacts this inner capacity related to the character's vision is through Shu's performance of two of Hsieh's own symptoms: the lack of eye contact during communication; the obsession with an interest or an activity.

Regarding the former, since for autistic people subtle emotional cues are detached from the physical existence of a given entity (animate and inanimate alike), the conventional loci of human expressivity such as hand gestures and facial expressions emerge as no more significant than the appearance of any other object.[46] That is, the autistic perception responds to everything all the same: from observable behaviors in the everyday life to blood flows in the brain, no change is triggered.[47] Indeed, throughout *The Assassin* all scenes of verbal communication

---

[46] The reason behind this is that subtle—sometimes even apparent—emotional complexity does not always register for the autistic people, whose thinking proceeds logically and intellectually in what has been described as a kind of mechanical process: specific, codified emotions have been restored as files in a mind that operates like a databank or a computer. To act "normal," in this line, entails the correct retrieval of an emotional file that adequately responds to the context of any given scenario. Instead of the instinctual ways in which non-autistic people come to gain mastery over social skills—a learning process which typically proceeds without the awareness of learning—the number of emotional files they possess grows only gradually through conscious and systematic trial and error. In this line, developmental psychologists like Uta Frith, Francesca Happé, and Frances Siddons have considered such phrase as "the autistic mind" to be an oxymoron, given that the almost mechanical, computer-like capacity of dealing with mental states has been described, in their Cartesian vocabulary, as lacking a "theory of mind" in the context of the everyday. In this particular view, while the autistic test subjects might "show insightful social behaviour" such as empathy and the ability of deception in controlled experimental environments, they are unable to perform the same results in real life. Uta Frith, Francesca Happé, Frances Siddons, "Autism and Theory of Mind in Everyday Life," *Social Development* 3.2 (1994), 110. Grandin has similarly confessed that there are only four distinct feelings in her emotional databank: happiness, sadness, fear, and anger. She could easily relate to and switch among them, but her manifestation of each emotion comes all or nothing—overjoyed or not at all, for instance—and she could not express a mixture of them. But regarding the capacity of deception, she rejects the study of Frith, Francesca Happé, and Frances Siddons by offering several accounts of her success in deception in childhood, in the form of hide-and-seek, trick, ploy, or the initiation of a rumor. See Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism*, 156-157, 164.

[47] The results of magnetic resonance brain imaging (MRI) have registered this lack of differentiation as not only behavioral but also biological facts of the autistic perception. See Noa Steimatsky, "Of the Face, In Reticence," in *Film, Art, New Media: Museum without Walls?*, ed. Angela Dalle Vacche (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012), 159, 166. Notably, the evasion of eye contact is not simply a neutral behavior related to the autistic levelling of all components of the world and, therefore, the erasure of attentive focalization; rather, it is itself an active choice that shields the autistic people from excessive inputs. When forced to read facial expressions, in clinical contexts with chins fixed and gazes directed, some autistic people have reported a receptive overload of emotional cues, which could consequently trigger the shutdown of some sensory faculties, if not the entire brain. Therefore, even in an

featuring Nie dramatize this autistic characteristic. The resistance to eye contact is consistent and evident, at times even accentuated by blocking, sudden disruptions of face-to-face conversations, and Nie's acts of concealment that literally "deface" herself. This begins from the opening black-and-white sequence when Nie kneels down outside the threshold of a gate and looks down at the floor while her nun-master assigns her the task of assassinating Tian Ji'an—admittedly, the social decorum that regulates Nie's interaction with her superior factors, too, in this case. A more radical treatment takes place when Nie looks straight ahead without turning to her mother, who sits to her right and recollects Princess Jiacheng's life. After her mother's words sadden Nie to tears, shortly, the possibility of expressing any mawkish sentiment through facial countenance is thoroughly rejected as she covers the entirety of her face with a handkerchief. Other instances abound: when Nie's wounded father confesses, in her face, his deep regret of letting the nun take her away, she halts the conversation at once by turning the back to her father; when the mirror polisher sits behind her to apply ointment on her wounded back, she lowers her head and tells the story of the bluebird; when she fights with Tian Ji'an after he misrecognizes her to be the perpetrator of the malicious spell casted on his concubine, Huji (Nikki Hsieh), she subdues him with force and, with her gaze fixated on his chin, whispers her diagnosis of Huji's pregnancy.

These evaded eye contacts with the interlocuters are marked and contrasted throughout the film with Nie's fixed glance upon people in scenes where verbal communication does not define the nature of their interaction, particularly when a matter of life and death is concerned. Consider, for instance, the opening shot that sees Nie's nun-master ordering her to kill a villainous man "expertly, as if he were a bird in flight." Slowly but surely Nie moves about in the

---

ideal scenario where the evasion of eye contact is permitted, communication over phone still serves for some autistic people as a more desirable mode of connection than face-to-face interaction, given that fewer emotional cues are involved.

next shot, bordering the edge of a grove where she hides. Her resolute and unremitting gaze stays fixated upon the target, of whom we catch a glimpse in the following point-of-view shot from her perspective. When the moment arrives, she sprints out of the hiding place and, in the next four slow-motion shots which lengthen an instance of a blow into a nine-second display of her skills, slashes his neck with swiftness and accuracy. Pulled by gravity, the corpse leans forward, shortly before it falls off the horse. During this process of killing, her hawk-like eyes stay concentrated and sustained on the targeted man. Not once has she blinked; the first and only time we see her close the eyes in this sequence comes right after the moment of her last blow.

Throughout the film, in fact Nie's eyes simply do no blink during tasks of spying, eavesdropping, and killing. An exception occurs when she first returns home to execute the assassination of Tian Ji'an. She first puts on colorful clothes that her family, in anticipation of her return, has been preparing for her. Here, perhaps the blinks are caused by the actress's physical standpoint on a terrace facing the incoming wind (figure 2.1). But one could also read this subtle change of the face not as an index of the set's windy exteriority—one that blows in, borrowing André Bazin's renowned simile, "a grain of sand that gets into and seizes up a piece of machinery"—but rather as a nonindifferent constituent internal to the unfolding of the diegesis: a performance contingent upon her temporary disrobing of the black outfit and, consequently, her disarming of the identity as an unblinking assassin.[48] Indeed, the link between the particular outfit and the identity is decisive (to which we shall return)—a point best illustrated by the official Japanese translation of the film title, *Kokui no shikyaku*, meaning literally "the black-robed assassin."

[48] André Bazin, "*Le journal d'un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson," in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, ed. & trans. Hugh Gray (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 131.

Figure 2.1. A rare blink.

But is hostility the only form of affect that a gaze of concentration projects? Leo Bersani poses this question in his analysis of the various "stares" in Bruno Dumont's *Humanité* (1999), a film that also dramatizes the different kinds of looks hitherto discussed: a melancholic subject's non-searching staring that establishes "the only nonrelational relation we can visibly, corporeally have in a world in which we no longer *are*"; a child murderer's violently focused staring which, along with the knife he uses, cuts into and shreds a girl's genital. Other than these withdrawn or hostile stares, Bersani wonders,

> Can the world be welcomed—met, received, somehow, with pleasure? […] What if Pharaon's [non-searching] gaze, fixed with unceasing attention on everything that enters

> its field of vision, were to become *interested* by something within that field? Interested enough to move toward it, to test ways of knowing it.[49]

It is as if *The Assassin* were both conducting this inquiry and answering it affirmatively. Indeed, the other instance of Nie's eye contact comes loaded not with hostility but full-on fondness. Towards the very end of the film, upon Nie's return, the mirror polisher runs out of a hamlet where he has been waiting to greet her. A long take allows us to glimpse the contour of the two characters' togetherness, framed in a distant space whose coordinates are those of the extreme long shot (figure 2.2). More than fleeting contacts of wandering gazes, here their eyes are locked on each other. Talk is cheap when, finally in the denouement, a vague tinge of Nie's smile—unmistakable even at the deployed shot scale—says it all. In several interviews Hou has mentioned that the character of the mirror polisher was inspired by the actor Satoshi Tsumabuki's signature smile, so child-like and beamy that it seems capable of melting down every piece of impenetrable armor.[50] After numerous displays of unreciprocated gazes, such communicative immediacy at the very end of the film articulates, after all, the possibility of togetherness. If one thing could create a captivated center in autism's otherwise affectless state of confusion, what might have been more reassuring and transparent than an unreserved smile that lays bare the fullness of interiority to lower the affective filter of Nie and garner her candid regard?

[49] While Bersani does not refer to studies of ASD, *Humanité* in fact draws an analogy between the gaze of a withdrawn subject and a subject of mental disorder in its narrative. When Pharaon, the melancholic policeman, visits a psychiatric hospital, his gaze is "fixed on the equally fixated gazes of the men outside. It is almost as if he were staring at other versions of himself, except that, while his features remain expressionless, his stare appears somewhat intensified by the spectacle of a staring that he, that we perhaps can't help but read as empty, wholly nonreceptive misery." Leo Bersani, *Receptive Bodies* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018), 106-112, 116.
[50] Xu Fei, "Xie haimeng jiemi nieyinniang: qifumu cong de xiaorong qifa le hou xiaoxian," *Jiemian*, May 2015, available at http://www.jiemian.com/article/290669.html.

Figure 2.2. The reunion between Nie and the mirror polisher.

Might we hypothesize these distinct motivations behind Nie's concentrated gaze—extreme aggression or affection—as reverberations with the complex mechanism behind the second autistic symptom that Hsieh and Nie share: a target in which the autistic person's attention and interest are fully instilled? In psychoanalytic terms, as Bruno Bettelheim's influential (but also controversial) study posits, the childhood development of a privileged focus in the external world—usually first accorded to the mother's face or breasts—initiates a process that fosters emotions. "[T]he coming alive of autistic children," in particular, proceeds from "a freeing of hostility" in the form of frustration or a vague sense of anger. Given that autism has been regarded as the result of a repressive nonaction and thereby the "total repression of hostility" as well, the original extinction of all feelings, including pain, that autistic infants

experience is unsettled once they build a positive relation with the world. Namely, when a specific object comes to serve as a target of aggression, channeling the release of infantile hostility.[51] That said, Grandin complicated this view by suggesting that autism's investment in a privileged focus is, in effect, a dialectical process. While such a focus in an otherwise neutralized world might have given rise to hostility in the primal scene, the deepening of this engagement also encourages the autistic people's concentration on intellectual, rather than emotional, complexity. Emerging from this kind of encounter with the world is a self-formation into a subject of *actions* rather than a subject of feelings. Emotional cues could thus be more easily circumvented as the object of interest grows to be a piece of factual information processible, so long as interactive routines are followed. With the assurance of familiarity, the autistic people begin to more comfortably engage with a network of people with shared interests. Practically speaking, this allow them to enjoy some kind of social life—even a sense of community—with non-autistic fellows insofar as they are all subjects of the same action(s).[52]

---

[51] The same holds true in non-autistic development as well, as Bettelheim observes: "It seems like the world first comes to our attention as a vague entity that satisfies or frustrates. But while our feelings originate in specific events, they diffuse over our total experience of the world until such time as some of its positive features emerge as specific for us. Once this happens, then a like specificity can be granted the experience that provoked us to anger." Bruno Bettelheim, *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self* (New York: The Free Press, 1967), 62. It is crucial to note that Bettelheim's view, though still widely popular and accepted today, did not go uncontested. Katherine DeMaria Severson, James Arnt Aune, Denise Jodlowski have, for instance, analyzed the rhetorical strategies of Bettelheim's writings and argued that "the persistence of false beliefs" Bettelheim has fostered is a result of "a conjunction of factors: postwar fascination with Freud and the Holocaust; his careful management of his public image; his careful attention to writing for a popular audience; and a generalized anxiety about the family in 1950s and 1960s America." Katherine DeMaria Severson, James Arnt Aune, Denise Jodlowski, "Bruno Bettelheim, Autism, and the Rhetoric of Scientific Authority," in *Autism and Representation*, ed. Mark Osteen (New York: Routledge, 2008), 66, 68. Even as many of Bettelheim's theories have been disputed and largely rejected in the anglophone world, however, his influence has persisted elsewhere in which behavioral treatments based on psychological research are not the mainstream approaches to the disorder. Jonathyne Briggs, for instance, has shown how Bettelheim's work on autism remained durable and powerful in France "due to its echoing of sentiments concerning the potential dangers of motherhood that was common among social critics in the 1960s and 1970s and the continued acceptance of psychoanalysis there." Jonathyne Briggs, "The Enduring Fortress: The Influence of Bruno Bettelheim in the Politics of Autism in France," *Modern Intellectual History* (2019), 29, available at https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244319000015.

[52] Temple Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism*, 161-163.

Insofar as the film's narrative is concerned, the switch from the antagonistic gaze to the affectionate look marks, as well, the transition of the ways Nie's self comes to be defined across different phases of the story. While the notion of "selfhood" hardly captures the autistic experiencing of the world predicated on a diffused, centerless state of subjectivity, Nie's initial identity as an assassin is established precisely as a result of her success in developing an acute sense of seclusion that groups herself and her target in a microcosm. Such is the cloistered but heightened sphere wherein her animalistic perception could operate, insofar as specificities stand out from an otherwise undifferentiated milieu. As Nie fails her second task presented in the film, the execution of a governor who holds his napping child in the arms, due to sympathy, her identity as an assassin undergoes self-questioning and begins to transform—a turning point in the narrative reflected on the stylistic front, too, as the opening black-and-white sequence comes to an end. She would once again fail to deliver the assassination of Tian Ji'an in the following colored part of the film. The cause of her failure this time is not simply because of compassion, but her evaluation of the political stakes he carries in the broader balance of power between the provincial Weibo he rules and the central government. No longer her old self who single-mindedly executes her nun-master's assigned tasks, Nie gains an alternative sense of autonomy through her interactions with the mirror polisher. The film thereby concludes with Nie's decisive departure from the nun-master and, instead, her companionship with the mirror polisher back to his homeland. We can perhaps describe her new identity as a lover since, at this point, the film truly unfolds to be what Chu Tien-wen has envisioned: "a love story with some occasional fights."[53]

[53] Chu's positioning of the film was quoted and shared by Shu on her Chinese social media platform, Sina Weibo, on August 27, 2015.

Excursus on Bresson

Nie's animalistic perception, withdrawal from the world, and investment in privileged focuses—all these have shaped Hou's assassin as a shamanistic figure and the method of acting he has devised for Shu's performance. In interviews and public appearances, Hou has repeatedly emphasized that Shu's sustained gaze during combats, projecting outward from an expressionless and impenetrable face, is the forced result of his direction. As every moment could be the last, no assassin adept at and devoted to her task could afford losing her vision, not even for the time of, literally, a blink of an eye.[54] Those ostentatious gestures routinely mobilized in the martial arts genre's staging of action—the intense stare (emphasized in a close-up or a dramatic zoom-in); the demonstrative opening pose before the fight; the display of specialized weapons; the signature move of the martial arts school to which the practitioner belongs—amount to mere redundancy and expose, in fact, the practitioner's amateurism. The skills essential to assassination, in Hou's own sportive analogy, are comparable with those of a top tennis player: "Even as he returns fast groundstrokes, Roger Federer stays focused without a slight change of facial expression. This is *wuxia*."[55]

To the end of restraining Shu's facial expressions, Hou adopted Bresson's famed directorial method of shooting the same shot numerous times until all acting is drained from his actors (whom he called "models") to the extent that they were simply enacting the actions and uttering the lines.[56] Habitual traces are erased one after another in the duration of Shu's repeated performances, as the actress works against the face's constant formation of expression, which

---

[54] Hsieh Hai-meng, *Xingyunji*, 98.
[55] Ibid., 217.
[56] Hou mentions Bresson several times in a book-length interview with Bai Ruiwen (Michael Berry). He is particularly impressed by the ways in which Bresson reveals, in *Pickpocket* and *Mouchette* particularly, the condition of his leading characters and their positions in the social structure through image rather than dialogue. Bai Ruiwen, *Zhuhai shiguang—hou xiaoxian de guangyingjiyi* (Taipei: Ink, 2014), 120, 152, 239. Hou also directly quotes *Mouchette* in his 2007 short *The Electric Princess Picture House*.

has over the course of a life molded a recognizable repertoire of expressivity that defines her star persona in contemporary Chinese cinema. Borrowing Bazin's evaluation of Bresson, this directorial method is best understood through the operative power of subtraction, as seen in his use of a series of negative qualifiers to describe its effect: "the countenance of the actor *denuded* of all symbolic expression, *sheer* epidermis, set in a surrounding *devoid* of any artifice [emphases mine]."[57] To further the tennis analogy, I think Hou would have agreed with David Foster Wallace's diagnosis that the attraction of a Federer match lies in how his kinetic aptness offers a "religious experience," the divinity of which emerges when we "come at the aesthetic stuff obliquely, to talk around it, or—as Aquinas did with his own ineffable subject—to try to define it in terms of what it is not."[58] Not a grimace, not a blink, not a trace of any codified expression of emotion—the purity of Nie's assassination skill achieves its fullest potentiality through the poverty of animation and of legibility that Shu's face, itself an image, carries.

On precisely this constellation formed by autism, Bresson's directorial method, and a negative mode of visual address manifested primarily on the face and through the look (or the lack thereof), Noa Steimatsky grounds her inquiry into what she perceptively describes as a kind of cinematic "reticence." In Bresson's narration, dramaturgy, cinematography, and editing pattern that unfailingly enact an assertive detachment of images from their semiotic conventions and functions, Steimatsky observes a conceptual reverberation with the autistic conditions outlined above. Just as autism's evasion of the look is symptomatic of the leveling of the anthropomorphic (and frequently anthropocentric, too) hierarchies of the world, so does Bresson's stylistics exposes the fallacy of an expressive, communicative center in cinema, not

---

[57] André Bazin, "*Le journal d'un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson," 136.
[58] David Foster Wallace, "Roger Federer as Religious Experience," *New York Times*, August 2006, available at http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/20/sports/playmagazine/20federer.html.

least that of the command of the human visage:

> His narrowing down, decentering, and de-framing of the visual field tears the human countenance from emotional syntheses and the symbolic repertoires it has inherited from other mediums. The opaque face (or face-to-face) and the displaced or withdrawn glance prevail in his work, affecting both the work of his models (as he calls his actors, beautiful as they invariably are) and his camera and editing work. His shots are obstinately composed and paced to level persons, objects, and spaces; they raise barriers everywhere between things, or else drain them in a flat, opaque field, wherein the face is displaced as measure and medium of address.[59]

Mobilizing the language of animism as well, Steimatsky further associates this cinematic treatment of the world with the state of confusion in the autistic experience. The placement of all entities on the same order of significance, through the reductive process of inanimation, presents both Bresson's method and autism as the antithesis of the Romantic alterity ascribed to childhood previously explored in Chapter One. A negative mode of the animist imagination is at play, here, as vitality has been pulled down to the horizontal status of a corpse, as foregrounded attractions have been sucked back into non-discriminating chaos. "Might one not describe," Steimatsky asks, "an anti-animistic inclination inflecting a certain cinematic lineage that defines itself against the more 'natural' inclination of motion pictures toward an inherent animism? Cinema may be related in this way, too, to a much longer history of figuration wherein 'death-dealing'—or at least dealing with death—is a fundamental concern, a defining element of art."[60] On this note, the aesthetic paradigm of autism to which *The Assassin* belongs defines the animist imagination, somewhat counter-intuitively, through an extreme rejection of anthropomorphism: a sphere of animism that is animist because everything is equally not animate, not personal.

---

[59] Noa Steimatsky, "Of the Face, In Reticence," 161.

[60] In Bresson, the effect of death that objectifies a person into an object or even a natural element, as Steimatsky has highlighted, includes "the very movements of suicide, displaced onto toppling, falling objects in the opening of *Une Femme douce*" and the suicide of Mouchette that reveals her "submission to nothing more than the angel of a mound of earth that will suffice to topple her into the water." Ibid.,168-169.

Thinking about the counter-anthropomorphism that Bresson's method effects, one would be remiss not to mention his 1966 *Au hasard balthazar*, wherein the titular donkey—the consummate Bressonian model—remains resistant to any psychological depth that the viewer might be tempted to ascribe. Throughout the film, Balthazar's face does not seem to function as a Kuleshovian ground for the viewer to conduct an emphatic reading through retrospective projection; nor does any readily legible meaning emerge, specifically in the beginning of the unforgettable circus sequence, when its face is juxtaposed, through montage, with four other animals' unexpressive and even fragmented faces.[61] And, indeed, with regards to the world of the animal behind the reach of ordinary human perception, doesn't the film stage precisely an episode of Balthazar being a "mathematic genius" that Lorenz demystifies? In the second part of the circus scene, after having its bodily measurements taken, Balthazar arrives at the center of the venue where a blackboard is placed, performing in front of a full house none other than the trick of calculation. After the show host asks for some random numbers from the audience, Balthazar performs arithmetic tasks by multiplying two sets of numbers and indicating the results by tapping its foot on the ground. The number of the taps, similar to the cases previously discussed in Lorenz's account, suggests the answer that the show host should fill in on the blackboard in the order of each digit. A rejection of anthropomorphic communication that, nevertheless, could not take place without the subtle cues from the human spectators, the entire

[61] In this 17-shot sequence, a series of encounters between the donkey and (in the order of appearance) a tiger, a bear, a monkey, and an elephant are presented from medium close-ups to extreme close-ups in an overall shot/reverse shot structure. Shot 2 to 5 shows a shot/reverse-shot sub-sequence between Balthazar and the tiger; Shot 7 to 10 between Balthazar and the bear; Shot 12 to 13 between Balthazar and the monkey; Shot 15 to 16 between Balthazar and the elephant. Brian Price has suggested it is fundamentally "indecipherable" in the sense that it remains "unclear in terms of what might be passing through it." Steimatsky also reads the sequence as an address in reticence by rejecting the possibility of any anthropomorphic recognition of an on-going communicative process between the animals: "No linguistic maneuvers will force these stunning, hieratic animal heads into direct conversation, identification, or any fabricated reciprocity that our habits of reading can truly command." See Brian Price, *Neither God nor Master: Robert Bresson and Radical Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 81; Noa Steimatsky, *The Face on Film* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 259-260.

circus scene turns to animalistic perception as a key to rethinking and performing the limit of humanness. It comes as no surprise that two donkeys make a cameo appearance in the first shot of *The Assassin*.[62]

What Hou has learned from Bresson, then, is a hermeneutic structure, one that demonstrates how the repetition of action (at least for human actors) hollows out interiority. We get a sense of how deep Hou's intuition goes when he resorts to the Bressonian method to shape his shamanic figure. To be sure, performing the same set of action repeatedly has been a common directorial method of Hou since the late 90s, the practice of which was first thoroughly implemented during the principle photography of *Flowers of Shanghai* when each scene was filmed at least three times.[63] The underlying ideology has been closer to the neorealist ideal of the non-actor, achieved, however, not through the direct employment of non-professionals. Rather, durational exposure to the camera and, more broadly, placement within the cinematic apparatus enforce Shu to overcome the necessary conditions of stardom, which, in Edgar Morin's anthropological account, entails that she "plays her own character, i.e., the ideal character which her face, her smile, her eyes, her lovely body naturally express."[64] Such a process concludes when the star as an archetype becomes a specific type of character—in our case, an assassin with Asperger syndrome. Similarly, the reticence of Shu's face, while in dialogue with Bresson's method, is not necessarily motivated by a philosophical interrogation regarding the limitations of the image's legibility and ability to signify. While it might appear

---

[62] These two donkeys point to another connection between humans and animals in the original tale: a prophecy that accurately indicates that Nie and her husband will arrive at a certain location respectively riding one black donkey and one white donkey. Such a connection between the main characters and donkeys is also reflected in the naming of another renowned intertext: the Qing-dynasty playwright You Dong's dramatic adaptation of the Tang-dynasty tale, the title of which replaces the Nie's name with *Heibaiwei*, which means literally "the black and white donkeys."
[63] Bai Ruiwen, *Zhuhai shiguang—houxiaoxian de guangyingjiyi*, 216-218.
[64] Edgar Morin, *The Stars*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Grove Press, 1960), 158.

that, like Bresson, Hou is also probing the possibilities of imaging at the zero degree, the motivated performance of autistic traits and the assassin as an identity, instead, situates Hou's method within the diegesis as well as the animist imagination's specific commitment to the question of nonhuman personhood.

To illustrate the distinctiveness of Shu's performance and Hou's borrowed method, consider a counterexample in film history regarding how the interaction between an assassin and an animal could have been staged: Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samouraï* (1967). In a memorable sequence that addresses head-on cross-species communication as well as the limitation of human perception outlined in both Kleist's and Lorenz's accounts, hitman Jef Costello (Alain Delon) returns to his apartment which has been previously invaded and bugged by the police. He is about to make a call phone before the ceaseless chirping of his caged bird catches his attention. Something about this sound and, upon closer examination, a few loose feathers in the cage strike him as unusual, particularly when contrasted with the bird's ordinary calmness as established in a close-up from the first sequence of the film. Alerted by the agitated bird, Costello searches his room and locates the eavesdropping device hidden behind the curtain. While, here, it is also the figure of the assassin that demonstrates a perceptive apparatus as efficient as that of the animal,[65] the anxiety of the bird is very much expressed through its agitated voices and movements. That is, Costello comes to be aware of the bird's unusual state primarily through exterior clues, including tangible objects such as its loose feathers, rather than a subtraction of his own affect.[66]

---

[65] Intriguingly, the Orientalist opening title of the film, original to Melville but ascribed to *Bushidō*, not only compares the assassin to an animal but also spells out an imagined specificity of the assassin as not simply a profession but an Eastern mode of existence: "There is no solitude greater than that of the samurai unless it be that of a tiger in the jungle... perhaps...."

[66] With ease we can imagine other actors' delivery of the same performance. Few specificities regarding Delon's acting is at play, let along the character of Costello—whether he is autistic or not seems to be a question of little consequence. And if whether the character of Costello is autistic does not matter, can similar thing be said regarding other autistic characters in contemporary media? Consider one the most famous portrayals of late: Sherlock Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) in BBC's *Sherlock* (2010-) wherein Dr. John Watson (Martin Freeman) explicitly

Assassins, Mask-to-Mask

If *The Assassin* invites an inquiry regarding the performance of autism, the converse also stands. To demonstrate how heeding autism as a mode of performance contributes to our reading of the film, let us revisit the encounter between the "two lionesses," previously explored through the lens of modern ethology. Here, the film arrives at the decisive moment when the external political threat that Tian Ji'an has been managing is laid bare as an internal crisis initiated by Lady Tian, herself a skilled assassin as well, and her sorcerer-master who has remained behind the scene. Indeed, the film has previously hinted at Tian Ji'an's awareness of his wife's scheme through his exposé of a hidden messenger in her room (who passes information between Lady Tian and her sorcerer-master). His subsequent warning to her that Tian Xing, his uncle whom he has demoted and banished to Linqing, must not be buried alive on the way there is also revealing: not the kind of daily conversation one expects to hear from a loving couple. But it is in this encounter between Lady Tian and Nie that the former physically partakes in the elimination

---

mentions, in the second episode of the second season entitled *The hounds of Baskerville*, that the eponymous detective has Asperger's. Cumberbatch's performance has certainly delivered several core symptoms of autism spectrum disorder, thus generating a wide range of media discussions regarding the authenticity of his performance, the pros and cons of portraying Holmes as an autistic supercrip, and the representation of mental disorders in popular culture in general. However, Asperger's, in *Sherlock*, is the screenwriter's retrospective diagnosis of a renowned fictional character's behaviors. Unlike *The Assassin*, its primary goal is not to conduct an aesthetic inquiry regarding how acute perception—quite useful to the detective's work, one would assume—could be rendered or performed with the sundry possibilities that the cinematic (or televisual) apparatus affords. This is not to say that no film has ever tackled this task. Quite the opposite. Tim Webb's *A is for Autism* (1992), Bob Sabiston's *Snack and Drink* (2000), Mick Jackson's *Temple Grandin* (2010), Roger Ross Williams's *Life, Animated* (2016), among others, have all explored the interiority of autistic people through creative—fantastical at times—use of visual effects and animation techniques, such as rotoscoping in *Snack and Drink*. Whether these films present the autistic experience realistically is up for debate, but in them, what the world might be like for an autistic person has become thoroughly visible to the point that viewers are frequently invited to take up the first-person perspective of the protagonist. Grandin herself, for instance, thinks that the biopic *Temple Grandin* provides a realistic depiction of her experience as a high-functioning autistic person—an achievement not unrelated to the director Jackson being on the autistic spectrum as well. Thinking about such a representational strategy in relation to the Bressonian method that Hou has privileged, *The Assassin*'s emphasis on the exteriority and opacity of human expression presents itself as the exact opposite of such accessibility to interiority. As such, the film establishes a new extremity and opens up a whole spectrum of the performative means with regards to the staging of autism.

of political opposition. It is after this encounter, too, that Nie begins to grasp the internal conflicts of interest within the Tian family, leading to her subsequent decisions to save the pregnant Huji from the spell casted by the sorcerer-master (which I discuss in Introduction) and spare the life of Tian Ji'an.

This crucial sequence is brief: 23 shots, beginning with Nie's entrance into a withered white birch forest and ending with a close-up of Lady Tian's split mask on the ground; three minutes in total, wherein the actual screen time devoted to action takes up less than fifty seconds. Yet for these fifty seconds, both actresses, especially Shu, went through the same set of choreographed actions repeatedly so that any visible trace of emotions—not least hesitancy, fear, and unfamiliarity revealed typically with the shut eyes—withdrew from their bodily gesture and facial countenance. Unsatisfied by the actresses' kinetic control, Hou even decided to re-shoot everything from scratch a year after the completion of this sequence.[67] The end-result is that the fluid expressivity of Shu's face has coagulated, stiffened itself into a vacuous surface, a (death) mask (figure 2.3). Even under frame-by-frame scrutiny, the lack of expression remains consistent from Shot 5, when Lady Tian's initiation of the attack that motivates a shock cut breaks through the stillness of the scene, to the last blows in Shot 19. Between these two shots, about two dozen thrusts and counter-strikes have been delivered, blocked, or dodged.

---

[67] The outdoor location also relocated from Shennongjia in Hubei province to Inner Mongolia. Hsieh Hai-meng, *Xingyunji*, 215-217.

Figure 2.3. Nie's mask-like face during the fight with Lady Tian.

I have emphasized this performative style and the underlying ideology because they not only shed light on Nie's characterization but also permeate other aspects of the film. The face's capacity to lock itself into a mask, for instance, would address Lady Tian's decision to wear a mask in this scene. On the narrative front, the mask functions as a conventional device of concealment that facilitates her fashioning of an identity alternative to her domestic (but not feeble) role in Weibo, thus allowing a channel for the internal conflicts of the Tian family to be externalized—both plotting behind the scene and fighting on the ground. Given the accentuated visibility of this device, however, might we also regard the mask as a device of self-transformation? An object that allows Lady Tian, a non-autistic person, to approximate and assume the autistic perception so advantageous to the identity of the assassin when she, too, sets

out to resume the assassination of Tian Xing previously sabotaged by Nie? Or more precisely, a kind of prosthesis—itself a crucial motif in the tradition of Chinese martial arts fiction—that elevates the wearer's physical capacity to a level on par with that of with Nie? If autism allows Nie to simply *be* the fencing bear in Kleist, the arithmetic horse in Lorenz, or the donkey in Bresson, the external addition of a mask onto Lady Tian's face opens up a non-pathological means through which the anti-animist levelling of the self and the world could likewise take place. She becomes, in this line, another consummate assassin who stands face-to-face, or more accurately, *mask-to-mask* with Nie.

It is only befitting that their fight concludes, in the slow-motioned Shot 19, when each of them swiftly spins their bodies to create an axis of rotation, through which maximum speed is generated before they simultaneously deliver one last strike to each other, with Nie aiming precisely at her opponent's mask. Two shots later, Lady Tian's posture becomes less reactive as she repositions herself from action-ready partial squat to ordinary upright stance. A subtle but visible crack on her mask appears. She tosses the mask on the ground in the following extreme long shot—a move easy to miss on first viewing given the shot scale. Both of them then leave the scene from opposite directions, and the last shot of the sequence presents a close-up of the broken pieces of the mask on the ground (figure 2.4). Such a result of their fight supplements a scenario missing from Kleist's wide spectrum of (non-)conscious entities. While the ideological positions of God, the animal, and the marionette have all been laid out, among which human consciousness is defined, what might have happened when a bear fights a marionette? That is, an encounter between two distinct but equal entities that occupy the same position on the spectrum of kinetic proficiency. *The Assassin* provides an answer to this thought experiment: with the breakdown of the mask, so such equality collapses, soon followed by Lady Tian's surrender.

Figure 2.4. Lady Tian's broken mask.

Moreover, as this final close-up reveals, not just the act of masking but the mask, itself, beckons. The device is, first of all, a half mask that covers Lady Tian's face from the nose up. The aforementioned fight is thus, more accurately speaking, a half-mask-to-mask encounter—perhaps the half-ness explains why Lady Tian is bound to lose the fight against the fully masked Nie. The rich decoration on the half mask is not to be overlooked, either, insofar as it turns the object into a symbolically loaded device (as masks conventionally are) rather than Nie's expressionless, blank mask-face. Radiating from the center of this gold-embroidered half mask, irregularly shaped and fire-patterned carvings extend to embrace Lady Tian's forehead and the sides of her head, as if her gaze is materialized into centrifugally bursting flames. According to production designer Huang Wen-ying, this is because the elemental attribute of the character is

conceived of as fire, the symbolic and material qualities of which point to her fierce personality and her shape-shifting plasticity at once. Instead of seeing Lady Tian as someone who has lived with a secret identity as an assassin, it is more accurate to describe Lady Tian and the masked assassin as but two of this person's aliases: her essence, like the fire, stays "ever-shifting and ungraspable."[68]

Returning to her fight with Nie, this fiery quality as expressed in the material conditions of the costume has also anticipated their gap in the mastery of martial arts skills. Indeed, the color of Nie's signature black outfit indicates, by definition, a state post-transformation. As Huang conceptualizes, the classical understanding of blackness, according to *Shuowen jiezi*, a second-century Chinese dictionary, is "what results from flame." The color black associated with Nie is thus the final outcome of a fiery transformation.[69] Like the half mask versus full mask encounter, we could also view the colored contrast between Nie and Lady Tian as one between what is still unfolding and what has already undergone the necessary process of becoming an assassin. Lady Tian's elemental affinity with fire is reflected, too, in the design of her outfits and objects that decorate her dwelling, most especially a six-panel folding screen that appears in her room where Tian Ji'an comes to punish her after discovering her scheme. Regarding her outfits, their defining colors of carmine and dark orange that conventionally represent the fiery imagery foreground her presence when she is outdoors, sharply distinguishing her position from the surrounding natural environment and an entourage of servants who appear in comparatively indistinct colors. In interior spaces, the folding screen in her room also features the two major sets of colors: a withered forest and a bright sun, both depicted in gold, against a dark coral sky.

---

[68] Huang Wen-ying, *Baifang cike tangchuanqi* (Taipei: Ink Publishing, 2015), 74-75; Huang Wen-ying and Hsieh Chun-qing, *Tang fengshang*, 180-181.
[69] Huang Wen-ying and Hsieh Chun-qing, *Tang fengshang* (Taipei: Ink Publishing, 2015), 102.

In Huang's words, when light passes through the surface of this screen made of fine, translucent yarn, it enlivens the mysterious pictorial landscape and transforms it into a flowing redness that takes turn giving off "a shadowy weight, a sparkling incandescence, like flaming larva, like dripping blood, revealing both the message of life and the message of death."[70] The multiple circular stars that decorate the screen also correspond to the starry landscape on the folding screen behind her sorcerer-master and, therefore, imply their discreet connections. Similarly, the constellation of whirlpools that constitutes the main body of Lady Tian's mask links her to the sorcerer-master, who wears a black robe also decorated with whirlpools that symbolize "the convergence of energies from heaven and earth, connecting cosmic principles with individual fates and bridging natural and artificial forces to fashion abundant, bursting, and recurring vitality."[71]

Like this symbolized flow of vital force, my brief tracing and mapping of the material ties and elemental geographies—from Lady Tian's costumes to those of Nie's; from Lady Tian's folding screen to that of her master's—demonstrates that the anti-anthropocentric logic behind the film's autistic characterization and performance undergirds, too, other aspects of its world that far exceeds what this chapter can manage to cover. Facing all the materialist, creaturely, and energetic vibrancy that *The Assassin* presents to us, I want to conclude this chapter by considering some open questions regarding the ideal form of spectatorship that it solicits: how do we register all these intricacies in the film? What does it mean when the viewer, on top of sorting out the elusive narrative, concentrates on the material world formed collectively by various nonhuman entities? In what ways does *The Assassin* as an animist imagination ask to be viewed?

[70] Ibid., 181.
[71] Ibid., 199.

No place comes more suitable for us to begin addressing these inquires than two "insectile" shots that push spectatorship to the extreme.

Spectatorship of Exteriority

Shot 32 of the film: The courtyard outside a corridor of the Princess's dwelling is presented in a fifteen-second shot after Nie's recollection of Princess Jiacheng playing a zither in the yard—the only moment in the film when the aspect ratio breaks through the narrower confine of 4:3 into widescreen—and before the sequence where Nie's mother recounts past events during her time as the Princess's servant. Two white flowers in the lower right quadrant of the frame stand in sharp focus, against a blurry background that includes the garden and other architectural components. About ten seconds into the shot, an insect flies in and lingers on the flower on the right for five seconds until the screen fades into black (figure 2.5). Could it be a nod to one of the emblems of contingency in modern cinema: that iconic bug, crawling on the windowpane in François Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* (1962)?[72]

[72] My uncertainty as to whether this bug demonstrates cinematic contingency or intended intertextuality points to what I have elsewhere described as the distracting qualities of animals on screen, with dogs in early cinema as my privileged objects of study. Pao-chen Tang, "Of Dogs and Hot Dogs: Distractions in Early Cinema," *Early Popular Visual Culture* 15.1 (2017).

Figure 2.5. A bug lingers on the flower on the right.

The penultimate shot of the film: When Nie fulfills her promise and returns from Weibo to the idyllic hamlet where the mirror polisher awaits, the camera pans left as he walks her back to the house and introduces her to the local residents. In the precise spot where the camera movement arrests, between the lens and the wood fence that structures the entrance to the hamlet, fleeting reflections of light allow one to see threads of a spider web in the foreground, covering almost the entirety of the lower half of the frame.

Present or implied, the visual presence of insects seems to occupy liminal spaces in the film.[73] They mark the spatial boundary between the interior and the exterior of a built environment: respectively, the courtyard of the Princess's dwelling; the entrance to the hamlet.

[73] I have emphasized the visual aspect here because the acoustic environment of *The Assassin* unambiguously amplifies the chirping of insects, among other ambient sounds such as the cackling of birds. Echoing my reading of the characterization and performance of Nie, Timmy Chih-Ting Chen and Chang Hsiao-hung, informed by Daoist thought and Deleuzian philosophy, have similarly argued that the film's vibrant soundscape enacts a non-anthropocentric mode of listening. Timmy Chih-Ting Chen and Chang Hsiao-hung, "The Three Ears of *The Assassin*," in *The Assassin: Hou Hsiao-hsien's World of Tang China*, ed. Peng Hsiao-yen (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019).

Situated at the transitional shot from Nie's memory to the present, the former's liminality also indicates a temporal shift and the associated changes of film style. And when read intertextually, they point to a straightforward equation of the human and the nonhuman from the original tale: in order to protect her patron Liu Chang-yi from an assassin's swift decapitation at night, Nie undergoes a Kafkaesque metamorphosis into an unspecified bug, hides inside Liu's intestines, and waits for the right timing to initiate a counterstrike.[74]

While all these intricacies might be non-sequiturs to the unfolding of the narrative, they nevertheless carry great stylistic significance. Since the widescreen format affirms that the shot into which the insect flies belongs to the domain of Nie's memory, the fade-out to black at the end conveniently smoothens the transition into the present, so as to reduce the jerky abruptness when the aspect ratio shrinks back to 4:3 as the next shot fades in. In the case of the spider web, had the camera decided to follow the characters further, with a few inches of a forward track the lens would have been entrapped in the spider web, or, conversely, ruined the threads. Therefore, while this long shot seems unassuming insofar as it rehearses Hou's signature aesthetics that privileges respectful distance from the filmed object, the spider web adds hitherto unseen layers to the profilmic space. The camera seems to have acquired an ecological awareness; its placement and the shot scale maintain the coherence and integrity of specific elements in this meticulously designed scenography. The duration of the shot is related, as well, as the threads only become visible on screen under specific lighting conditions. It takes not only sufficient amount but also certain angel of light casted onto the spider web to create the fleeting shimmers necessary for the camera to visually register its presence. Unlike the insect in Shot 32 whose precise location I can pinpoint in a screen cap, the entirety of spider web is only visible as part of

---

[74] Pei Xing, "Nie yinniang," 406.

a moving image. Indeed, as if the shot is aware of such a specific representational condition, from the moment when the pan stops, it generously provides the viewer with more than 40 seconds to appreciate the shimmering threads in the foreground.

But to notice all these conceptual and stylistic surprises entails, to begin with, one's awareness of the film's inconspicuous insectile aesthetics, among a wealth of other subtleties. Implicitly the film encourages the spectator to survey its milieu through a kind of scrutiny that could perhaps be described as an autistic-animalistic perception, on which interpretive potentials are predicated.[75] Unlike the privileged cinephilic moment in film theory, not least the close-up that reveals the inner life of things celebrated by Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein, *The Assassin* solicits a kind of spectatorship that focuses on details and the anti-interiority that runs through it, including the performative style that works to restrain affect. Not so much a dynamic exchange between what lies interior and exterior as the outer being the outer—and nothing else. Such a spectatorial engagement is particularly in need when we fathom an extraordinary aspect of the film that lies, unfortunately, beyond the scope of this chapter: natural landscape. Examples abound: the last shot of the opening black-and-white sequence in which one tree, out-of-focus in the background, is rippling leaves while the other, in sharp focus in the foreground, is not; the first time of the day when a flock of resting birds in a tree breaks collectively into action, flying into the foggy distance against a mysterious blue hue that blends together the sky and a lake; the clearing and dispersal of the fog up in the mountains, seamlessly mirroring the clouded relationship between Nie and her nun-master. Our heightened awareness of the environment is the necessary condition for the vivacity of lives and matter to manifest themselves on screen.

---

[75] Doesn't the autistic figure frequently take up the form of a detective across contemporary literary and televisual media? Consider Mark Haddon's *The Curious Incident of the Dog in the Night-Time* (2003) to Ashley Miller and Zack Stentz's *Colin Fischer* (2012) to, again, BBC's *Sherlock*.

While these details might not register on first viewing, as Shen Shiao-ying has reminded us, Hou's stylistics always solicits—in fact, deserves—repeated viewings if not, as the two insectile shots advance, frame-by-frame *looking*.[76] Such a detail-oriented spectatorship that *The Assassin* calls for will continue to guide my approach to select objects of study in the rest of this dissertation. But for now, to conclude the present chapter and to transition into the next one devoted to the martial artist as another shamanic figure, let me offer one more intertextual link that the absent spider binds in web with the film. As we look at Nie through the mini frames within the frame formed by the foregrounded spider web—perspectival illusion almost turns her into the missing spider on the web—the specific combination of the spider and a female martial artist recalls an unforgettable opening in the history of martial arts cinema: King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* (1971) which shows, after the credits, a spider creeping towards the entrapped prey in its web at dusk.

It is tempting to read this subtle arrangement in *The Assassin* as a discreet nod to Hu's urtext of contemporary martial arts films. By fate or by chance, the film seems to immediately confirm such intertextuality with another discreet detail. After the spider web shot, the film cuts to its final shot that captures Nie and the mirror polisher's journey back to the latter's hometown. Accompanying them is an old man who appears for the first time in the film. The camera position and scale of this extreme long shot prevent us from clearly seeing the character and identifying the casted actor who was most likely edited out, almost entirely, from the film. Fortunately, some detective work from the cast list in the closing credits reveals that the old man is played by Shih Chun who ascended to stardom upon his first two screen appearances as the leading actor in precisely Hu's *Dragon Inn* (1967) and *A Touch of Zen*. But if the spider and its

---

[76] Shen Shiao-ying, "Benlai jiugai duokan liangbian—dianying meixue yu hou xiaoxian," In *Xilian rensheng—hou xiaoxian dianying yanjiu*, ed. Lin Wen-chi, Li Zhen-ya, and Shen Shiao-ying (Taipei: Rye Field, 2000).

habitat in *A Touch of Zen*, according to Stephen Teo's exhaustive reading, come loaded with psychoanalytic significance (a sense of uncanniness, an imagery of the structure of the unconscious, a symbol of female sexuality, among others), the web in *The Assassin* invites a surface reading that points not so much to the width and depth of interpretive vista as to the film's quietly animate environment per se.[77] Though I have not approached *The Assassin* from the generic perspective of martial arts cinema except for an account of its aesthetics of action, precisely the ways in which martial arts practitioners navigate the larger environment where they are immanently situated constitute one of the most crucial aspects of the genre. We shall follow the lead of a few luminaries of world cinema who most thoroughly engage with this tradition to explore how the figure of the martial artist renders on screen such navigation of the world, itself a technique of animism, set in none other than natural landscape.

---

[77] Stephen Teo, *King Hu's* A Touch of Zen (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006), 17-28.

CHAPTER 3. THE MARTIAL ARTIST

> *But perhaps by now all the houses had turned to snow, inside and out; a whole city of snow with monuments and spires and trees, a city that could be unmade by shovel and remade in a different way.*
>
> —Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo: or the Seasons in the City*[1]

After traversing the child's and the autistic's realms of experience in the first two chapters, this dissertation enters its second half featuring another distinct group of shamanic figures. Several differences notwithstanding, the animist capacities of the first two figures are givens, defined in relation to how they naturally perceive and understand the world. In comparison, the shamanic figures explored in this and next chapters assume their identities through continuous self-cultivation or involuntary forces exerted from the outside. In a concrete and tangible fashion, their interaction with the animist world manifests itself externally on the surface of their bodies, through their actions, and even at the physical sites where they are situated. Codified gestures and movements; manual skills; the materiality and plasticity of surrounding natural elements—these are the channels through which a shamanic figure now articulates his or her animist capacity. Indeed, the privileged figure to which this chapter attends is the martial artist: someone who is in constant motion, displaying and doing things with both its corporeal body and its body-as-image in the kind of poetically fallacious or outright fantastical setting privileged in certain conventions of martial arts cinema.

My interest in the martial artist and its associated animist capacity emerges out of Chapter Two, devoted to the identity of the assassin as a sub-category of the martial arts practitioner. While, there, my discussion of the titular character in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The*

[1] Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo: or the Seasons in the City*, trans. William Weaver (Orlando: Harcourt, 1983), 18.

Assassin (2015) focuses on the process of characterization and actress Shu Qi's distinctive performance of her as a person on the autistic spectrum, I have only touched upon her technique of the body in relation to the ideologies of Chinese martial arts as well as the film's peculiar position in the generic category of martial arts cinema. This chapter revisits these unexhausted promises by learning primarily from Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster* (2013), a film that consciously devises a discursive enterprise surrounding the appropriate ways in which the martial artist shall be filmed. Based on close analysis of select sequences and several documents related to the film's making across all stages of production (including the director's interview, special effects production notes, and biographical accounts on which the screenplay builds), this chapter demonstrates how *The Grandmaster* constructs and stages a cultural tradition in Chinese martial arts that regards its adept practitioners as those capable of participating in an energetic exchange of vitality between the inside and the outside of their bodies. In this process of exchange, division between the self and the world melts, resulting in a cosmic correspondence between the individual and the environment as well as an expanded attribution of personhood from the martial artist to natural elements that populate his or her milieu.

To be clear, the level at which this melding or melting takes place is more than a rhetorical device that confers human agency onto things. What we see, rather, is something that strives towards an ontological flattening, where it turns out that everything becomes one, where all matter is likely the self. That said, while *The Grandmaster* enshrines this ontological state of confusion desirable to the martial artist, it much foregrounds the centrality of his and her corporeality by resolutely rejecting the viewer any impression that such a state might exist. A great puzzle of the film lies in the fact that the ontological oneness which the martial artist enjoys in the diegetic world is presented in a way that deliberately renders itself almost imperceptible to

the viewer. Put differently, the animist capacity of the martial artist transpires so elusively in this film that it takes a special, if not extreme, mode of spectatorial attentiveness to even notice its traces—a restrained enchantment exclusive to those who truly look at the screen. What does it take, then, for us to recognize the animism that the film hides in plain sight? And why should we even be bothered with the task of recognition, especially when the film seems to be ambivalent about laying itself bare to our gaze?

In *The Grandmaster*, such subtleness that undergirds the animist capacities of the martial artists is achieved through digital visual effects, not least in scenes when each of them performs his or her signature martial arts moves. While the effects per se, albeit pervasive throughout these performances, are difficult enough for the viewer to perceive, in the artistic discourse that paves the way for the film's public reception they have curiously taken up the form of a lack, with their presence entirely downplayed so as to present, according to Wong in an interview, "real martial arts […] not movie martial arts."[2] Elsewhere, Wong also states with firm resolve: "When it comes to fighting, you must restore its true appearance in history without the aid of visual effects; you should also restore the intuition, energy, and spirit (*jing*, *qi*, and *shen*) of the martial artists of that era."[3] Indeed, at first glance, the live-action shooting of the film on location

---

[2] Ann Lee, "Wong Kar-wai: Fighting Is Like Kissing," *Dazed*, December 2014, available at https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/22783/1/wong-kar-wai-fighting-is-like-kissing?fbclid=IwAR3tgW1kBiPh7OLBILWhLJaGx8WnfNLA2SCr8S3d_n9IUoFS9OXUbeOqiik.

[3] This line comes from "Wong Kar Wai's Journey into the Martial Arts" in the special features section of the film's DVD released by The Weinstein Company. Except where otherwise noted, all translations of Chinese into English are mine. In this line specifically, the translations of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* are Michael Saso's. See Michael Saso, "The Taoist Body and Cosmic Prayer," in *Religion and the Body*, ed. Sarah Coakley (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 231. While I have chosen to follow Saso because I think his account best contextualizes Wong's words, I want to acknowledge that there are many other ways of translating these terms into English. *Jing*, for instance, also has been translated into "essence." Even if philology and the translation studies are not the primary fields with which this chapter engages, the intricacies behind these Chinese terms should not be fixed or reduced when they appear as seemingly commonsense terms in English. Indeed, as Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang have pointed out, none of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* can "[conform] to the body known to biology or even to the ordinary embodiment of our American readers. Though we argue in places that unfamiliar forms of being are actually not so strange as philosophers might make them out—*qi* is not hard to experience, once you start attending to it—we nevertheless can see that an English text that treats *jing*, *qi*, *shen* as commonsense nouns is in danger of appearing

and in studios across Hong Kong and mainland China was separated from the postvisualization process in the Paris headquarter of BUF, the French company in charge of the film's effects work. "I didn't have the opportunity to meet [Wong]," said the effects supervisor Isabelle Perin-Leduc, "he was in China on the stage, while we worked on the movie sequences at the studio. So, we were used to send [sic] him frequently shot by the web, and he sent us back its [sic] comments by email." According to Perin-Leduc, however, at various stages from 2010 to the completion of the film in 2013, a team of people—from 1 to 50 depending on the time and the task—contributed to a total of 512 effects shots, the majority of which feature martial arts actions.[4] This does not include the time and energy that more than 200 people invested into the film's 3D version (2014) a year later—one particular arduous task was to turn three-dimensional tens of thousands of rain drops in the six-minute opening sequence alone.[5]

Beyond reflecting the high level of professional specialization of contemporary effects industry, the inconsistency between Wong's and Perin-Leduc's words intimates more questions concerning what post-production effects and the ideology of martial arts could mean to each

---

quaint or 'merely cultural'." Judith Farquhar and Qicheng Zhang, *Ten Thousand Things: Nurturing Life in Contemporary Beijing* (New York: Zone Books, 2012), 35.

[4] Vincent Frei, "*The Grandmaster* (Yi Dai Zong Shi): Isabelle Perin-Leduc –VFX Supervisor – BUF," *Art of VFX*, April 2013, available at http://www.artofvfx.com/?p=4203. BUF's official website documents only 509 VFX shots, however. See BUF, "*The Grandmaster*," *BUF*, 2013, available at http://buf.com/films/the-grandmaster/.

[5] The seeming discrepancy between Wong's and Perin-Leduc's statements signals the film's awkward position in a conventional division of martial arts cinema. According to Stephen Teo's categorization: "The most important qualification of kung fu was its claim of realism as a reaction against the fantastic premise of *wuxia*. This implies that the nature of *wuxia* is more abstract and philosophical in terms of its application of concepts such as chivalry, altruism, justice and righteousness (all of which come under the rubric of *xia*), while kung fu apparently emphasizes the *actual and pragmatic* application of combat techniques as well as training." The setting of kung fu film, moreover, is usually "more modern and less historical" and "usually but not always set in southern China (and then, almost always Guangdong province) in the time of the early Republican period beginning in 1911"; by contrast, *wuxia* film is frequently set, if not exclusively, in ancient or mystical times, "reinforcing the Mandarin cinema's tendency to invoke ancient China more naturally and successfully." Stephen Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The* Wuxia *Tradition* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), 5. At first glance, with Wong's emphases on authentic actions, the temporal setting in the Republican period, the film's characterization based on real people and their biographies (including Ip Man, Gong Er, Ma San, Master Gong, and Ding Lianshan), and the main spatial settings in Foshan—located exactly in Guangdong province—and Hong Kong, *The Grandmaster* squarely falls under the rubric of kung fu film. But as I will demonstrate, the fantastic aspect of the martial arts is not thus excluded from the film. Rather, it works discreetly but intimately with the profilmic actions.

other, especially when we take into account the second half of Wong's statement: the representations of such immaterial, formless entities as the martial artists' "intuition, energy, and spirit"—and the system of knowledge that these culturally specific terms point to—that require laborious effects work to realize. Rather than situating the director's and the effects supervisor's positions in the disparate phases of the production process, this chapter places them into conversation. A connecting tissue lies in the defining characteristic of the shamanic figure of the martial artist: the energetic exchange between the inside and the outside. Such a process is presented throughout the film in the fleeting moments when the profilmic actions interact with the effects work, not least those that capture the contacts between the martial artists and the constant, ubiquitous falling snow created by particle systems.

When profilmic actions and effects interact in the film, they open up inquiries concerning not only cinematic realism but also the status of corporeality in the age of digital animation and compositing when the lines in the sand between the vitalist and the mechanist, between physical and the virtual have been relentlessly blurred and redrawn. It is, indeed, a commonplace today that the plasticity of the digital image affords cinema to braid and traverse—ontologically, phenomenologically, or otherwise—across modes of representation, projections of fantasy, pathetic fallacies, among other audiovisual desires. The fact that Wong and Perin-Leduc were only in email communication already bespeaks the notion that digital effects work destabilizes these conventional dichotomies. Beyond acknowledging the power of digital technology that needs no more acknowledgement today, however, I want to take Wong's words as seriously as possible. Since there is no question as to his awareness of the labor put into the effects work, his choice to de-emphasize its presence and, instead, highlight the profilmic as the real and the absolute comes all the more perplexing. If the unmistakably false binarism between profilmic

authenticity of the actions and the illusory quality of the effects Wong has set up in the interview carries any significance beyond a mere promotional gimmick, what is reflected in this insistence upon the former? What kind of "reality" accessible only through the actors' physical movements does the film hypothesize and uphold? And how might any of this speak to the tensions between effects and reality? It is no secret, after all, that Wong had all the leading actors and actresses, especially Tony Leung, Chang Chen, and Zhang Ziyi, received rigorous martial arts training for years in the pre-production phase—Chang eventually became so adept at Bajiquan, the formalized martial art that his character Razor practices, that he won a top national prize in it along the way.

While the focus of this chapter is *The Grandmaster*, to approach and understand the martial arts genre more broadly from an animist perspective, I also submit a group of films which experiment with capturing or suggesting the martial artist's energetic exchange with the exterior. In them, the construction of natural landscape—be it a real location or an impression of nature created in studio—is the privileged formal device mobilized to this end. Notable, though perhaps unexpected, examples which I will explore and set into dialogue with each other include Maya Deren's *Meditation on Violence* (1948) and Lau Kar-leung's *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978). My goal behind tracing and assembling this cluster of works is to illustrate how *The Grandmaster* both follows and renovates what could be seen as a visual tradition of Chinese martial arts on screen. What distinguishes Wong's film from these precursors is that its cinematic landscape is rendered primarily through digital effects that animate, energize, and personify natural elements surrounding the martial artist. My accentuation of Wong's film, however, does not espouse a drastic paradigm shift from analog to digital filmmaking. The grouping of these films, itself, indicates a shared ideological objective to which their aesthetic inquiries invariably

address. If any difference exists between *The Grandmaster* and other films, it lies in the ways in which digital technology opens up an alternative approach to the common task they face: cinematic landscape transformed through the manipulation of the pictorial and plastic quality of pixels. Based on this technologically specific engagement with the image, *The Grandmaster* further solicits from the spectator an intense viewing of the connectedness between the martial artist and nature. This chapter attends to and sorts out such entanglements between the animism of Chinese martial arts, nature aesthetics, digitality, and spectatorship.

An Open Body

To begin our inquiry, an account of the martial artist's defining characteristics is in order. Given that this chapter studies such a special figure in a film set during the early years of the Republic of China, my discussion focuses on the Eastern traditions of martial arts, especially the Chinese one. According to philosopher Yuasa Yasuo's account of the human body, Eastern traditions of martial arts have long served as methods of self-cultivation through which practitioners manage and enhance not only their kinetic capabilities or strength of mind but, ultimately, a unification of the two. Yuasa's construction and analysis of these so-called "Eastern" traditions are predicated on a heuristic framework that allows their specificities to be isolated, highlighted, and contrasted with other points of reference, particularly the mind-body dualism in Cartesian metaphysics. The basis upon which Yuasa builds his view is the neuropsychological theory of conditioned reflex that advances a positive and solid connection between external stimuli received through our sensory organs and the functions of our autonomic nerves. In this framework, the "body" and "mind" respectively refer to: the cerebral cortex that governs our sensory and motor nerves; the emotion-instinct circuit which is, in the topology of human psyche

to which he refers, located at the bottom of consciousness and bordering unconsciousness. To train such psychological responses as instinct and neurosis which are typically uncontrolled—or at least not easily controlled—by our will, one works outside in from the conscious region, i.e., the sensory organs through which outer stress and stimuli are received.[6]

The mastery over seemingly involuntary reactions is the telos of what could be a long and arduous training process. Such a desired capacity could well be applied to our daily life on various practical fronts: for instance, quickly appeasing stage fright before a public performance; maintaining emotional equilibrium and thus not losing corporeal coordination during situations of emergency. A widely adopted practice comparable with the martial arts, as per Yuasa, is the breathing exercise commonly seen in a wealth of meditative methods. Subtle differences notwithstanding, Zen, Yoga, Confucian, and Daoist methods all suggest that the control of breathing facilitates the control of emotion. The maintenance of a seated posture commonly emphasized across them—normally a straightened but relaxed upper body, with the center of gravity held at the lower abdomen—also "trains one to direct one's mind within while maintaining this posture as long as possible in a state of stillness (immovability) so that wandering thoughts, welling up from the bottom of the mind, disappear."[7] Through rhythmic breathing, maintenance of certain postures, and exercising codified moves, martial art practitioners likewise strive to achieve a correlative state between their mind and body. Admittedly, the posture, degree of animation, and environmental conditions noticeably differ between meditation and the martial arts—the former seated, still, solitary; the latter standing, moving, surrounded by one or multiple opponents. In the theoretical vista of the correlative mind-body relation, however, the two methods of self-cultivation function similarly.

---

[6] Yuasa Yasuo, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy* (Albany: State University of New York, 1993), 42-55.
[7] Ibid., 71.

Crucially, at a philosophical level there exists a prominent difference between the two methods: meditation trains one to "gaze into the *inner world*" while the martial arts "the *outer world*."[8] Here, the "inner" and the "outer" mean, respectively, the human psyche and the material environment in which the body navigates. During meditation, one centripetally concentrates on the purity of mind by filtering out as many external stimuli as possible—the ideal state is a temporarily shut down and bracketed body. When practicing the martial arts, however, one aims at centrifugally reaching out to the materiality of the world by turning the body into an "*intermediary* being between 'mind' and 'matter', […] a mediating system of organs connecting the world of spirit to the world of material substance." In such a state to which the martial artist aspires, the body weaves itself into the fabrics of the world. During this process, the distinction between the martial artist's body as an animate entity and the inanimate aspects of the world is destabilized. What opens up and connects the martial artist with his or her milieu is the circulation of a vital energy known in Chinese as *qi* (or *ki* in Japanese).[9]

This cultural context clarifies a point in Wong's description of the film's task previously quoted: the necessity to restore "the intuition, energy, and spirit of the martial artists of that era." In Chinese medical and religious parlance, *qi* is commonly juxtaposed with *jing* and *shen* to form none other than the phrase "intuition, energy, and spirit." Simply put, each of them constitutes a vital force associated with a specific part of the body. Collectively they formulate the inner world that corresponds to the outer world—the poetics of microcosm and macrocosm that plays a central role in classical Chinese medical literature, itself a great influence that shaped religious

[8] Ibid., 71-72.
[9] The meridians, according to Yausa, are what a martial artist trains to cultivate for they are "at the same time both killing and saving points. For example, one offensive strategy for controlling an opponent is to attack on the meridians or acu-points where an opponent's *ki* is emitted." Ibid., 76.

(especially Daoist) thoughts and practices from the Warring States period onwards.[10] In Michael Saso's account of the Daoist system of meditation, for instance, intuition is related to the belly and corresponds to the underworld; energy to the head and to heaven; spirit to the heart and to the earth.[11]

The oldest received Chinese medical theory *Huangdi neijing* (*Inner Canon of the Yellow Thearch*, ca. first century B.C.) states that the vital currents are contained in the body within the meridian, or the *mo*, an elaborate system of vessels.[12] "The character *mo* itself," as Shigehisa Kuriyama explains in his comparative study of Eastern and Western views of the body, "combines the flesh radical, marking a part of the body, with a pictograph for branching stream. […] We picture vital fluids steaming through the body." Indeed, this bodily system where flows of vital energy come and go, roll, disperse, and sometimes pause, according to Kuriyama, "[speaks] to the central intuitions guiding Chinese palpation." Echoing my references to Yausa's and Saso's accounts, the distribution of the *mo*—rivers in our body whose defining feature is its constant flow—also corresponds to the actual rivers on earth:

> The hundred rivers of the earth are like the streams of blood (*xuemo*) in man. Just as the streams of blood flow along, penetrating and spreading, and move and rest all according

[10] Tsai Bi-ming has explored the intersection between Daoism and classical Chinese medicine and argued for the importance of seeing Daoist thoughts as also techniques of the body in "'Shoujingdu' yu 'yuandu yi weijing': yitiao tixian lao, zhuang zhixue de shentijishu," *Bulletin of The Department of Chinese Literature, National Taiwan University* 34 (2011).

[11] Michael Saso, "The Taoist Body and Cosmic Prayer," 231. Echoing with Saso's account of Daoism but focusing specifically on the Yangist tradition, Mark Edward Lewis also suggests that the ideology behind "intuition, energy, and spirit" points to a "program of self-cultivation within an overarching vision of a dynamic cosmos that, like the body, was constituted from a series of ever more refined vital energies […] This model of energies or vital breaths shared by the body and the outer world permitted a more systematic exposition of the character of the body/self, the means of its perfection, and the consequences thereof." Mark Edward Lewis, *The Construction of Space in Early China* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006), 20-21.

[12] In *Huangdi neijing*, there are twelve *mo* in the body. However, Donald J. Harper's study of the Mawangdui medical manuscripts, which are documents related to but older than the textual parallels in *Huangdi neijing*, recounts that there are eleven *mo* instead. Donald J. Harper, *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998), 5.

> to their natural order, so it is with the hundred rivers. Their ebb and flow from dawn to dusk is like the expiration and inspiration of breath.[13]

In this specific medical system, a person is never a centralized, standalone figure against an otherwise diffused ground. His or her body could not be contained, as it always bleeds out and intimately links itself with its surroundings through ceaseless movements of common vitality. The practice of martial arts is one of the techniques of the body that could actively lead to this state of corporeal openness.

A Lost Cosmology

If Wong's reference to "intuition, energy, and spirit" points to a prevailing medical tradition which it also seeks to reinvent on screen, he associates this tradition with a bygone era, the historical authenticity of which the choreography of action in *The Grandmaster* endeavors to recuperate. In many ways the artistic discourse that the film has mobilized—the combination of a carefully constructed cultural tradition and a past time—forms a critique of modernity (and, by extension, global modernity): the conceptualization of the martial artist's body as one open to the world is a qualitatively different idea from the modern (Western) understanding of the body based on the scientific approach of anatomy. Indeed, *The Grandmaster* is set precisely in the early- to mid-twentieth century China when the anatomical paradigm started to exert profound influence over Chinese physicians. In this historical period when two disparate ways of theorizing the body collided, discussions and self-reflections were generated. Chinese medicine, for instance, realized at this point that it had not systematically registered the existence of

---

[13] Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine* (New York: Zone Books, 1999), 49-50.

muscles before anatomy was introduced.[14] Reflecting on the notion of the *mo*, then renowned physician Tang Zhonghai noted that

> Western physicians don't believe in the method of the *mo*. They say that the *mo* which circulate around the body all arise from the blood vessels of the heart, that it is because of the ceaseless activity of the heart that the *mo* move. But how can the condition of the five viscera be determined by just the blood vessels?[15]

Here, Tang reiterates the point that the *mo* is not tantamount to the actual blood vessels but a system of energy flow that permeates the body.[16] It is not a physical force initiated by and pumped out of the human heart into the rest of the body. Rather, recalling Kuriyama's vivid analogy, the system flows, ebbs, spreads, and penetrates through our body like the hundred rivers on earth.[17]

A pivot that holds together *The Grandmaster*, the martial arts tradition, and the self-reflection upon the body in this transitional period of modern Chinese history is one of the film's three screenwriters, Xu Haofeng, himself also a writer of martial arts literature, martial arts practitioner, published scholar of Daoism, and director of four recent martial arts films.[18] Xu's book, *Shiqu de wulin—1934 nian de qiuwu jishi* [*The Bygone World of Martial Arts: Records of*

---

[14] This is not to deny, as attentive historians of medicine have pointed out, that Chinese physicians had long engaged in critical reflections and examinations of the institutionalized tradition they were in. See, for instance, Volker Scheid, "Transmitting Chinese Medicine Changing Perceptions of Body, Pathology, and Treatment in Late Imperial China," *Asian Medicine* 8 (2013), 323. I am, however, approaching this paradigm shift through from the perspective of the film, in which a body lost in the modern era has been forcefully imagined and rendered on screen.

[15] Shigehisa Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*, 12, 37-38.

[16] Related to this, Kuriyama mentions that Alfred Forke's translation of *xuemo*, a phrase composed of the character of blood and *mo*, as 'blood vessels' is inexact. The more natural and precise translation should be 'streams of blood' Ibid., 50-51.

[17] Wonders of the human body are still unknown to and escaping the capture of present-day scientific knowledge. When I first started to work on this chapter, researchers at the University of Virginia School of Medicine had just found out a connection between the brain and the immune system by vessels previously thought not to exist. University of Virginia Health System, "Missing Link Found between Brain, Immune System; Major Disease Implications," *Science Daily*, June 2015, available at http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/06/150601122445.htm.

[18] The four films are *The Sword Identity* (2011), *Judge Archer* (2012), *The Final Master* (2015), and *The Hidden Sword* (2017). Xu also wrote the original story of Chen Kaige's *Monk Comes Down the Mountain* (2015).

Martial Arts Acquisition in 1934], in particular, records the martial arts communities of the 1930s China as narrated by Li Zhongxuan (1915-2004), a master of the formalized martial art technique called Xingyi, practiced in the film by Ma San (Zhang Jin). This book serves as a foundational text on which the film's script heavily relies for the construction of its historical backdrop. In a few places throughout the book, Li describes the training process of then martial artists. A chapter wherein he comments on the key to Xingyi practice specifically stresses that

> Above all, the inner comes first. Whatever happens outside happens. Do not stick to external forms and thus remain trapped. Seeking inner energies through external forms is like the foolish undertaking of marking on a boat where your sword is dropped into the water. Accessing external forms through inner energies helps you reach the sky in a single bound.[19]

The centrifugal vector from within the body towards without characterizes the Xingyi practitioner's body as the one with porous boundaries understood in traditional Chinese medicine. Such corporeal porosity is most explicitly reflected in *The Grandmaster* through the professional trajectory of Gong Er (Ziyi Zhang). It is only befitting that she, after vowing to never impart the Bagua 64 Hands once she successfully avenges her father's murder, becomes a physician of traditional Chinese medicine when she ends up as a war refugee in Hong Kong. Indeed, based on a gendered principle, self-cultivation in the Gong family takes up two forms: the men practice the martial arts; the women medicine. Even though no woman is allowed to inherit the leadership of the family's martial arts school, as I shall demonstrate later, Gong's supreme martial arts skill which the film emphasizes—more so than that of any other character—would have surely made her an adept in the system of the *mo* for medical usage as well.

[19] Li Zhongxuan and Xu Haofeng, *Shiqu de wulin—1934 nian de qiuwu jishi* (Beijing: Dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 2006), 144.

Moreover, Li details how the mechanism of energy flow in the practice of Xingyi is analogous with the ways in which earthly energies manifest themselves. "Peach is good too," says Li, "its peak protrudes and connects to the heavenly energy; it's bottom concaves and contains the earthly energy. The peach blossom has no smell, and even if it does it would smell bad. But when the peach is ripe, its aroma is thick as wine which connects all the energies in the universe and affects people."[20] Here, Li refers to the aforementioned intersubjective connection between the human and nature that underlies the ideologies of Chinese martial arts. Immediately afterwards, he recounts that

> to practice Xingyi is to "put the electric plug into the socket." The interior must be connected—this is the secret of *feng lei* [wind and thunder]. When electric currents run through the central axis of the body, premature decay can be cured. When water is splashed onto the hot stove it makes a "splash" sound. This sound is the internal work of martial arts. The "splash" contains all the nutrition. With the arrival of spring thunders, the earth revives, and everything is imbued with vitality all of a sudden.

At first glance, the transition from the human-peach analogy to the electric currents and the spring thunder seems unmotivated. When we think about Li's words through the prism of energy circulation, however, it becomes clear that the connection between the human-peach and nature takes up the form of energy current. In order to function, the martial artist's body is literally a socket that needs to be connected to the currents permeating out there.

However, as the main title of Xu's *Shiqu de wulin*—meaning literally "the bygone world of the martial arts"—makes clear, the historical setting in which *The Grandmaster* takes place is haunted by a sense of loss: the loss of various martial arts techniques and, consequently, the martial artist's associated openness to the world. In this rather romanticized chronotope, the set of agreement as to what constitutes the body that serves as the basis of the knowledge system of

[20] Ibid.

that time—which might not be "real" in terms of authenticity but is inarguably a system of cultural belief that has remained relatively coherent and trans-historical—was gravely put into question and challenged by alternative and competing models of understanding the body. The toughest challenger of all was the anatomical body that the enterprise of modern (Western) medicine promoted, wherein, recalling Tang's critique, the system of *mo* had no place.[21] Such tensions that emerge with the introduction of new epistemes not entirely compatible with the existing ones—not least those that arrived with the forced implementation of modern technology, frequently in service of colonialist and imperialist ambitions—were themselves already reflected in Chinese cinema of the time. As Zhang Zhen points out, the martial arts-magic spirit film in the 1920s featured technologized bodies that played with "science and magic, film technology and folklore, avant-garde aesthetics and popular tastes." They embodied the multiple facets of modernity until they came to be banned officially by the authorities, who regarded them as "the

---

[21] Not to mention how such a sense of loss is not entirely ungrounded. Historically speaking, China in the early 20th century, in response to the modern notion of health that had arrived with imperialist forces, underwent the most radical period defined by what Ruth Rogaski terms "hygienic modernity." Ongoing transformations of the medical world across all aspects of life transpired: from the reconfiguration of the public health system in treaty ports to the maintenance of individual bodies to the management of invisible germs. The aforementioned Chinese physician's dismissal of his western colleagues' ignorance of *mo* reflects precisely this paradigm shift concerning the conceptualization of one's body and, based on it, the "hygienically modern" ways to guard and preserve one's health, not least methods based on biomedicine and germ theory. As individual health and broader social transformation became intimately intertwined, personal sanitary arrangements came to serve as vehicles for the definition of a nation's identity, expressions of a collective pursuit of modernity, and evaluative criteria of the level of modernization. The significance behind the cultivation of the body—of which the martial arts remained a central device—thus started to shift from maintaining harmony with cosmological energies to advancing the strength of the nation. In a Foucaultian fashion, the biopower of hygienic modernity organizes the maintenance of health (and thus life) in ways that allow crises of politics and modernity—bigger than any individual's body—to be naturalized as conditions of a specific body and its know-how regarding the protection and nourishment of health. The open body in Chinese medicine that could not be smoothly solicited to line up with these novel conditions—the indispensable bumpiness in any ride of transcultural encounter—was, then, gradually euphemized as "traditional" if not shamed outright as unfit for the development of a modern society. Pushed to the extreme though, as Rogaski points out, hygienic modernity becomes biopolitics that both guards and takes life, as seen in "Japanese science during the [Second Sino-Japanese] war that sought both to cause epidemics and to prevent them. The result was a paradox of extreme hygienic efficiency coexisting with the use of germ warfare." Ruth Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004), 20.

vehicle of dangerous desires and spirits, […] a source of degeneration of Chinese cinema and national spirit."[22]

Against the contemporary backdrop of China's rising geopolitical influence and hence Chinese culture's global influence, a host of martial arts films, including *The Grandmaster*, has recently revisited precisely this collision between the traditional and the modern takes on the body as well as the latter's nationalist connotations through the historical figure of Ip Man. Wilson Yip's *Ip Man* (2008), for one, fantasizes a conflict between Chinese martial arts and Japanese firearms while its sequel, *Ip Man 2* (2010), celebrates the eponymous character's triumph over the (shirtless and muscular) British boxing champion Taylor "The Twister" Milos.[23] Peter Chan's *Dragon* (2012) set, too, in the early Republican era likewise plays with this dichotomy, with the complexities of the *mo* system visualized and explained to death under the penetrating gaze of forensic science and x-ray. The film's climactic moment even humorously refers to the vital energy that circulates in and out of the open body as the protagonist inserts acupuncture needles into the main villain's soles, thus materializing him into a human conductor and taking his life by directing electricity from a lightning strike to his body.[24]

It comes as no surprise that such a conflict between tradition and modernity would also appeal to Wong. The dramatized collision between temporalities present and past has, indeed, recurred across his oeuvre, routinely generating a sense of nostalgia, a sentimental yearning for a lost and irrecuperable object of desire. His gaze into the past is certainty idiosyncratic, albeit

---

[22] Zhen Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 213, 224.

[23] Interestingly, in comparison with the versions of *The Grandmaster* released in 2013, the 3D version fosters a stronger nationalist sentiment by deleting a few scenes from the international version featuring the character's interactions with and comments on the Japanese. There is also an added intertitle that reminds the viewer Ip Man's faithfulness to his nation.

[24] Curiously these three films, among others such as Andrew Lau's 2010 *Legend of the Fist: The Return of Chen Zhen*, all starred Donnie Yen. Some specificities of his body, stardom, and martial arts skills seem particularly suitable for illustrating these tensions.

with its own logic and system, in approaching history among Chinese films from the late-1980s to the mid-1990s. Unlike Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* (1989), *The Puppetmaster* (1993), and *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996) that take seriously the interrelation between the past and the present, Wong has been more interested in the nostalgic gesture to the extent that filming the present, itself, becomes an enactment of nostalgia. Such remembrance of things past has taken up various forms with levels of intensity ranging from an everyday fuss to a mournful depression. They include an unalterably deceased romance, indexed only by anthropomorphized daily objects, in a postmodern pastiche of Hong Kong (*Chungking Express*, 1994); days of wander and exile around the time of Hong Kong's 1997 transfer of sovereignty (*Happy Together*, 1997); an auratic old Shanghai imbricated into the 1960s Hong Kong (*In the Mood for Love*, 2000); or the eternal return of an impossible love out from the sediment of memory (*2046*, 2004). In Jean Ma's apt description of Wong's films after 1997, especially *In the Mood for Love* and *2046*: "Chronological progression cedes to a looping trajectory of repetition and return in these works, as we witness Wong's characters struggle again and again with the impossibility of making time stand still. […] If these narratives do not flow in a straightforwardly linear fashion, they nonetheless still acquire a cast of inevitability, their outcomes overdetermined by what has taken place before."[25] The mounting nostalgia has only increased in recent years. After *2046* and a brief excursus through Hollywood (*My Blueberry Nights*, 2007), Wong returned with a new object of longing of much grander scope than any ever desired in his previous films: *jianghu*.

To Recuperate, Digitally

---

[25] Jean Ma, *Melancholy Drift: Making Time in Chinese Cinema* (Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2010), 139.

Meaning literally "rivers and lakes," *jianghu* in the universe of martial arts fiction is both a tangible social system where knight-errands (or *xia*) navigate according to their own will and conscience (though typically in defiance of official orders) as well as a wondrous chronotope that responds to reality by weaving historical figures, locations, and events into an imaginary narrative.[26] The aesthetic potentials for filmmaking opened up by such a sphere are by no means novel to Wong. At once concrete and elusive, *jianghu* has served as the setting—befittingly a desert wasteland—for his 1994 martial arts film, *Ashes of Time*. Given the socio-historical context of the mid-1990s Hong Kong, film scholars have invariably conducted political readings of the film's rendition of *jianghu* as an allegory of futurity before the 1997 handover. Stephen Teo, for instance, has explicitly suggested that the film functions as "a trope for Hong Kong itself, where 'neither the urge for unification nor the value of coherence can be realised'"; Hye Jean Chung also echoes this view and further posits that "the inertia of the characters—whether they wander aimlessly as knight-errant or are temporarily rendered immobile—can be read as lived anxiety of the Hong Kong people, whose past and present are under threat of becoming subsumed into an unknowable future."[27]

This politically allegorized *jianghu*, however, is distinct from the ones that have emerged out of Wong's more recent works, most notably a remake of *Ashes of Time* and *The Grandmaster*. A major difference lies in the deployment of digital technology. Indeed, in 2008

[26] According to Teo, "Interpretations of *jianghu* are many, but essentially, it refers to an abstract entity which can mirror the real world in which *xia* and their code of conduct are put into operation. As Hamm has elucidated, the *jianghu* can be concretised in 'the complex of inns, highways and waterways, deserted temples, bandits' lairs, and stretches of wilderness at the geographic and moral margins of settled society'. They imply an illicit space nurtured by conflict and corruption, but functioning as an 'alternate society'. Chen Pingyuan gives two meanings of *jianghu*: 1 a secret society within the real world that exists in opposition with the government, 2 a semi-Utopia where xia are free to defy authority and act on their conscience to punish evil and exalt goodness." Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The* Wuxia *Tradition*, 18.
[27] Ibid., 165; Hye Jean Chung, *Media Heterotopias: Digital Effects and Material Labor in Global Film Production* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 71.

Wong released a re-scored, re-edited, and digitally restored version of *Ashes of Time*, entitled *Ashes of Time Redux* (hereinafter referred to as *Redux*). If *jianghu* in *Ashes of Time* gives form to a political zeitgeist in Hong Kong, the one in *Redux* gains an additional layer of significance: a reflection on the cinematic medium in the digital age, conducted through none other than the tradition of martial arts cinema. According to Chung's tracing of *Redux*'s journey throughout contemporary global film industry, digital restoration has undeniably "expanded the scale and scope of [the film's] transnational circulations" beyond the 1994 sites of exhibition in Asia, France, and oversea Chinatowns. During the restoration process, digital technology also facilitated the mobilization of an assemblage of technicians and artists all over the world. Recalling the email communication between Wong and BUF, the division of labor behind *Redux* took place from France to Thailand to China to Belgium and featured cosmopolitan artists including Yo-Yo Ma and Wu Tong.[28] Intriguingly, as Chung suggests, such a condition of production characterized by transnational mobility and network stands in sharp contrast with the film's mise-en-scène that frames the martial artists' bodies—frequently lethargic and immobile—in ways that make them seem subsumed into the landscape. Reminiscent of traditional Chinese landscape paintings, various moments in *Redux* witness how "bodies and landscapes are mediated by a visual medium that converts them into virtually identical tones and textures. One wonders whether the bodies are moving through space, or whether the space itself is undulating with the momentum of their bodies."[29] In lieu of the 90s political allegory, then, the characters' situatedness in the landscape in *Redux* now mirrors the dissolution of human physicality in digitality's endless formations of network and assemblage.

[28] Ibid., 63.
[29] Ibid., 69.

Chung's interpretation is perceptive, insofar as it demonstrates how the production and stylistics of *Redux* generate a dialectical tension between the heterotopic production of digital cinema and the human condition in the digital age. From the perspectives of Chinese landscape aesthetics and the energetics of martial arts, however, I would offer an alternative reading of this human-nature integration as something almost desirable. Indeed, echoing my account of the open body, François Jullien has argued that "[the Chinese] pay less attention to the identity and specificity of morphological components (organs, muscles, tendons, ligaments, and so on) than to the quality of the exchanges between 'outside' and 'inside'."[30] Chinese visual culture, not least landscape painting, has long experimented with the visualization of this worldview with the aid of various conventionalized formal devices and pictorial motifs. Some notable ones include: the undulation of the clothing; the mountain peaks glimpsed among the clouds; the evanescent hills and rocks; the "veins" of mountains that resemble dragons' backs; and rivers that vaguely fade out and blend with the distant horizon. Jullien has thus described that "when Chinese painting depicts figures, it focuses on presenting them as intimately bound up with the world around them: for, like the human body, the entire landscape vibrates with flowing breaths that pervade it."[31]

To be clear, the contemporary establishment of a cultural tradition frequently depends on a framing of the world that produces certain dichotomous and essentialist configurations. One finds this tendency in Jullien's philosophical writing as well as the previously cited accounts of medical history that argue for an epistemological distinction between traditional Chinese medicine and its modern Western counterpart. However, I am less interested in reiterating the

[30] François Jullien. *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*, trans. Maev de la Guardia (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007), 59.
[31]Ibid., 61.

critique done by a corpus of profound reflections upon comparison as a method of critical inquiry than thinking about the stakes behind the conscious mobilization of the enterprise of Orientalism by Wong's films, if not contemporary martial arts fiction more generally. It goes without saying that not every work of art produced in the Chinese-speaking areas conforms to the view of the body previously described, or to the specific mode of artistic production outlined by Jullien. That said, one cannot afford to ignore them when the landscape aesthetics and the figure of the martial artist have been so consciously set into conversation in *Redux*. Following these medical and aesthetic accounts, might we see the so-called "subsuming" of the characters' bodies into the natural landscape as, itself, the desired state for the martial artist? While *Redux* does not feature any landscape constructed entirely through visual effects, Wong's decision to digitally restore and remake certain parts of *Ashes of Time* nevertheless invites not so much a critique of digitality as an attempt to tackle it when we view it through the privileged perspectives of human-nature relation in the martial arts tradition and, taking a step further, of the ecological thinking to which the animist imagination of cinema is committed. The significance of his "*jianghu* redux" can be so much more than another Jamesonian allegory of third-world literature but, recalling the literal meaning of *jianghu*, the very "rivers and lakes" accumulated by *qi*-energies that flow in and out of the *mo* and the world. Bodies in a digital production and the film's landscape aesthetics are thus not dissonances but elements that work closely together under the rubric of martial arts cinema. In this line, the open body of the martial artist offers us a way to address how the human body in general has, itself, been opened up in one digital image after another.

Moving with the Snow

Chronologically succeeding *Redux* in Wong's filmography, *The Grandmaster* continued and pushed to an extreme such inquiries concerning digital technology, landscape aesthetics, and film genre. Before examining some exemplary sequences in *The Grandmaster*, a quick note on the process of my sequence selection. As is the case with *2046* and *Ashes of Time*, several versions of the film have been created for different purposes and markets: one of 115 minutes was shown exclusively at the 63rd Berlin International Film Festival, another of 130 minutes was made for the general international release, still another of 108 minutes was edited specifically for the US market, and the other of 111 minutes in 3D came out in selected areas in late 2014. All the sequences analyzed in this paper can be seen in the American, international, and 3D versions, with the exception of the conversation between Master Gong and Ding Lianshan next to a pot of snake stew which appears only in the international version. Admittedly, I am unsure whether they appear in the Berlin cut, which few people had the chance to see. However, while the presence (or absence) of these sequences certainly matters insofar as the plot development of each version is concerned, I have chosen to isolate them primarily because the problematics of this chapter lies less in their narratives than their deployment of formal devices and visual effects in relation to other selected sequences. Because the narrative constitutes but one of several objects of my discourse, I hope I am justified in being somewhat eclectic in approaching these particular materials, if not the entirety of *The Grandmaster* as a variorum text that includes all the versions.

In the same interview quoted in the opening section of this chapter, Perin-Leduc makes clear that it was Wong's instruction to "increase the ambiance of the shots and the character's moves" through digital effects.[32] One particular aspect of the image received the most sustained

[32] For an exploration of the mood that the cinematic snow creates in Western film history, see chapter five of Kristi McKim's *Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change* (New York: Routledge, 2013), devoted

attention: the falling snow so pervasive, so conspicuous throughout the film. According to BUF's production note, all the snow, as per Wong's request, must "match the 'atmosphere'" of the sequences and "[help] in enhancing the fight intensity."[33] At first glance, Perin-Ledu's description and the production note give the impression that the effects work in *The Grandmaster* is merely supplementary to the martial arts actions meticulously choreographed for the camera. After all, dramatically swishing snow around martial artists has become quite a generic cliché. From to highly stylized snow in *Lady Snowblood* (1973) to the serene snowfall at the House of Blue Leaves in *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (2003) to the violent snowstorm in the climactic battle of *House of Flying Daggers* (2004), the image of snow has taken up various forms, through which martial arts cinema articulates the character's pathos. Closer scrutiny, however, distinguishes *The Grandmaster* from these precursors and complicates the seemingly straightforward matching of the falling snow with the overall atmosphere of different scenes.

To begin with, almost the entirety of the funerary march sequence has been digitally retouched (figure 3.1). A thick layer of snow was first added to the surface of the frozen lake and the surrounding ground to "increase the emotions" of this scene captured predominately in long and extreme long shots.[34] The mountains in the background were almost completely rebuilt to heighten and cover them with snow; the marching team was lengthened with a train of followers digitally multiplied and placed in areas according to the needs of different shots. Colors were then adjusted to brighten and whiten the shots, further thickening the snowy tone and creating an air of solemnness befitting the funerary occasion (fig. 3.2). This whole layer of retouched image

---

entirely to this topic. Inga Pollmann has also explored the technical mediation, narrative function, and affective economy of such cold images as snow, ice, frost in melodrama in "*Kalte Stimmung*, or the Mode of Mood: Ice and Snow in Melodrama," *Colloquia Germanica* 43.1-2 (2010).

[33] BUF, "*The Grandmaster*."

[34] Vincent Frei, "*The Grandmaster* (Yi Dai Zong Shi): Isabelle Perin-Leduc –VFX Supervisor – BUF."

was then combined with a separate layer in 3D rotoscoping—an animation technique that allows animators to trace over film footage frame-by-frame—permeated by the falling snow and mist created through particle systems (fig. 3.3). The simulations of these natural phenomena were generated in accordance with the native frame rate—namely, the frequency at which a camera displays consecutive frames per second—of the original plate (at various stages, the film is shot at 24, 48, 72, or 96 frames per second). Many other shots in the film were created through similar processes. What binds them together is the fact that the digital technology has modified the original plate as if transforming the profilmic natural space into a scenography of display readily available for manipulation in order to establish, enhance, and otherwise transform the atmospheric tone of the space.

Figure 3.1. The original plate of the funerary scene.

Figure 3.2. The funerary scene after digital retouch.

Figure 3.3. Particle systems at work.

A similar but technically more complex process in snow generation involves an additional step of setting up a 2D-matte that matches the figure's shape in 3D rotoscoping. This technique is applied when figures framed in medium long shots, medium shots, and medium close-ups move about in exterior spaces. Due to these chosen shot scales, the figures occupy the very foreground of the image. A layer of falling snow imposed onto them would obscure their presence to the camera. The human-shaped 2D-matte that delineates a space where the rendering

of the snow is excluded thus allows the viewer to have unobstructed access to the figures' movements when the original and the 3D plates are eventually combined. In addition, it creates a sense of proximity between the viewer and the onscreen figures, leaving an impression that the distance between them is so close that only a handful of snowflakes can fall through.

Carefully conducted as the above two sets of procedures might be, it is another type of snow-making that I want to focus on: an energetic snow that not only matches and enhances the overall atmosphere of the mise-en-scène but also physically interacts with the profilmic actors. The sequence that best illustrates this process features the opium-addicted Gong on her deathbed, recalling the good old days in her northern hometown where she practiced the Bagua 64 Hands, a formalized martial art technique that the Gong family practices. To render this sequence as the final moment of peace and serenity in the stormiest period of her life, in an extreme long shot BUF meticulously effaced at least a thousand of snowflakes and replaced each of them with a digital reproduction generated by particle systems. In the original plate, the snow falls unevenly with the majority gathering at the left half of the frame (fig. 3.4). The size and velocity of each snowflake varies, creating chaotic and violent movements that sharply contrast the smooth choreography of Gong's Bagua 64 Hands near the frame's right margin. In a later plate labeled "restore," BUF removed almost all traces of the natural snow (fig. 3.5)—an act that indexes a time-consuming, labor-intensive procedure—before replenishing the scene with digital snow of a certain quality. These snowflakes created by particle systems, now evenly distributed and placed across the frame, are of similar size, traveling harmoniously at approximately equal speed (fig. 3.6)—the equality of physics, here, leads to an equality of affective harmony in a curiously literal

fashion.[35] A digitally modified nature thus becomes a formal device specifically designed to match both Gong's actions and the tone of tranquility that the film delivers for the purpose of conveying, on the narrative front, her emancipation from the physical, spiritual, and psychological constraints. These constraints are, respectively, the old injuries from a climactic fight with Ma San in the train station, the vow to Buddha of personal celibacy and professional termination of the technique of Bagua 64 Hands, and the unrequited affection towards Ip Man. Like Italo Calvino's city of snow quoted in my epigraph, the falling snow in *The Grandmaster* can be conveniently "unmade by shovel and remade in a different way" with the aid of digital technology.[36]

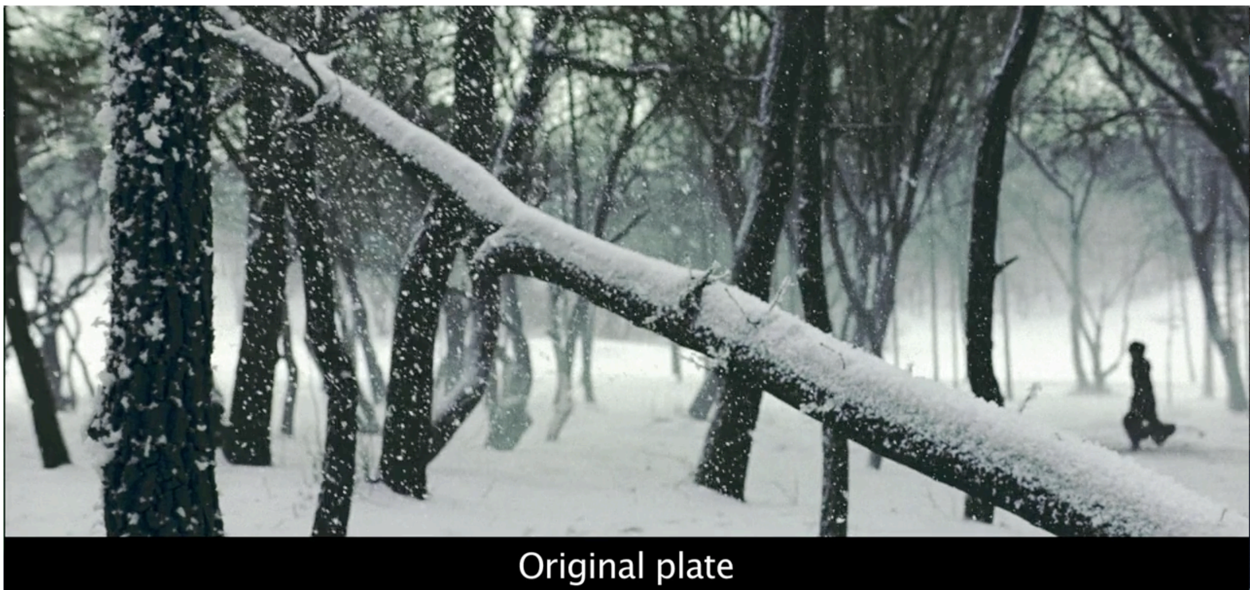

Figure 3.4. The original plate of Gong's practice in the woods.

[35] BUF did not remove the natural snowflakes that fall between Gong's body and the camera. The reason, I suspect, is that Gong's body is only captured in this extreme long shot of less than 2 seconds. BUF likely decided that this minutia could be ignored.

[36] Such visibility and plasticity are some of the aesthetic qualities of snow which, according to McKim, differs it from other elements of weather: "Surely rain can pool in puddles and risen bodies of water, but snow remains liminally positioned as a substance we can *see* and hold and shovel even as it can melt or change form with slight increases in temperature." Kristi McKim's *Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change*, 136.

Figure 3.5. Almost all of the natural snowflakes are digitally removed.

Figure 3.6. Replenishment of the digital snow through particle systems.

Four shots after this exemplary moment, a medium shot zeroes in on Gong's arms and hands (fig. 3.7). For reasons that will become clear shortly, note that a body double takes over the actress Zhang Ziyi's place: even though she is almost beheaded by the upper edge of the frame, her lips and chin are unmistakably not Zhang's when cross-referenced with any of the actress's appearances elsewhere in the film. Facing the camera, the body double's Gong raises

her arms to shoulder height and swings her arms with open palms from her left side rightward. As if pushed by her hands, the camera simultaneously pans left. In addition to these two effortlessly perceptible movements of the character's body and of the camera, a micro-movement also takes place. Through frame-by-frame viewing of this shot, it becomes noticeable that within five frames, several qualities of the falling snow have drastically changed. The traveling direction has shifted from circulating in a whirl to forming a concentrated vector following the movement of Gong's arms and hands. The speed also has greatly accelerated and, as a consequence, the shape of each snowflake has been proportionally stretched to a straight, needle-like vector (fig. 3.8). This one shot testifies to the film's supreme orchestration of principal photography and post-production effects: Gong's arms align with the central horizontal axis of the frame; both the choice of medium shot scale and the framing that cuts off the upper half of the character's face establish a space at once concentrated enough for viewers to appreciate the movement of her upper body and spacious enough that BUF can digitally create snowflakes that travel in accordance with said movement. Retrospectively, these formal aspects clarify the choice to use a body double: the shot's central attraction lies in neither Gong the character nor the stardom of Zhang the actress, but the very interaction and correspondence between the profilmic body and digitality.

Figure 3.7. The first frame of the shot.

Figure 3.8. The fifth frame of the shot.

Another shot in this sequence enacts a similar interplay: a high-angle long shot that situates Gong at the center of the frame. Fifteen tree branches stand in the left, right, and top margins of the upper half of the frame, forming a semi-circle surrounding her (fig. 3.9). Gong practices the 64 Hands and, within a second, her movement creates a magical rippling effect. Through frame-by-frame viewing, again, we notice that on the snow-covered ground with Gong's body as the center, a circle with the radius of approximately three meters emerges as the snow is centrifugally pushed outward by an imperceptible force. A circumference of the snow

circle is delineated, and together with the semi-circle formed by the tree branches, a concentric structure emerges in the frame to visualize what is supposed to be an invisible outward force emitted from where Gong stands (fig. 3.10). Through visual effects, she is able to "touch" and "move" entities in her immediate surroundings without physically touching and moving them. The digital snow, then, is at once tangible and immaterial as it becomes both a part of her bodily movement and an extension of her outward energy; a fantasy of martial arts specifically expressed in and through the digital.

Figure 3.9. The original plate of Gong's practice.

Figure 3.10. A circle of snow emerges on the ground.

Intriguingly, all the shots so far analyzed amount altogether to less than a minute, with each of them lasting a few seconds—sometimes even a split second—in this two-hour film. The elusiveness of the snow circle is particularly striking if we compare it with another circle that expresses outward energies in *Ashes of Time*: the moment when the lonesome Dugu Qiubai (Brigitte Lin) demonstrates her sword skills in the lake. In this fast cutting sequence (22 shots in 29 seconds), Dugu Qiubai stands on the surface of a lake and releases an explosive energy. To whichever direction she points the tip of her sword, a vector of force bursts out from where she stands. The energetic release is manifested across the lake surface through one straight line of water explosion, achieved not by computer-generated imagery but underwater dynamites carefully laid out in advance and detonated by well-trained pyrotechnicians at the cue of Lin's movement. After repeating this move two more times, Dugu Qiubai opens her arms with the sword still in her hand in a forty-five-degree angle along her body, lifts her head up, stretches out

her back and upper body, and twirls round on the same spot. Like Gong, she becomes the center from which a circle of outward energy emerges; unlike Gong's energy which causes a barely perceptible ripple, however, hers fills the whole frame with such volume of swells, splashes, and water vapor that even an extreme long shot fails to capture the entirety of their scope and vibrancy (fig. 3.11).

Figure 3.11. The circle that Dugu Qiubai creates in the lake.

Returning to Gong's snow circle, without close scrutiny one would have missed all the intricate arrangements of the digital effects in this shot—or these frames, more precisely. And yet, digitally retouched shots like this one is not so much outliers as the norm in *The Grandmaster*. My choice to dwell solely on the falling snow in this section is due to its sheer ubiquity that makes it, inarguably, the most visible digital component. But similar effects work was also applied elsewhere to such natural elements as drifting smoke, dripping water (and blood), flames, among others. Why did the film invest all the labor behind the digital effects in particular these entities? And how were they produced? The following section will reveal that the

technology of particle systems adopted to create these natural elements is by no means an arbitrary decision. Designed and developed since the early 1980s by William T. Reeves, a Canadian technical director of animated films, the principles of particle systems conceptually reverberate with the animist ideologies of the martial arts. The martial artist, as it turns out, is not the sole entity defined by corporeal porosity. The animist logic that guides the world of *The Grandmaster* runs across all its parts, to the extent that the surrounding natural elements, as produced by digital particles, face their own boundary problems.

The Life and Death of Particles

Reeves's 1983 "Particle Systems: A Technique for Modeling a Class of Fuzzy Objects," the founding text on the titular device, opens with a claim that particle systems are designed to model phenomena such as clouds, smoke, water, fire, snow, fog, and sometimes, hair and skin, which are too difficult for then existing techniques of computer image synthesis to achieve. The reason is that these entities are not objects with well-defined boundaries by a set of smooth "surface elements, as polygons or patches." Rather, they are what Reeves calls "fuzzy objects" characterized by "dynamic and fluid changes in shape and appearance." Like a flow of energy, a particle is "the simplest of the surface representations"; that is, it does not take up any specific form and, thereby, it is technologically easy to motion-blur.[37] We recall, in Jullien's account, the recurring motifs in Chinese landscape painting of a riverbank disappearing into the mist, of mountains vanish, emerge, and submerge amidst the fog as if in a state of confusion. Such a visual expression of presence dissolving into absence—and vice versa—creates an ambience of the absolute as ungraspable and unnamable forms continually lay themselves out without any

[37] William T. Reeves, "Particle Systems: A Technique for Modeling a Class of Fuzzy Objects," *ACM Transactions on Graphics* 2.2 (1983), 91-92.

elucidation of metaphysics. If the undulation of the clothing, the mountain peaks glimpsed among the clouds, and the hills and rocks—in evanescence, in eclipse—are conventional devices through which Chinese figure and landscape paintings capture the formless and elusive flow of energy, then particle systems offer a fitting channel with all the necessary and sufficient conditions to approximate the same end in digital cinema.

Aside from the topological correspondence with certain traditional Chinese aesthetics, the development of particle systems has itself taken up the language of animism that considers each individual particle as a living being. In Reeves's words, "particle systems model objects that are 'alive', that is, they change form over a period of time." Like a life, it moves, grows, transforms itself within a system, from which it eventually dies too. When generated, "a particle is given a lifetime measured in frames. As each frame is computed, this lifetime is decremented. A particle is killed when its lifetime reaches zero." And like all forms of organic lives, "[new] particles are 'born' and old particles 'die'."[38] Reflected in Reeves's use of such phrases as "alive," "die," "born," "lifetime," and "killed," these fuzzy objects are not lifeless pixels but vibrant substances with qualities and behaviors of biological life forms.[39] On this view, Reeves's design philosophy behind particle systems blurs the dividing line between the human and the nonhuman and, together with the conceptualization of an open body, levels the profilmic characters and the digital snow by opening up the former's body to the cosmic world and animating (but also killing) the latter's pixels 24 times a second—or, in the case of *The Grandmaster*, 24, 48, 72, or 96 times per second based on the native frame rate of different scenes.

---

[38] Ibid., 91-92, 96.

[39] By no means idiosyncratic, Reeves's attempt should be nested in the broader experiment of 80s special effects to navigate on the slopes of the Uncanny Valley, starting from the development of particle systems around 1982 to the release of Pixar's Oscar-winning *Tin Toy* in 1988.

With their rewiring the animate-inanimate distribution between the character and the surrounding matter, particle systems serve as a suitable device that allows the film's martial arts sequences to blend photographic and animation effects, two modes that, while distinctive in theory, collectively contribute to a malleable image always in process, always in transformation. These sequences possess what Sergei Eisenstein has praised, in Disney animation, a plasmatic quality that invokes the "primitive" worldview of animism: "In English, Disney's moving drawing is called… an animated cartoon. And in this name, both concepts are interwoven: both 'animateness' (anima—soul) and 'mobility' (animation—liveliness, mobility)."[40] From this perspective, the animation of the snow generates not simply movements and thus an illusion of vitality; rather, each flake is itself endowed with soul, *anima*.

Several other shots in *The Grandmaster* operate, too, on this animist mode. Exemplary moments include the bubbling snake stew and the smoke emerging out of it next to the Gong brothers, the rain drops flying along the tangent trajectories of Ip's hat and clothes, the dripping blood from Razor's enemies that dyes the watery ground crimson, and the flaming tobacco in Ip's cigarette butt. They share the formal quality that combines close-up and slow motion cinematography to film natural elements. They amplify the micro-movements and intensify the emotions of the onscreen entities, recalling the fascination with animism in another famous piece of classical film theory: Jean Epstein's mythopoeic description of the inner lives of things that the camera is capable of revealing.

> It is in the curtain at the window and the handle of the door. Each drop of ink can make it bloom on the tip of the fountain pen. In the glass of water it dissolves. The whole room is saturated with every kind of drama. The cigar smoke is poised menacingly over the ashtray's throat. The dust is treacherous. The carpet emits venomous arabesques and the arms of the chair tremble.[41]

---

[40] Sergei Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, ed. Jay Leyda, trans. Alan Upchurch (Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1986), 54.
[41] Jean Epstein, "The Senses I (b)," in *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology: 1907-1939*, ed. Richard Abel, trans. Stuart Liebman (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988), 242.

Shot intensely in close-up, inanimate objects become animist forces and, together with slow-motion cinematography, they construe situations that lay bare the objects' inherent personhood. Here, the ontological blurring that the film's digital effects has achieved thus curiously reveals an empathetic side, wherein animism is also understood as a response to and translation of the emotions of the physical world. Such an affective room has not been foreign to Wong's previous configurations of mise-en-scène: Who could forget how the pathetic fallacies of a crying towel and an emaciating soap bar in Cop 663's apartment articulate their owner's unspoken post-breakup blues in *Chungking Express*? And how Cop 663 gets "cured" as Faye the waitress secretly cleans and redecorates his grief-stricken apartment—a gradual appeasement of his depression from outside in? In *The Grandmaster*, this room relocates to the *jianghu* of early Republican China and now features fuzzy objects like snow, smoke, water drops, and flaming tobacco formed by one *living*—and thereby *dying*—digital particle after another.[42]

Because of this affiliation between particle systems and animism, the snow in *The Grandmaster* fashions a dialogical sphere where distinct ontological grounds and epistemological positions—human and nonhuman; modern Western and traditional Chinese—are at once foregrounded and reworked. Such a sphere carries significant stakes for our contemporary world for a couple of reasons. Firstly, as per Lev Manovich's now familiar narrative, the foundation for audiovisuality has gradually been taken over by computer-generated images in graphic, digital and animated forms, of which the photographic and the cinematic

[42] As Tom Gunning points out, Epstein's own *La Chute de la maison Usher* also operates on an animist mode that seeks to reveal 'a different rhythm to the universe" and "a ballet of matter" which itself "may have a sentient and animate dimension' Tom Gunning, Preface to *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, ed. Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 19.

come to settle as subsets.[43] Secondly, globalization has generated new philosophical vocabularies out of sundry traditions—through insensitive appropriations and critical translations alike—in service of adumbrating new transcultural epistemologies. These two sets of problematics routinely converge in contemporary effects cinema where the lines in the sand between myth and disenchantment, between magic and technology are constantly being redrawn. Indeed, as Tom Gunning observes, "the twin narrative poles around which recent special effects tend to cluster—portrayal of ancient forms of magic and the possibilities of new technology—invite us to probe even further back into the cultural roots of cinema's animated images in the Western traditions of magic and technology."[44] Here, *The Grandmaster* poses an intriguing case behind the confine of the Western. Its animist worldview that sees everything as potentially soulful operates both as an inherent part of modern Western technology and in correspondence with the traditional view of an open body. On the one hand, it intimates that the modern technology of digital effects dreams, after all, an animist dream. On the other hand, it clarifies the geopolitics of the film's special effects as more than an indigenized Western device that articulates the energetics of Chinese martial arts. A confusion of identity resulted from an all-encompassing attribution of soul and a wide-ranging circulation and exchange of vital energy, in effect, constitutes a utopian principle that transcends the divide between the modern and the premodern across cultures.[45] One recalls what Eisenstein—learning from Eastern landscape paintings and selected Western paintings—

---

[43] Lev Manovich, *The Language of New Media* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001), 295.

[44] Tom Gunning, "Gollum and Golem: Special Effects and the Technology of Artificial Bodies," in *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's* Lord of the Rings, ed. Ernest Mathijs and Murray Pomerance (Leiden: Brill, 2006), 322.

[45] The animist energetics of particle systems enables a reflection upon actions more broadly. The actions in other martial arts films set in the Republican period are certainly included; so are those that have voyaged to other locations in Chinese cinemas. Actions themselves also get to be rethought as the approach inherently takes into account the associated notion of vital energy and its permutations into various tangible or intangible prostheses across genres and modes of filmmaking. For instance, The Force in the *Star Wars* universe, the Indian chakra transformed into *chakura* in the Japanese manga and anime series *Naruto*, or even the telekinetic and telepathic powers in *X-Men* and *Carrie*—all their realizations, to varying degrees, depend on CGI effects.

has elsewhere envisioned as the possibility of a "nonindifferent nature": "Everywhere this was the emotional landscape, dissolving into itself the human being, or more precisely: Everywhere the emotional landscape turns out to be an image of the mutual absorption of man and nature one into the other."[46] Particle systems, used as such, render Eisenstein's painterly observation on screen by enabling not simply an emotional correspondence but a concrete contact between the animist universal and the martial artist's particular subjectivity.

Excursus on Deren

In order to further explore the significance of particle systems in relation to the landscape aesthetics of martial arts cinema, I want to take a detour here that situates the deployment of particle systems in *The Grandmaster* within a cinematic genealogy that tackles similar concerns through non-digital means. Wong's film, in effect, responds to what could be considered as a central, albeit long neglected, problematics in the scenography of martial arts actions as a number of filmmakers have likewise endeavored to stage the "intuition, energy, and spirit" of martial artists for the camera. My objective, however, is not so much to downplay the centrality of digitality for *The Grandmaster* as to foreground the specificities, if not peculiarities, of how the film mobilizes digital technologies. Works that belong to this genealogy I assemble share two characteristics: 1) they all feature Chinese martial arts even if they might not have been historically categorized under the rubrics of Chinese martial arts film; 2) like *Ashes of Time*, they turn to natural landscape, real and pictorial alike, in search of a formal device that communicates the subjectivity of the martial artist. An exemplary case is Maya Deren's *Meditation on Violence*, where the energetics of martial arts is articulated through a martial artist's body and movements

[46] Sergei Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature: Film and the Structure of Things*, trans. Herbert Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 359.

in relation to its setting and soundtrack. Heeding how Deren tackles these issues opens up new ways to conceptualize the stylistics of martial arts cinema more broadly.

A short film of 13 minutes featuring the demonstration of three styles of Chinese martial arts, *Meditation on Violence* emphasizes the corporeal porosity of the sole human figure it depicts, Chinese-American actor and dancer Chao-Li Chi. Such an emphasis is reflected from the film's title that juxtaposes, recalling Yuasa's account, two major means of self-cultivation: meditative methods and the martial arts which, respectively, lead to an introspective concentration on interiority and an outward connection with exteriority. The film takes up a nonlinear structure, starting and ending *in medias res*. Three parts form the first half, the conclusion of which is marked by a moment of stasis in the third part. From that moment onwards, the film runs in reverse from the third part back to the first.

In the first part accompanied by the sound of Chinese flute, Chi, shirtless in an interior space against a white wall, practices Wudang (or Wu-Tang) style of boxing, a formalized technique of martial arts named after the Wudang Mountains in the province of Hubei (figure 3.12). A strong side light casts into the space, creating distinct shadows of Chi on the wall. Towards the end of this part, a soundtrack of the Haitian shaman's drumming recorded by Deren herself emerges. The two soundtracks flow together into the second part, wherein Chi, still shirtless but now located in an interior space with a white wall and a black wall, shifts his martial arts style. He practices, instead, the Shaolin style of boxing, another formalized martial arts technique named after the Shaolin temple located in the Song Mountains of Henan Province (figure 3.13).[47] Gradually, the flute soundtrack dwindles down whereas the drumming persists

[47] Deren's choice of two martial arts styles presents the first two parts as one large unit, insofar as Wudang and Shaolin are representative styles in the tradition of martial arts fiction. According to Teo, they point to a geographical divide of *jianghu* defined by the northern school of Wudang and the southern school of Shaolin. Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The* Wuxia *Tradition*, 5-6

and continues into the third part. The transition from the second to the third part takes place in a shot wherein Chi jumps out of the frame from the right and, in the following shot, enters into the frame from the left. This cross-shot leap made possible by editing brings along several stylistic changes. No longer confined within the interior space, Chi now moves about in the open air on a round stone plateau surrounded by a short stone wall, overlooking what seems to be a river and a land on the other side of the shore (figure 3.14). He practices, instead, the Shaolin style of sword fight in what resembles a conventional costume of *duanda wusheng* in Peking Opera (the convenient, short clothing for martial artists).

Figure 3.12. The white background in the first part of *Meditation on Violence.*

Figure 3.13. The black background emerges in the second part of *Meditation on Violence.*

Figure 3.14. The third part of of *Meditation on Violence* takes place outdoors.

Drawing on Deren's production notes, Sarah Keller has elaborated on the film's nonlinear structure and the formal devices deployed to articulate the quality of martial arts movement in each part. To echo the steadiness and equilibrium of the Wudang style, for

instance, Deren had the camera run long, at medium-long scale and in slight slow motion, to preserve the entirety of the smooth flow of Chi's choreography. When the more aggressive, accelerated, and crisp Shaolin style emerges in the second part, Deren had the camera run at normal speed and impersonate Chi's more separated and intense movement by placing him in a tighter frame (of mostly medium shot) and cutting right after each move ends. The result leaves little space for Chi's body to recompose and reconfigure; little time for the viewer's gaze to linger and digest.[48] On the mise-en-scène, Keller points out that the interior spaces in the first two parts organize what Deren calls the "interior reality" while the outdoor space in the third part a "hard reality […] specifically reserved for confrontation."[49] Indeed, Chi's performance of the Shaolin Sword is marked by an increase in intensity, swiftness, and force from his Shaolin style of boxing. At times it seems like his sword is directly addressing if not attacking the camera head-on.

As the most prominent stylistic change in the film, the appearance of exterior location in the third part, according to Keller, initiates a contact between "the inner and outer realities," allowing for an extension of "the balance to the individual's relationship to the world. Thus in the place of a strong side light, we now have 'the real sun'."[50] Following this view and my previous account of the martial artist's realm of experience, might we read that the exterior location functions to materialize the reach into the outer world that the martial artist trains to achieve? Accordingly, the interior space in the first two parts would correspond to the interiority of the martial artist's body. From a purely white space in the first part which indicates positive energy to the introduction of black backgrounds in the second part that brings in negative energy,

[48] Sarah Keller, *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015), 192-193.
[49] Ibid., 193-194.
[50] Ibid., 196.

the interior space has undergone a qualitative transformation. Together they point to an energetic synthesis, forming a cinematic translation of the equilibrium of *qi*, conventionally represented in Chinese visual culture as the tai chi symbol formed by two teardrops of *ying* and *yang* energies. Perhaps it came as no surprise that, ten years later *Meditation on Violence*, Deren would re-manifest the centrality of this motif in the opening credit of *The Very Eye of Night*, featuring the tai chi symbol as the pupil of a depicted eye.

Such an interior space both divided and integrated by the black and white walls testifies to the circulation of energy in the martial artist's body as well as Deren's understanding of the philosophy of Wudang based on *The Book of Change*. In an audio recording collected in Martina Kudláček's documentary *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2001), Deren comments that, in the theory of Wudang,

> life is an ongoing process, constantly; and that it is based on a negative-positive, a negative-positive with constantly a resolution into another negative and positive and so on. And so my first problem became to construct a form as a whole, which would suggest infinity. Now, the Wudang based on the negative-positive principle translates that in physical terms into the *breathing*. And that's why it's called an *interior* boxing because the movements are governed by an *interior condition* [emphases mine].[51]

The sudden shift to the exterior space after a long build-up from the slow Wudang style to the speedy Shaolin style signals the very instance when the energetic synthesis between the positive and the negative transpires, emitting literally inside out. As the martial artist manages to open up his body, so the camera moves out of the stylized but vacant room into the realm of nature, against an open sky wherein exist not only "the real sun" but also real trees, real stones, a large waterbody in the background, among other natural elements. If this analogy between the first half of the film and the practice of the martial arts stands, the second half of the film which

[51] Deren's commentary is taken from the section devoted to *Meditation on Violence* in Martina Kudláček's documentary *In the Mirror of Maya Deren*.

reverses this process—from the exterior back to the interior—points to the trajectory of a centripetal concentration that practitioners of meditation follow. *Meditation on Violence*, in effect, offers a way to visualize and temporalize the ideologies of self-cultivation from two perspectives: how violence (the martial arts) can be so thoroughly explored on both thematic and stylistic fronts in the first half; how the malleable materiality of filmstrip allows doubling, reversing, and re-editing of the first half, consequently offering an additional "meditation" on the tight unity of film form and content in the second half.

What is more intriguing is that *Meditation on Violence* works with the agential aspect of animism: a strong correlation is intimated between the martial artist's open body and the shaman's body, which is to be opened up, too, so that spiritual possession becomes possible in a ritualistic context. This is reflected most evidently in the acoustic encounter between the soundtrack of the Chinese flute and the Haitian drumming, and the latter's eventual replacement of the former. Chi himself mentions in an interview with Kudláček that

> We started with many arguments because she had just come back from Haiti and she was all involved with Haitian Voodoo and the trance and the shaman culture. And I was saying that in the Chinese context, it was quite the opposite. It was the wise man is the one [sic] who controls nature rather than allowing nature to possess.

I shall revisit this hierarchical relation between the martial artist and nature at the end of the chapter. Here, I want to highlight how the culturally specific ideologies of Chinese martial arts have spoken to Deren's artistic concerns about none other than shamanism.

Since as early as 1947, one of the primary goals of Deren's renowned project on Haitian Vodou was the ethnographic recording and mythopoetic rendering of the shaman's entry into ecstatic trance through cinema. But this goal was also, paradoxically, the very cause of the project's eventual incompletion, at least not the cinematic form she had hoped for. Film scholars

have speculated on the cause of the incompletion, but regardless of the reason, filming metaphysical presence—the moment of cosmic oneness when the divine force possesses the human medium—itself proves to be a challenge that lies at the threshold of visuality.[52] For how could this process of contact be fixated and actualized through the devices of any particular mode of documentary or, as per Deren's celebrated description of cinematography, any "creative use of reality"? Reading against the backdrop of Deren's post-Haiti representational conundrum, the energetics of Chinese martial arts and meditation seemed to have provided her with a channel to express, however indirectly, the Haitian magic on screen. While her camera might not be capable of capturing the ritualistic climax, it could transform Chi into an intermediary being through which the communication between interiority and exteriority similarly transpires.

The triptych structure that defines *Meditation on Violence* would later find its way into a Hong Kong martial arts film to signal the very energetic transfer into exteriority. Consider the opening credit sequence of Lau Kar-leung's *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*—a meta-martial arts film about the very process of the protagonist's acquisition of (Shaolin) martial arts. Recalling Deren's film, this sequence contains three parts. The first part sees San Te—a Shaolin disciple first created in martial arts fiction of the late Qing dynasty—practicing the Shaolin style of boxing in an empty interior space with a white floor against a white wall (figure 3.15). The second part places San Te, first performing the Shaolin Stick and then boxing again under falling

[52] One way to account for its incompletion boils down to an impasse of identity politics. As Catherine Russell sharply asks: "How could she have filmed this without looking like Osa Johnson among the Africans, Marlene Dietrich in a gorilla suit, or Leni Riefenstahl among the Nuba? Positioning herself behind the camera, she eliminates her whiteness and its attendant discourse of race. But at the same time she eliminates the level of experience that she claimed to be necessary for an understanding of possession." More positively, however, Keller has suggested that such notions as inability and incompletion are themselves central to the developmental process of Deren's works—in effect, a privileged aesthetic principle carried out via the inability to control. Perhaps, then, another way of seeing the eventual absence of the Haitian film is not to regard it as a failure but as an enactment of Deren's own artistic vision. Catherine Russell, "Ecstatic Ethnography: Maya Deren and the Filming of Possession Rituals," in *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, ed. Ivone Margulies (Durham: Duke University Press), 2003, 285; Sarah Keller, *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control*, 135-188.

water, in an interior space with a black floor against a black wall (figure 3.16). Like the transition from part one to part two in *Meditation on Violence*, a dichotomy between positive and negative spaces is established in the first two parts of the opening sequence through a contrast between white and black spaces. The last part of the sequence begins with a medium close-up of San Te exercising a big saber against a crimson wall. As the shot zooms out and reframes, it reveals that San Te stands in a desert constructed in studio, alone surrounded by artificial low sand hills under a trompe-l'oeil cerise sun and grey fibrous clouds painted directly on the studio walls (figure 3.17).

Figure 3.15. The white setting where *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* begins.

Figure 3.16. Actions in a black setting ensue.

Figure 3.17. Synthesis that takes place "outdoors."

My point in bringing between this sequence and *Meditation on Violence* into comparison is not to advance a causal or historical connection. To be sure, they differ from each other in almost every other formal aspect, including camera movement, shot scale, editing, sound, lighting, costume, and the style of the martial arts action. Insofar as the logic of the set design is concerned, however, one finds in *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* the same yearning to break through the interior setting into the realm of natural landscape, or more precisely, a landscape depicted naturalistically. Even if the last part of the sequence is not shot on location, it still creates, within the studio, a mimetic landscape to situate San Te's final display of his skills in a natural environment: a realistic sun instead of a real one. The shared shift of setting in both this opening sequence and *Meditation on Violence* functions as a formal device to manifest the martial artist's state of intermediacy. Upon reaching the third part where natural landscape emerges, both Chi and San Te arrive at a stage where they connect with the exterior world beyond their body.

While, as admitted, my objective is not to propose historical connections, by no means am I interested in mere coincidences either. There are other moments in the history of global cinema that resort to structures highly similar to the one I have discussed. One film that could

also find a place in this tradition, for instance, is American filmmaker Tom Davenport's brilliant but little known short, *T'ai Chi Ch'uan* (1969). Filmed on location in the northeast coast of Taiwan, *T'ai Chi Ch'uan* also plays with black and white spaces by intricately capturing the contrast between light and darkness of the profilmic scenery. The end result is a transformation of the landscape, itself, into a tai chi symbol, as if the film has located in nature this pictorial motif that manifests itself in Deren's *The Very Eye of Night*.[53] Each of these moments links itself strongly to the paradigm of natural landscape in martial arts cinema, even if it does not describe the paradigm to itself in exactly the way I have suggested. Indeed, my previous analysis of Gong's snow sequence in *The Grandmaster* has demonstrated how the film, too, responds to such necessity of nature in its own formation and with a twist. In contrast to Deren's and Lau's stylish approaches, the sequence does not feature the drastic and evident alteration of settings. From the outset it takes place outdoors, surrounded by constructed natural elements that do not attempt to conceal their constructedness. Unlike the two older films which visualize the outward trajectory of the martial artist's energy through their symbolic and conspicuous use of space, through digital technology Wong's film quietly literalizes the release and impact of said energy onto nature.

Such a combination of literalness and quietness beckons, for even as the technology of particle systems enacts, recalling Eisenstein, a "mutual absorption" between the human and the nonhuman in the animist world it fashions, the particular way it is used in *The Grandmaster* does not aspire to a radical levelling of all differences between them. While the kind of animism that

[53] One could say that King Hu's *Dragon Inn* (1967) and *A Touch of Zen* (1971) also confirm the martial artist-nature connection in this cinematic tradition with an emphasis on its demise: in ways that evoke a divine punishment, the transgression of natural landscape leads to the demise of the martial artist. In the former, this takes place at the end when protagonists overcome the head villain shortly after he cuts off a tree; in the latter, a group of villains' destructions of a bamboo forest results in their defeat.

Eisenstein celebrates in Disney animation belongs to a realm of fairy tale populated by shape-shifting cartoon creatures that could virtually take up whatever form they desire, Wong's film locates its magic and enchantment around profilmic actions untouched by the modification of effects. Unlike the vast desert wasteland in *Redux* that underlines the tininess of the characters, if not enfold them into one unified whole in one extreme long shot after another, the digital snow, as an outward extension of Gong, remains subordinated to her body placed at the center of the image. Such an animism embodied in the forms of surrounding elements seems unassuming but attractive, or perhaps slightly distracting.[54] Something about how they interact with Gong makes it impossible to ignore her corporeal presence. Forcefully they solicit our consideration of the cultural and aesthetic significance of the film's human-nature relation by zeroing in on the martial artist's body which the particles surround. What, then, does such a treatment of Gong's body reveal with regards to the bodies in contemporary live-action cinema in general, the ontologies of which CGI effects have come to define?

Bodies in Dissolution

Through the prism of animation, Thomas Elsaesser has suggested that "cinema—in its widest sense, i.e. including its digital forms—ought to be seen not as an image system only but as a 'life system', once we accept the idea that cells, organisms, groups, corporations, nations, networks,

[54] Jordan Schonig has attributed this uncanny quality of the particles to their "exemplary capacity to simulate the chaotic *unplannability* of contingent motion forms. Such simulations seem to exhibit an exceptional intensity of verisimilitude not because they more accurately resemble their referents than do the renderings of other phenomena but because they cause us to recognize the sheer visual complexity of—and hence the representational challenge posed by—their referents." Schonig further associates the particles' unplannable motions and their attractions with early cinema's fascination with contingent phenomena, such as the renowned "wind in the trees" anecdote. Jordan Schonig, "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the 'Wind in the Trees' in Early Cinema and CGI," *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 40.1 (2018), 45.

and other assemblage-ensembles all process matter, energy, and information."[55] The soulful quality of particle systems that fulfils the animist promise of cinema à la Eisenstein and Epstein constitutes one such micro-life system. This is not to overlook, however, a looming dark side of this animist promise: the flattening of human beings with automatons, with objects deprived of agency. Indeed, while celebrating the animation of the inanimate, Epstein has already warned us that this effect, pushed to the extreme, results in the development of the world into "a desert of pure matter without any trace of spirit" where "any living substance goes back to its fundamental viscosity and lets its deep colloidal nature rise to the surface. […] humans become statues, the living merges with the inert."[56] With little difficulty, one envisions the effacement that such nondifferentiation could likewise exert on the specificities of the martial artist as a biographical subject in *The Grandmaster*—and by extension, on the cultural-historical conditions of the early 20th century China that the film imagines in order to lament on its loss. As Garrett Stewart has noted, bodies have routinely served in contemporary effects films, not least sci-fi, as "scapegoats to their own optic possibility—where the science of the image becomes part of the fiction […] screening per se, has here more openly claimed the status of *trucage*: image itself as *digitage*."[57] This observation is equally applicable to martial arts cinema today where the martial artist's body has been functioning as a medial hybrid that synthesizes technology and corporeality. Viewing through digital compositing and its relation to animism, the division between effects and actions, like the inside and the outside of the porous body, has become awkward to draw. Hardly can effects and actions be thought through separately anymore, insofar as they construe a

[55] Thomas Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema* (Amsterdam University Press, 2016), 312.
[56] Jean Epstein, *The Intelligence of a Machine*, trans. Christophe Wall-Romana (Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014), 29.
[57] Garrett Stewart, "Digital Mayhem, Optical Decimation: The Technopoetics of Special Effects," *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 45.1 (2017), 15.

unity so airtight that one cannot tell if the former has determined the latter, or the other way around.[58]

But it is out of this otherwise enmeshed confusion of corporeal cum visual plasticity that the peculiarity of the snow sequences transpires. We are, once again, reminded of the mystery behind Wong's decidedly obsolete insistence upon the indexical authenticity of the actions even after the digital turn, except this time some sense of clarity accompanies. The porosity of the martial artist's body is only hinted through the surrounding snow rather than an in-your-face emission of force like the lake explosion in *Ashes of Time*. Rather than superseding the body, the particles extend it, serve as the decisive elements towards its apotheosis. Admittedly, as the use of Zhang's body double makes clear, one body still might be replaced by another body; this, nevertheless, does not negate the fact that all these bodies are actual bodies. In a way my emphasis on the profilmic body and actions is made possible due to precisely an uncanny aspect of particle systems. As Jordan Schonig puts it, the power of this digital technique lies exactly in its tendency of defamiliarizing the world on screen without overwhelming other constituents in

---

[58] Vivian Lee has argued that "the *staging* of special effects," including virtual bodies and virtual objects, has become the primary spectacle of contemporary martial arts film. Dorothy Wai-sim Lau also points out that a few recent martial arts films starring Donnie Yen serve as exemplary cases of this trend: "The body does not aim to assert his kinetic prowess over digital renderings; neither it to claim the persona disappearing into technology and becomes a mere effect. Rather, it makes the synthesis of digital media and the corporeal body visible." In several places *The Grandmaster* does operate according to this logic. As per Anne Rutherford, such is the case in the film's opening fight in the rain wherein "Wong Kar-wai achieves the cinematic body par excellence, as water, light, location, arms, legs, fists, torsos, framing and cutting mesh in a seething tangle of movement so dense at times that it mimics an Abstract Expressionist painting ramped up to a full speed kinetic conflagration." In drawing a connection between the fight scene in the rain and a painting, however, Rutherford aims to downplay the specificities of digital technology, including those of particle systems. According to her, this scene where the figure-ground relation between the martial artists and the rain resembles that of an Abstract Expressionist work "contest[s] claims that digital cinema is inventing 'new' relationships between human and environment that were not possible in analogue cinema" and "demonstrates that, in live-action cinema, the digital/analogue divide does not necessarily mark a decisive rupture that makes possible a new non-anthropocentrism." Vivian Lee, "Virtual bodies, Flying Objects: The Digital Imaginary in Contemporary Martial Arts Films," *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 1.1 (2016), 24-25; Dorothy Wai-sim Lau, "Remediating the Star Body: Donnie Yen's Kung Fu Persona in Hypermedia," *Studies in Media and Communication* 4.2 (2016), 95-96; Anne Rutherford, "What Is Body, What Is Space? Performance and the Cinematic Body in a Non-Anthropocentric Cinema," *Arts* 6.4 (2017), available at https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/6/4/19/htm.

the frame. The ubiquitous particles in contemporary effects films, particularly animated features, are not so much

> spectacles interrupting the diegesis as background details that quietly beckon our attention. […] such films shock us not with their imaginative possibilities—possibilities that were already a staple of their cel-animated predecessors—but instead with *the uncanny familiarity of their natural environments* [emphasis mine]."[59]

Something wonderfully poised, classical, even humanist—which does not have to be tantamount to anthropocentric according to the expanded definition of personhood in the animist worldview—hovers behind the rotoscope layering and formal processing in *The Grandmaster*, acting stubbornly against digitalization's propensity for the transformation of the body and of nature into one synthetic spectacle after another. At both discursive and visual levels, the martial artists in the film are persons as well as images, which are not opposed even if the wake of the former's presence, as we have routinely been told, constantly lies under the threat of dissolution in the land of technology. One recalls Walter Benjamin's renowned description of the preservation of an actor's humanity in the cinematic apparatus by "placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph."[60] *The Grandmaster* celebrates just such triumph of the martial artist, whose body shall not dissolve into the digital snowscape.

As the film efforts to place profilmic actions into an equal, however inconspicuous, partnership with pixels suggest, the key to addressing the ontologies of actions and effects, of the

---

[59] Jordan Schonig, "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the 'Wind in the Trees' in Early Cinema and CGI" 46.

[60] The original passage reads: "To perform in the glare of arc lamps while simultaneously meeting the demands of the microphone is a test performance of the highest order. To accomplish it is to preserve one's humanity in the face of the apparatus. Interest in this performance is widespread. For the majority of city dwellers, throughout the workday in offices and factories, have to relinquish their humanity in the face of an apparatus. In the evening these same masses fill the cinemas, to witness the film actor taking revenge on their behalf not only by asserting *his* humanity (or what appears to them as such) against the apparatus, but by placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," in *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, ed. Michael W. Jennings et al., trans. Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 31.

human and the nonhuman in the age of digital compositing lies not only in the ethical insistence upon the body's authenticity but also how the body's openness could and should be viewed. Throughout this chapter I have emphasized that my visual analysis of the operation of particle systems could not be possible without repeated frame-by-frame viewing—a method inspired by Hannah Frank's formidable examination of hundreds of American animated cartoons frame by frame. As Frank herself admits, this approach to the materiality of celluloid is a perverse way of film viewing, or more accurately, film *looking*. While this gaze of film criticism interrupts the flow of movement, which constitutes the very appeal of animation if not the "moving" image more generally, such a penetrating vision recognizes how even the tiniest of details in one single frame "can be placed into larger theoretical debates about the nature of technological reproduction as such, for instance the relationship between image and text, the fraught authorship of popular art, and the political implications of the circulation of hitherto inaccessible works of art."[61] While the reimaginations of modern Chinese history and its body politics with which this chapter deals drastically differ from the questions opened up by Frank's objects of study located in the context of mid-century United States, I see my work as an extension of Frank's method: how frame-by-frame viewing might work behind cel animation into the realms of digital animation. Something about the way that *The Grandmaster* utilizes effects solicits our recognition of the film's tiniest, particle-sized animism; and to recognize this animism entails a radical and radically distinct mode of perception. Indeed, according to Christian Metz's classification of effects, when slowed down to frame-by-frame viewing, the particles are the flawed "imperceptible *trucages*" that fail to conceal their ubiquitous idiosyncrasy, exceeding

---

[61] Hannah Frank, *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons* (Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019), 2. The applicability of Frank's way of viewing cartoons to my analysis of particle systems testifies to an aspect of digital effects analogous with painting: the computer mouse as the brush; the screen as the canvas; and pixels as pigments.

beyond the "limits of what is called the 'realistic film'." But even for the average viewer they serve as "invisible *trucages*" not seen but *sensed* for their harmonious fluidity—the sense itself "may even be indispensable, according to the codes, to *an accurate appreciation* of the film [emphasis mine]."[62]

What, then, constitutes "an accurate appreciation" of *The Grandmaster*? Namely, what actions of film spectatorship might the bodies of spectators themselves be moved to perform just as they watch Gong move the snow? I have demonstrated that our action of film scrutiny not only discerns each snowflake's movement, trajectory, shape shift, and interaction with Gong but plays a key role in our recognition of the martial artist's animist capacity. Elsewhere, the film also proffers intricate demonstrations of the open body, which might or might not be done through digital means. In lieu of a conclusion, let me expand on my method of close reading, which attends to the act of sensing both internal to the film and in our viewing process. I do so by discussing two interrelated moments that acoustically stage the energetics of martial arts.

To Recognize the Energy

The first instance appears during the fight between Ip and Gong that takes place in a brothel. In the moment when Gong's fist contacts Ip's palm, a high pitch sound seemingly generated by metallic vibration emerges. We recall the acoustic description of the energetic collision in the practice of Xinyi that I have previously quoted from Xu's *Shiqu de wulin*: "When water is splashed onto the hot stove it makes a 'splash' sound. This sound is the internal work of martial arts." With a pitch too high to come from normal physical collisions, this sharp sound signals the

[62] Christian Metz, "'Trucage' and the Film," trans. Françoise Meltzer, *Critical Inquiry* 3.4 (1997), 664. The same can be said regarding the film's use of body double, which, according to Metz, would also belong to the imperceptible category. As I have demonstrated earlier, however, frame-by-frame viewing has likewise brought Zhang's stunt woman in full light.

very “splash” between Ip’s and Gong’s energy fields. What is intriguing about this sequence is that the film highlights the attentiveness of the surrounding viewers in the brothel. Indeed, the sequence begins with several shots that capture the moments when people pause the chores at hand and direct their full attention to Ip and Gong. These gazes projected from all over this place, themselves, initiate the scene, not least two crucial shots that bring us to the conversation between Ip and Gong before their fight: each begins with a courtesan’s face and pans following her sightline before eventually stopping to frame either Gong or Ip in a medium close-up. As well as an implicit acknowledgement of the performative nature of the two martial artists’ encounter, the two shots stage the high level of concentration it takes for the spectators to witness the actions soon to take place.

The same high pitch sound, accompanied by the reflexivity of the act of sensing, re-appears in the sequence where Ip uses a chopstick to “hear” the priceless “music of steel” from Razor’s razor. At first hearing, the high pitch sound is, again, a non-realistic sound effect insofar as it is not the direct result of a collision between physical entities. This impression soon gets complicated once we take into account the presence of this sound in relation to other competing soundtracks. When Ip and Razor walk out of the chess house with their metals at hand, a non-diegetic symphonic music emerges and the camera, in four shots, shows us their positions on the street as well as the workers, diners who concurrently occupy this space too. Afterwards, every time the camera cuts from a medium or medium long shot of these background characters to a close-up of the two martial artists’ metals, the high pitch sound emerges, abruptly against the symphonic music so as to indicate that the Ip and Razor have imbued energies into their metals and thus changed the surrounding flows of energy. The use of the high pitch sound and the symphonic music respectively represents two kinds of energy fields: the former points to the

special identity of the martial artist; the latter is associated with everyday activities on the street. In the climactic eight shots that take place within less than 4 seconds, Ip's and Razor's metals confront each other and the high pitch sound merges with the music into a new, lower pitch sound. The emergence of new sound is immediately registered by the surrounding people as the next four shots showcase their reactions. Simultaneously all of them turn their heads in curiosity in order to identify the acoustic source. The two energy fields originally unnoticeable become, at this instance, one that directly impacts their perceptive organs as the mingling of sounds bleeds in and manifests itself. Paralleling the function of digital particles, the ultimate convergence of these different timbral qualities followed by their collision reveals, too, an underlying sonic landscape of energy structurally similar to the animist snowscape.

Might we read the witnesses' concentration on the impending brothel fight and the street people's reactions to the metallic crash in these two sequences together as the film's attempt to call for the viewer's recognition of certain moments when the structure of animism that undergirds the film's world surfaces? In these sporadic and fleeting instances, background characters' attentiveness to given sight and sound models for us "an accurate appreciation" of the animist promises that the figure of the martial artist carries—itself a promise of cinema as an apparatus for generating new ways of perception that go beyond what the "natural" eyes and ears can sense? More than a bygone cultural icon, more than a body that stands against digitality's assimilation, the martial artist as a shamanic figure crystalizes the quiet energetic affinities between the human and nature that have remained unnoticed. The second sequence would instantly confirm the significance of perceptive sensitivity and re-affirm it through visual means. Right after showing the street people's reactions, the camera cuts to an extreme close-up that replays, in slow motion, the process of metallic collision and renders visible each of the tiny

metallic pieces that the razor pares off from Ip's chopstick. Such a seemingly abrupt deployment of repeated action editing—i.e., an editing style, commonly seen in early cinema, that shows the same action multiple times from different perspectives—serves a crucial purpose. Aside from being a magnified attraction in and of its own right, this shot disjoints the manifestation of acoustic synergy in the previous four shots from the visible physical collision. The acoustic phenomenon, here, is simply not an accompanying supplement to the visible matter but the privileged form that the energy flow has taken up. Indeed, repeated action editing in early cinema is by no means a crude awkwardness waiting to be smoothed out in the developmental history of film editing; rather, it functions to juxtapose not only different viewing perspectives but also different modes of perception and sensation.[63] What *The Grandmaster* thereby pursues is not so much a stylistic or visual coherence of the image as a heterogeneous screen space that encompasses not only diverse modes of visual effects but also distinct, or even competing, sensual impacts.

As the film foregrounds and diversifies the act of sensing, a reflection upon the role of perception in the animist imagination of cinema transpires. If Chapter Two similarly ends with my reconciliation between Hou Hsiao-hsien's aesthetics and an all-encompassing sensitivity to audiovisual details that the shamanic figure of the autistic is imagined to possess, *The Grandmaster* invites its viewers to train with the martial artist through the repeated practice of intense looking, meticulous listening, among other ways of conducting thick engagements with the image—perhaps, by extension, with the world too. Even if attentiveness entails such

[63] For an account of repeated action editing, see Tom Gunning, "Shooting into Outer Space: Reframing Modern Vision," in *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination: Georges Méliès Trip to the Moon*, ed. Matthew Solomon (Albany: SUNY Press, 2011), 104-105, particularly his analysis of the cut in Méliès's *A Trip to the Moon* that "moves us from the moon-face blinking at the projectile stuck in its eye to the landing on the surface." Gunning's article also touches upon the stakes of mobilizing this technique in contemporary cinema through exploring the function of Méliès's film in Joris Ivens's *A Tale of the Wind* (1988).

willingly perverse methods as frame-by-frame looking, its outcome, like the telos of martial arts as a means of self-cultivation, proves to be worthwhile. As we—and only when we—catch the fleeting transformations throughout Gong's dance with the snow, so can we momentarily follow her into the realm of digital *jianghu* and partake in a lost cosmic oneness.

CHAPTER 4. THE LEPER

> *an aberrant tradition of shamanism… he who does not succeed in mastering the "spirits" will be "possessed" by them.*
>
> —Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*[1]

Frequently I recall the unexpected but pleasant encounter with a wood sculpture, titled *Tonari no Totoro* (Totoro the neighbor), in one summer afternoon spent at Tokyo's National Hansen's Disease Museum. Located near the center of an extended corridor that connected Exhibition Room 2 and 3 on the second floor, the waist-height statue of the eponymous forest spirit in Miyazaki Hayao's animated feature *My Neighbor Totoro* (1998) stood on a low pedestal. Placed next to it was a photograph of its maker, an amateur sculptor and former leprosy patient named Sasaki Matsuo, holding a smaller Totoro figurine in his hand. An immense sense of relief emerged when I ran into this grinning creature, situated in this narrow corridor flanked on one side by glass walls from which the afternoon sunlight cast through. Relief, indeed, because I had just exited Exhibition Room 2 wherein the lived reality of Tama Zensho-en, the leper colony next to the museum, had been re-enacted through archival photographs, documentary clips, and full-size reconstructions of its architecture—including a tiny detention cell for those disobedient patients—in which daily objects and life-like mannequins in period costumes were placed. The traumatic past indexed in the documentary images, the moldy smell that the used objects gave off, and the uncanniness of the vivid but still mannequins were all sharply contrasted by the cheerful Totoro, bathed in sunlight against a wildly animated view of the museum's courtyard, where leaves, stripped by the wind in the trees, sped through the air.

---

[1] Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 450.

The presence of the sculpture at this specific location was not accidental. The corridor and the exhibition room to which it led housed a collection of what the museum pamphlet and wall text described as "the proof of survival": artworks across multiple media created by former residents of the leper colonies in Japan; namely, those fully developed human beings whose identities have, nevertheless, come to be pejoratively defined solely by a pathological condition. Sasaki's decision to remake Miyazaki's divine creature, in particular, was perhaps not an arbitrary choice. This is not only because Miyazaki openly acknowledged at Tokyo's 2016 International Leprosy/Hansen's Disease History Symposium that the Iron Town workers in his *Princess Mononoke* (1997) were conscious depictions of lepers based on his visit to Tama Zensho-en after this former space of total quarantine opened up in 1996—the year when Japan's 1931 Leprosy Prevention Law that allowed the confinement of anyone deemed a public health threat was ruled unconstitutional.[2] Given the thematized fascination with the circulation of vitality in the wind and one's control of it across Miyazaki's oeuvre, leprosy also testifies to the negative consequences of said vitality's mobility and one's failure to co-exist with them.[3] While the appearance of the Iron Town workers in *Princess Mononoke* is brief, their spatial segregation and bandage-covered appearance beckon. Imbricated into such an exclusionary, claustrophobic

[2] Clarisse Loughrey, "Hayao Miyazaki Confirms Princess Mononoke Fan Theory Is True," *Independent*, February 2016, available at https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/hayao-miyazaki-confirms-princess-mononoke-fan-theory-is-true-a6846096.html.

[3] Such a tension between the flowing of life energy in the wind and the human's attempted regulation of it is routinely materialized in one breathtaking flight sequence after another in Miyazaki's films. Some of his film titles also spell out the central role of the wind in the world he has fashioned on screen: for instance, *Nausicaä of the Valley of the Wind* (1984), *Spirited Away* (2001), *The Wind Rises* (2013). The bandaged workers in *Princess Mononoke* mark the antithesis to the typical Miyazaki characters bathed in invigorating breezes and soaring through the sky on a wealth of aerial vehicles. Not only does the bandage conceal their physical deformities but also prevent any direct contact of their skin with the vital energy that circulates in the air. See Eriko Ogihara-Schuck's *Miyazaki's Animism Abroad: The Reception of Japanese Religious Themes by American and German Audiences* (Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014) for an account of the animist worldview in Miyazaki and its transnational influence.

mise-en-scène is none other than the wind's (*feng*) pivotal role in traditional Chinese medicine, which has greatly influenced medical theories and practices across East Asia.

According to Shigehisa Kuriyama, since the Shang dynasty the wind has been regarded as one of the key factors that caused illness, metaphysically associated with "the vengeance of unhappy ancestors" whose angry curses must be identified and appeased through ritualistic divination and sacrifice so that illness could be cured. Even as this animist tie between diseases and ancestral spirits was later gradually loosened, physicians still paid much attention to the wind insofar as its unruly nature embodied chaos. "[T]he chief of all diseases," a wind that blew at the wrong time, from the wrong direction formed the aetiological source of all illness: the disorder of nature that constantly invaded the less guarded or nurtured people through orifices across their bodies.[4] Physicians were thus also semioticians of weather, whose central task involved observing and deciphering the messages written on the wind: When would it blow? From which specific direction? What effect would it cause?[5]

Perhaps nothing better demonstrates the inferential relation of the wind to health than the two terminological categories that constitute the changing lexicon of leprosy in classical Chinese. In Angela Ki Che Leung's comprehensive tracing, throughout ancient and medieval periods such terms as *dafeng* (big wind), *efeng* (malignant wind), and *zeifeng* (vicious wind) all designated bone and hair symptoms suggestive of leprosy, while symptoms manifested on one's

---

[4] According to Kuriyama, "Evil winds arose unexpectedly, spontaneously, irregularly; they made abrupt, harsh shifts. Whence the association of winds with the most dramatic illnesses—stroke, epilepsy, madness. More generally, it was wind's protean volatility, its lack of regularity (wuchang), that led physicians to conclude, 'Wind is the chief of all diseases'." Shigehisa Kuriyama, "The Imaginations of Winds and the Development of the Chinese Conception of the Body," in *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, ed. Angela Zito and Tani E. Barlow (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 36.

[5] An elaborate system of correspondence known as "the eight winds and four seasons" consequently emerged, providing instructions as to what one should do and feel at different times of the year in order to maintain cosmic harmony and personal health. The grand historian Sima Qian, for instance, notes that the arrival of the wind from the Southeast at the dawn of the new year affects epidermis and scanty harvest later on. Ibid., 25-31.

skin such as sores, lumps, and bumps were denoted by *li* and *lai*. The Chinese character of *lai*, in particular, was used to refer to leprosy in modern Japanese (*raibyō*) before gradually replaced by *hansenbyō* (literally, "Hansen disease"), a term that has been considered as less discriminatory in the past few decades.[6] Most likely, none of these medical terms in classical Chinese squarely corresponded to the modern definition of leprosy: an infection by the bacterium Mycobacterium leprae or Mycobacterium lepromatosis. But around the 10th century they began to merge into one unified group of disorders, evolving over the time into the compound term *mafeng* or *damafeng* (meaning, respectively, "numb wind" or "big numb wind"). With the later arrival en masse of Western missionaries trained in "modern" medicine and Gerhard Hansen's identification of the bacterium in 1874, *mafeng* was eventually dovetailed with what we know today as leprosy in modern Chinese.

Although from the 12th century onwards, East Asian physicians had themselves began to reject the disorder as wind-induced in favor of less abstract and configurationist etiologies, the nomenclature *mafeng* still carried the memory of this classical conception of the body and structured an enduring popular imagination of leprosy in relation to the wind.[7] The archaic tie between the wind and metaphysical forces persisted as well, albeit in different forms such as Buddhist karma, as leprosy continued to be considered as the result of divine retribution across East Asia, including Japan, until as late as the 19th and 20th centuries.[8] Might one speculate that

---

[6] Angela Ki Che Leung, *Leprosy in China: A History* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 1-18.

[7] Instead, they attributed the source of the alignment to excessive sex, overexertion, toxin accumulated from internal heat, among other more concrete factors such as regional and gender differences. Worms (*chong*) or witchcraft that used worms as magical agents (*gu*) was regarded as another potential cause from the ancient period to the late imperial period. These alternative views reflected a conception of the disorder as initiated through contagion. Ibid., 29, 35.

[8] For the popular understanding of leprosy in relation to religious conceptions, particularly Buddhist karmic punishment, in the Japanese context from medieval periods to modern times, see Andrew Edmund Goble, *Confluences of Medicine in Medieval Japan: Buddhist Healing, Chinese Knowledge, Islamic Formulas, and Wounds of War* (Honolulu: University of Hawaiʻi Press, 2011), 67-88; Susan L. Burns, "From 'Leper Villages' to

Sasaki's Totoro, capable of summoning natural energies and traveling effortlessly through the air in Miyazaki's animist imagination, subtly articulates the leprosy sufferer's desire to appease this wind gone awry, or at least peacefully live with its precariousness? If the figure of the martial artist explored in Chapter Three skillfully controls the vital energies that circulate in and out of a desirable body of porosity, what the leper embodies is close to the unfortunate case described in my epigraph from Eliade's account of possession as "an aberrant tradition of shamanism" in ancient Chinese system of belief: a spiritual medium who has been overwhelmed by, instead of controlling, the airy spirits. The subjectivity of the leper constructed and conceptualized as such, in relation to the built environment of the leper colony, thus constitutes a profound irony: a subject forced by the modern Japanese state to relocate and dwell in an enclosed space due to its forced openness by the malicious wind.

The primary object of study of this chapter is Kawase Naomi's 2015 feature film, *Sweet Bean*. Yet I have begun the discussion with a detour through Miyazaki's depiction of lepers because it well reflects a cinematic tradition that characterizes the existence of leper as the opposite of corporeal porosity. From the biblical tradition (such as William Wyler's 1959 *Ben-Hur*) to the exotic abject (such as Fritz Lang's Indian dyptich); from institutionally segregated bodies (such as Forugh Farrokhzad's 1964 *The House is Black*) to vengeful spirits in the horror genre (such as John Carpenter's 1980 *The Fog*), the leper as a cinematic figure remains physically covered, spatially isolated, and socially marginalized on screen. Miyazaki's fascination with the invigorating wind that characterizes his Iron Town workers as well, however, points to a solution to transcending such a representational stereotype: a possibility of reimagining the now curable disorder—though social stigma unhappily persists—from the

Leprosaria: Public health, Nationalism and the Culture of Exclusion in Japan," in *Isolation: Places and Practices of Exclusion*, ed. Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford (London: Routledge, 2003), 98-99.

perspective of immanent and intimate connectivity between the leper and nature through the mediation of the wind. It is as if *Sweet Bean* were consciously picking up where Miyazaki had left off. The archaic but enduring view of leprosy in relation to the wind; the involuntary openness of the leper's body; the spatial closeness of the leper colony; and the objects manually crafted by the leper colony residents, which quietly articulate their desires—all these medical discourses, historical facts, and site-specific conditions have been woven tightly into the creative fabrics of the film.

This chapter demonstrates how *Sweet Bean* tackles what the label of "the leper" may entail and connote in post-1996 Japan when leprosy no longer poses a grave threat to public health. A filmmaker who has thought seriously about human-environment relation together with cinematic aesthetics throughout her career, Kawase considers the leper as a shamanic figure in *Sweet Bean*. Through this figure's ontological affinity with nature and "artisanal epistemology" (when it comes to the production of the titular sweet) that enacts her interpretation of nature, the film envisions an urgently needed mode of existence in the contemporary Japanese society, not least the post-Fukushima nuclear crisis.[9] In the leper's thick engagement with the world, a portal to the animist sphere is opened up within Tokyo's urban landscape. On this view, the leper functions in the same way as the three shamanic figures hitherto explored, insofar as all of them structure the animist imagination of cinema by invariably shaping or maintaining an animist sphere qualitatively different from the everyday on screen.

That said, *Sweat Bean* adds a twist to this narrative by staging the death of the leper—a move that consequently exposes all the ironies, inconsistencies, and conflicts internal to the

[9] The notion of "artisanal epistemology," coined by Pamela H. Smith, advances that practice, rather than abstract theorization, was the primary mode for engaging and interpreting the world, not least nature, in the West from the fifteenth to the seventeenth century. Pamela H. Smith, *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004).

utopian promises of the animist imagination. Indeed, if this dissertation about animism might itself be animate, mirroring the death of the leper in *Sweet Bean* it has also arrived at the inescapable dawn of life. What this concluding chapter thus explores are precisely the demise and legacy of animism: What has the passing of the shamanic figures taken permanently away with them? What methodological insights regarding the human-nonhuman relation have they left behind? What aesthetic devices does cinema afford to render both the lacuna and heritage of their animist capacity? What spectatorial engagements have these devices solicited from the viewer on physical, emotional, and other fronts?

A Tale of the Evil Wind

Adapted from Durian Sukegawa's 2013 novel *Sweet Bean Paste* (*An*, meaning literally "red bean"), Kawase's film manifests from the outset a profound affiliation between a leper and a particular conceptualization of nature. The 76-year-old protagonist, Tokue (Kiki Kirin), first appears as she exits public transportation and dodders through the crowded streets of Tokyo. Shortly before arriving at a small store that specializes in dorayaki (a sweet pancake which consists of two small patties wrapped around a filling of the titular red bean paste), she stands on a street flanked by flowering cherry trees. Framed under the blossoming flowers, the light pink of which echoes her earthly burgundy hat and bag as well as her sunglasses with red-colored lens, Tokue pauses and looks up to appreciate the sound of rustling leaves as a refreshing breeze passes through. The next shot cuts to her point of view to highlight one of the most classical demonstrations of natural contingency on screen: the wind in the (cherry) trees. This particular composition of a person under cherry blossoms will reappear at the final sequence of the film, the significance of which the conclusive section of this chapter will explore. For now, I want to

emphasize how the scene epitomizes a dialectical process behind culture's transformation of raw materials from nature in order to fashion a constructed image of nature (which lies within culture itself). Indeed, this opening sequence has framed traces of nature as part and parcel of the carefully arranged urban landscape. And yet, even as these traces are readily available to the dwellers of this space, they are not recognized—let alone appreciated—by anyone but Tokue, a former leprosy patient, who seems to have established some sort of connection with nature not only as a cultural construct but also as a concrete, tangible entity in and of itself. This dialectical process will recur throughout the film, as Tokue exposes and enacts the passage between culture and different registers of nature.

Such a passage is literally represented in the film as, borrowing Claude Lévi-Strauss's renowned concept, a culinary transformation from "the raw" to "the cooked"—let us not forget, after all, that the visual motif of "the wind in the trees" originally serves as the background for a baby's joyful eating in Lumière brothers' *A Baby's Meal* (1895). Indeed, the reason why Tokue is visiting the dorayaki store is because she wants to apply for a job there after reading the manager and chef Sentaro's (Nagase Masatoshi) recruitment of a store assistant. A middle-aged baker, Sentaro works at the store to return its owner a personal favor related to his past as an ex-convict. The business has been lukewarm, unsurprisingly so given Sentaro's personal dislike of sweets, including his own commodities. His immediate reaction to Tokue's intention betrays a mixture of skepticism and condescension. Convinced that the workload would be too arduous for someone of her age, Sentaro tries to discourage her by mentioning the rather low hourly pay of 600 yens (each dorayaki sells 120 yens). However, Tokue insists that money is not an issue and willingly offers a pay cut by accepting only 300 yens per hour. Here, she implies that her interest in this position is motivated not by monetary remuneration but something else that escapes the

easy calculation of value—a kind altruism that potentially includes offering her labor for free. Indeed, the film later reveals that, through Sentaro's store, Tokue is offering her culinary skill to the world as a gift that does not aim at participating in any discernable form of exchange. Insofar as Tokue's gift does not presupposes a return, it embodies, according to Jacques Derrida's famous conceptualization, a theoretically *impossible* gift that lies exterior to the standard economics of gift giving.[10] A gift that actually keeps on giving without subjecting the receiver to the obligation of repay.

Slightly surprised by Tokue's proposal, Sentaro still decides to turn her down. Later that day, however, Tokue revisits the dorayaki store. This time, in order to convince Sentaro, she not only offers to accept even less money—200 yens per hour—but also leaves some of her homemade red bean paste for him to try. Soon after she departs, Sentaro throws her bean paste away. But curiosity prompts him to pick it up from the bin and give it a try. That night in a restaurant, Sentaro runs into Wakana (Uchida Kyara), a junior high school girl who frequents the store and happens to witness his interaction with Tokue during the day. He confesses to her that the appearance, texture, fragrance, and flavor of Tokue's bean paste are impeccable, superior in every aspect to the factory-made, airtight sealed bulk order on which he has been relying due to his own inability to produce tasty bean paste. Sympathizing with, if not pitying, Tokue's desire to work, Wakana manages to persuade Sentaro, who thus offers Tokue a part-time position responsible solely for the production of the bean paste every morning before the store opens—an arrangement that limits Tokue's exposure to the customers, itself perhaps betraying Sentaro's slight discrimination against her after noticing her disfigured hands. Notice, here, that both

[10] In Derrida's words, "this unconditionality must be absolute and uncircumscribed. It must not be simply declared while in fact dependent in its turn on the condition of some context, on some proximity or family tie, be it general or specific." Jacques Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 7, n8.

Sentaro and Wakana misidentify Tokue's motivation as an old person's (perhaps desperate) attempt to get employed. This misidentification reflects not so much Tokue's financial situation as their own: Sentaro has to manage the store for the owner because he owns her money; Wakana has been considering the option of quitting further education and finding a job instead, including the same position that Tokue applies.

At work, Tokue befriends Wakana as well. Gradually the old lady, the middle aged man, and the teenage girl form something of an alternative family, insofar as they are driven together based on the shared experience of exclusion or deviation from the mainstream: life-long quarantine for Tokue in the leper colony; previous imprisonment for Sentaro; and a dysfunctional family from which Wakana longs to flight. With the improved bean paste, business begins to thrive. The store's newfound popularity and prosperity drastically decline, however, once customers start to notice Tokue's physical deformities. Rumors that they are caused by leprosy and all kind of misinformation about the disease start to spread, consequently tanking the business even in cold days when dorayaki is most popular. As suspected, Tokue is later revealed to be a former Hansen's disease patient forced to live in Tama Zensho-en since the age of 14 until the repeal of the Leprosy Prevention Law.

A causal connection is established between Tokue's culinary talent and her contraction of leprosy, which mysteriously enables her to take up a mode of being that is communicative with nonhuman entities, including but not limited to the red bean of which her confection is made. Several sequences throughout the film are devoted to the audiovisual rendition of her interaction with the nonhuman, as she attends to the messages that these entities send her through the wind. Like her attentiveness to the cherry blossom in the opening of the film, throughout *Sweet Bean* Tokue is seen fully immersed within natural environments, heeding the wind, the trees, the

sunlight, among all the things that surround her. Her sustained attention to and connection with nature persist even in the tiny store kitchen. At one point during the first morning when Tokue prepares the bean paste with Sentaro, she draws her face close to the cooper pot where the beans are cooking and stares at them intensely. Intrigued by her behavior, Sentaro cannot help but ask: "what do you see there? […] Putting your face so close… what are you looking at?"[11] To his inquiry, Tokue appears perplexed as if the object of her regard cannot be more transparent. After briefly expressing her confusion over this question, she continues with her work. To add onto Sentaro's (and our) curiosity, her interactions with the beans throughout the process of cooking is characterized by the rhetoric of personification, as she twice anthropomorphizes the lives of the beans. The first time appears after the scent of the steam out of the copper pot alters, to which she reacts by claiming that she and Sentaro are "hosting" the admirable beans that have journeyed all the way from the fields to their kitchen. The second time comes after her addition of sugar into the beans. She instructs Sentaro to wait for the unification of the two ingredients, in the same way that a couple on a first date should be given enough time to get used to each other. These seemingly naïve analogies of beans and people baffle Sentaro, though, at this point, he takes neither her words nor her behaviors too seriously.

The film restrains from identifying or elaborating on precisely what it is that Tokue sees until one memorable sequence wherein she recounts her attentiveness to the "voices" of the beans, through which she could further hear those of the wind, the sunlight, and the water surrounding the fields where they were cultivated and reaped. I am thinking of the moment when she abruptly quits the job after realizing that her identity as a former leprosy patient has stained

[11] Unless otherwise noted, English translations of the film's narration and dialogues are from the subtitles in the DVD released by Kino Lorber in 2016.

the store's reputation. Her voice-over narration emerges as Sentaro reads her resignation letter, the first half of which relates:

> Dear boss, how are things at the shop? I worry that your spirit might be low. When I was cooking the bean paste, I was always listening for the stories the bean tell. It's a way of imagining the rainy days and sunny days the beans have seen. What breeze blew across the beanstalks? Listen to the story of their journey. Yes, listen to them. I believe that everything in this world has a story to tell. Even the sunshine and the wind, I think you can hear their stories. Maybe that's the reason. Last night, the breeze that blew in, across the hedge of the holly, seemed to be telling me that I should get in touch with you.

Accompanying Tokue's steady and composed narration, the film shows her sitting alone on a bench, supported by a crutch and bathed in a setting sun which lights her from her right side and creates a pronounced lens flare effect. The camera, then, supplements the unfolding narration by presenting, in eight shots, an audiovisual voyage of the beans: from the field, where a backlit bean pod in close-up is shot in low-saturation color, through a small stream whose surface reflects the sunshine, to tens of thousands of red beans rustling into large bamboo trays and, then, evenly placed across the surfaces of the tray to be sundried in the open air. This pre-history of the beans before they arrive at the dorayaki store ends at the cue of the line "Last night, the breeze that blew in, across the hedge of the holly." At this point the film cuts to a long shot of an empty street where a whirl of leaves passionately dance at the center of the frame. Another long shot follows, capturing from a low angel tree tops from which numerous leaves gently fall. We then return to the interior of the space defined by the hedge of the holly, as the film cuts back to a medium close-up of Tokue's profile. She leans on and gazes out of a window, seemingly lost both in the aftermath of the cosmic journey she has just taken with the beans and in the dire situation of store as informed by the wind-messenger.

Viewing the kitchen scene and the letter sequence together, we catch a glimpse of Tokue's vision, which retrospectively addresses Sentaro's nonchalant inquiry regarding the

precise target of her attentiveness. In the original novel, Tokue names this special perception "Listening," which involves all senses including but not limited to hearing. One thing she has come to master—for more than sixty years in the leper colony—is to "sniff the wind and listen to the murmur of the tree" and to "pay attention to *the language of things in this world that don't use words* [emphasis mine]. That's what I call Listening."[12] What Tokue has perceived in the beans is the memory of their lives from birth to fruition. Displayed on screen is a multi-sensory journey (looking, listening, sniffing) that transcends temporo-spatial boundaries and the logocentric fantasy said to define—frequently in Western philosophy—human subjectivity, as Tokue interprets a welter of textual devices that echo and rebound in these translatable signs from the material world. Each bean is a poem, written out in the staccato and yet lingering rhythm as one after another slides down the gritty surface of the woven tray. Each bean recounts a story, where the natural convection generated by solar warmth structures a narrative arc, where the diffusions of streams wandering digressions, where the cob and stem in the field re-insertions of order, and where the wind emphatic phrases that breathe coolness into the hot mess of a passage.

The Savior-faire of Animism

Such a scenography of Tokue's vision during her ecstatic flight mobilizes various stylistic devices of haptic visuality, the core concept of Laura U. Marks's *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, understood as an experimental mode of filmmaking that compels the viewer to "feel" and "touch" the screen through vision. Facing a haptic image, our spectatorial attention is drawn to the surface of objects displayed on screen, or

[12] Durian Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, trans. Alison Watts (London: Oneworld, 2017), 134.

the surface of the image per se. When we dwell on the surface of an object, an intersubjective interaction with the object becomes possible, for we transform ourselves from a distant observer with attempts to uncover its deep meaning into an intimate participant if not addressee of the object's objectivity. "As our seeing comes closer to the surface," in Marks's theorization, "the object begins to see us from its own depth. Haptic criticism assumes that its object has aura—that it relates to me, looks back at me," not unlike how the world whispers to Tokue.[13]

The haptic effect is oftentimes achieved through a variety of formal features including but not limited to dissolves (frequently in a blur of colors), manipulations of the visual quality in pursuit of grainy texture or color saturation, and fragmented (extreme) close-ups. Indeed, the ways in which natural entities are shown in the letter sequence characterize this sequence as a textbook example of the haptic image, insofar as the extensive use of the close-up, the lens flare, and the amplified sound of each bean's contact with the bamboo tray irresistibly beckon us to dwell on the surface of the filmed objects. As the sequence propels us to wake up from the anesthesia of senses and reconnect with the materiality of the world, so we immerse ourselves in the sediment of each bean's memory that Tokue stirs up. Later on, the bean paste that Tokue produces at the dorayaki store would likewise be presented in close-up and saturated color, which imbue the paste with an auratic, dazzling sensuality.

That such devices as the close-up and saturated color are mobilized to magically transform any object in front of the camera into a commanding attraction has, in effect, been a commonplace media aesthetics today, not least at the service of food representation. East Asian cinema and media have been particularly adept in staging one gastronomic spectacle after another—from Itami Juzo's *Tampopo* (1985) to Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1995) to

[13] Laura U. Marks, "Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes," *Framework: The Finnish Art Review* 2 (2004), 80.

several popular Japanese manga-turned-TV series such as *What Did You Eat Yesterday?* (2019) and *Midnight Diner* (2009-2016), which inspired two remakes in South Korea and China (2015; 2017). That said, I accentuate the operation of haptic visuality in *Sweet Bean* because of its ecological potentials, insofar as this stylistic feature is motivated by none other than the leper's shamanic capacity. Such a unity between a style and a figure preserves the occulted voices of nature available only to Tokue, to the extent that the haptic image functions as the very evidence of animism throughout the film. Directly, then, *Sweet Beans* responds to and complicates a discourse surrounding the sensuous staging of food that argues how such stylistics enacts a twofold obfuscation: of the social labor behind the production of food and of the authenticity of food as such. A fundamental text that establishes this critical tradition is Roland Barthes's "Ornamental Cuisine," the structuralist critic's exposé of the myth behind mid-century culinary photography. By examining *Sweet Bean* through the lens of Barthes's observation, not least its divergence from Barthes's leftist take on mass culture, some clarity regarding the aesthetics and politics of the film's haptic quality transpires.

In "Ornamental Cuisine," Barthes discerns a "dialectical resolution" in color photography of elaborately prepared and displayed dishes in such "veritable mythological treasure" as the magazine *Elle*, the proud petit bourgeois pinnacle among all platforms of household journalism.[14] The titular ornamental cuisine captured in photography of this kind is composed of shiny surfaces (with the privileged color being glowy pink). It operates, Barthes continues, by the transmutation of nature into a product of social labor, aiming

> one the one hand, to escape nature by a sort of delirious baroque (to stud a lemon with shrimps, to color a chicken shocking pink, to serve grapefruit boiled), and, on the other, to attempt reconstituting that same nature by an incongruous artifice (to arrange meringue mushrooms and holly leaves on a yule log cake, to replace shrimp heads around the adulterated béchamel hiding their bodies).

[14] Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Lavers (New York: Hill and Wang, 2012), 143.

Barthes associates such disenchantment of nature and the ensuing reenchantment of a mediated *impression* of nature—a twofold mediation on the material level of the re-naturalized mushrooms, leaves, yule log, and the composites of dismembered shrimps, as well as through the photographic apparatus of cameras, lighting, analog labs, printing plants—in *Elle* and elsewhere with the contested notion of realism. The reality of the ornamental cuisine is restricted, lamentably according to Barthes's critique, by the periodical's "'distinguished' vocation" to a mere "magical reality" however natural its appearance might have assumed after the decoration by the chef's hands and the camera. This reality is magical not only because of its failure to address the "real problems of alimentation (the real problem is not to stud a partridge with cherries, but to find the partridge, i.e., to pay for it)" to its predominately working-class readers but also because, at the most pragmatic level possible, one could easily imagine how unpalatable if not outright inedible the cuisine would taste.[15]

Devoted to the evocation of sensory experiences and nothing else, the ornamental cuisine is thereby all visual surfaces. Unlike fellow culinary sections in rival household magazines like *L'Express* which assure their upper middle-class readers the eventual consumption of their photographed cuisines so long as the readers follow the provided instructions procedurally, *Elle* fantasizes a fundamentally split between the eater and what they consume. By no means does this detached relation correspond to any aspect of the actual process of eating most wonderfully portrayed by Tristram in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman*. Regarding the beginning of a person's possession of an apple, Tristram wonders: "how did it begin to be his? was it, when he set up his heart upon it? or when he gather'd it? or

[15] Ibid.

when he chew'd it? or when he roasted it? or when he peel'd? or when he brought it home? or when he digested?—or when he—?" If one's encounter with food can be anatomically categorized as the gradually internalization of other into self from observation to preparation, from collection to assimilation (before a part of that other eventually becomes an irreversible excremental abject), the mechanism of the ornamental cuisine disrupts this logic by ensuring that the dish remains a perpetually unattainable other, a longed myth in the yonder, never to be prepared, eaten, digested, and excreted by the gazing epicures.[16]

Given that *Sweet Bean* presents both the red beans and the bean paste made of them in precisely the stylistics condemned by Barthes, is Tokue's culinary creation ornamental? Can viewers, in the wake of her demonstration, recreate the confection in their own kitchens after the screening? What potential significance that speaks to the formation of an animist world might her bean paste carry? A comparison between *Sweet Bean* and the original novel by Sukegawa, intriguingly, expresses the former's rejection of any illusion of facile reproducibility of Tokue's product. The film, we shall see, proposes that while Tokue's bean paste is inarguably a cuisine of the surface, its superficiality is not a result of what Barthes diagnoses; rather, the myth of ornamental cuisine laid bared by Barthes as an obliteration of labor is, here, transformed into an ecological myth of animism, an object of desire that can be amply sensed but never quite interiorized. In other words, the visual pleasure of ornamental cuisine that Barthes denies due to its non-egalitarian nature is precisely what *Sweet Bean* holds onto as its privileged articulation of the animist principle that structures the film's world. In the face of (commodity) desire

---

[16] This passage from *Tristam Shandy* and the brilliant analysis of its implications regarding the process and aftermath of consumption are from Heather Keenleyside, "The First-Person Form of Life: Locke, Stern, and the Autobiographical Animal," *Critical Inquiry* 39.1 (2012), 119-121.

sanctioned by Barthes's moralistic account, the film founds itself on and celebrates pleasure all the same.

Let us start the comparison by heeding how the novel approaches the process of culinary production, especially its final chapters driven by Sentaro's desire to carry on Tokue's legacy through reproducing her signature bean paste so that her supreme skill—a testimony to her life, her subjectivity, and therefore a proof of the possibility of animism—can live on in the world even after her passing. The last time in the novel when Sentaro and Wakana visit Tokue in the leper colony, they eat the sweet bean soup that Tokue has specifically prepared for them in advance. The confection, as always, tastes impeccable, but this time she asks them to eat some homemade salty kombu—a seaweed in the kelp family—which "gave off a pleasant plum scent that tickled the back of the nose" after they taste the soup.[17] The unexpected supplement and elevation of the soup's sweetness by the seaweed's savoriness amaze Sentaro, who desperately inquires about the magic behind this combination. It turns out that Tokue has also added a pinch of salt directly into the soup to balance the sweetness, just as her bean paste is similarly on the salty side in comparison with the factory-made paste the Sentaro used to order. What the novel provides, here, is a moment of demystification that rationalizes the appeal of Tokue's paste, especially to men like Sentaro who "like a drink" and dislike the taste of strong sweetness.[18] Knowing that her time in the world will soon come to an end, Tokue presents the salty kombu as her last gift to Sentaro: a hint at the creation of a doable product that Sentaro himself can make—a salty kind of dorayaki—to support the store after she passes away. If, like the film, the novel has previously established Tokue's culinary skill as a result of her mysterious Listening, it now reverses this premise by suggesting that there are empirical ways to achieve her animist capacity

[17] Durian Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 147.
[18] Ibid., 150.

that are available to potentially everyone who knows how to use salty ingredients in the production of sweets.

From here, the novel depicts Sentaro's trial and error at great length, meticulously detailing each step he takes in recreating that fine mix of sweet and salty flavors. His search starts from the selection of salt including "well-known brands of natural sea salt such as Ako from the Seto Inland Sea or Yanbaru from the Okinawan island of Iejima."[19] A series of calculations with regards to the quantity, technique, and timing of placing salt into the bean paste ensues, initiating a drastic shift of the novel's mode of narration from conventional story-telling into an exposition that one typically expects to find in a cookbook or, recalling Barthes, magazines like *L'Express*:

> At first Sentaro tried increasing the amount of salt he mixed into the bean paste. Ordinarily he would add only a pinch to a four-kilogram batch—one gram at the most. He tried increasing it to two grams, then three grams. And something mysterious happened when he did; the salt flavour stood out against the sweetness, clear and fresh—an unexpected blossoming of flavour. The taste was fleeting and not overpowered by sweetness. He found it refreshing. But that was only when he added salt in minute quantities. Once he increased the amount of salt—specifically to three or more grams per four-kilogram batch—the flavour abruptly turned coarse, and lost all subtlety. […] What should he do then? The obvious answer was to try adding salt to the pancake, so he decided to experiment with the batter. As always, he blended equal amount of eggs, salt, and soft flour. Then he added some baking powder to leaven, honey, and sweet rice wine, and a tiny dash of green tea for flavouring. Next he divided the batter into several bowls, put varying amounts of salt in each, and cooked the pancakes.[20]

Four-kilogram batch; two or three grams of salt; equal amount of eggs, salt, and flour; a tiny dash of green tea—Sentaro becomes a chemist and his kitchen a laboratory. His experiments, however, do not lead to much success. When he offers a sample to the owner of the store, she condescendingly describes that there is "something *poor* about it."[21] After trying one of his own

[19] Ibid., 153.
[20] Ibid., 153-154.
[21] Ibid., 155.

samples, Sentaro himself reluctantly admits that while the first mouthful might taste refreshing, a disagreeable aftertaste soon emerges with the following bites. Rather than complementing the sweetness of the bean paste, the salty dorayaki ends up as a one-time gimmick.

Sentaro's experimentation promptly stops when Tokue passes away. He soon quits the job, too, when he fails to counter the store owner's plan of adding the savory okonomiyaki pancake onto the store's menu. One night, however, he dreams of an encounter with a young girl whom he immediately recognizes as the young Tokue. The dream takes place in her hometown, an idyllic landscape featuring a river that streams down the mountains, with the entire riverbank covered by a carpet of blossoming cherry trees. She asks him to enter a teahouse that stands amid a cloud of pink flowers and offers him a cup of tea, on the surface of which floats a few petals. This cherry-blossom tea tastes "[a] little bit salty with a lovely smell of flowers," because, as the young girl reveals, the petals—a specific kind of "double-flowered variety, not your usual *somei yoshino* [Yoshino cherry]"—have been handpicked and pickled with salt at home. An epiphany hits Sentaro as he recalls that Tokue once mentioned about pickling cheery blossoms as a child. Realizing that the pickled flowers could just be the missing ingredient to his salty dorayaki, Sentaro desires but never manages to ask her for confirmation: "did you ever eat them with sweet food?"[22] As if this illuminating dream has not already explained things to death, the last page of the novel further identifies the precise location of Tokue's hometown as "Shinshiro in Aichi Prefecture."[23] The extensive process of demystification that Sentaro has undertaken concludes, in this moment, when a kind of deus ex machina traverses the boundaries between life and death and submerges Tokue's childhood memory in the realm of Sentaro's unconscious. This ending of the novel cannot be more enlightening and instructive. One could even expect a readerly

---

[22] Ibid., 180.
[23] Ibid., 213.

response that follows the step-by-step process outlined in the novel-cookbook to purchase all the ingredients necessary for reproducing Tokue's floral bean paste.

In comparison, Kawase's screen adaptation betrays reservations about the novel's epistemological certainty. While it also features Tokue's suggestion of the addition of salt, this exchange with Sentaro lasts less than two minutes. The screen time devoted to the lengthy trial and error behind Sentaro's selection of salt and refinement of the paste's taste amounts to approximately a minute. Sentaro's dream does not make it into the film at all. This is not to say that *Sweet Bean* completely denies the novel's proposal of a transference of animist knowledge from Tokue to Sentaro to the reader. But it does so with reservations, withholding the kind of empiricism that undergirds the novel's optimism and certainty. Recalling the kitchen scene previously analyzed, a sense of mystery permeates the making of the bean paste. Not only does Tokue restrain from addressing Sentaro's inquiry, she does not define, either, what constitutes a good bean when she scolds him for not separating the good ones from the bad ones. Nor does she, after quietly attuning to the boiling pot for hours, explain the timing behind her sudden pouring all the beans into a colander in order to rinse them with cold water. Repeatedly the film establishes that a recipe of the bean paste is the last thing it desires to provide. If Tokue's bean paste becomes learnable and its making can be codified in any form of a set recipe, it is not the result of her animist engagement with the world, which belongs exclusively to the leper as a shamanic figure. Indeed, a step-by-step audiovisual representation of the production of bean paste—even for the duration of one sequence—would turn the film into an example of what Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky terms "the process genre," defined as "the sequentially ordered representation of someone making or doing something."[24] This cinematic category which

[24] Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky, *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2020), 2.

demystifies a given object by showing all the steps of production it takes for the object to reach its final form, as Skvirsky argues, "offers up a world that can be understood, known, mastered by anyone, by everyone. Like Neil Harris's operational aesthetic, its ethos is democratic and egalitarian. A world full of stuff whose genesis can be known and understood (even by a child), a world full of bodily skills that can practiced and learned by anybody willing to put in enough hours—that world is a world under my control. It is also a world that can be molded and transformed by one such as me."[25]

Unlike the novel and thus the process genre, *Sweet Bean* offers an alternative approach to the tracing and preservation of memory that remains in the personal domain, not popularized through procedural instructions. The film thereby avoids the pitfall of ornamental cuisine, all while preserving the pleasure of both tasting and looking at culinary delicacies, by resorting to what Luce Giard has termed "doing-cooking," an acquisition of culinary knowledge not by following recipes "devoid of both illustrations and 'feminine' flourishes" and therefore seemingly authoritative, but through mobilizing one's memory of past experiences and sensory acuteness on the ground.[26] On the one hand, doing-cooking involves "a multiple memory: memory of apprenticeship, of witnessed gestures, and of consistencies, in order, for example, to identify the exact moment when the custard has begun to coat the back of a spoon and thus must be taken off the stove to prevent it from separating;" on the other hand, it depends on "the smell coming from the oven that lets one know if the cooking is coming along and whether it might help to turn up the temperature."[27] Such a method at once pre-programmed in the depths of memory and contingent upon the atmosphere of the very site of cookery is what Tokue privileges

[25] Ibid., 220-221.
[26] Michel de Certeau, Luce Giard, Pierre Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*, trans. Timothy J. Tomasik (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998), 152.
[27] Ibid., 157.

in and out of the kitchen as she never ceases to see, hear, and sniff each of the messages that the world delivers through the wind.

Crucially, while *Sweet Bean* associates the haptic mode with the privacy of Tokue's animism, it also insists that the significance of this style operates not only on the level of the individual but also that of a particular collective: the leper as a shamanic figure. The film explicitly alludes to the broader culturo-historical context out of which Tokue's capacity emerges: the involuntary containment of lepers across Japan throughout the 20th century. The following section explores how the film's dialogue with Marks's concept does not simply concern the phenomenology of image, even if the latter has been grossly reduced in vernacular usage, in scholarly and non-scholarly accounts alike, to describe a particular affect solicited by certain codified and sensuous means of image production.

The World on the Tongue

Inarguably, the privileged stylistic devices of the haptic image—the blurry dissolve, the saturated tone, the pronounced texture—have become desirable ends in themselves: a multitude of glossy images permeates the contemporary media landscape, with the glossiness itself enshrined as one set of the mainstream standards of artistic evaluation. In a reflective essay published four years after *The Skin of the Film*, Marks herself notices and cautions against the reduction of haptic visuality to an erotic eye-candy. Art and popular cinemas, television commercials, music videos, video games—we can add onto this list Instagram posts, cooking shows, digital photographs taken by cameras equipped with built-in filters—all seem to have assumed "a haptic cloak that pulls us close sensuously in order to sell us clothing, hamburgers, life insurance."[28] To rewrite

[28] I cannot help but want to share an interesting statistical number related to Japanese Instagram users' tendency to share gastronomic images. According a comparative study that categorizes the content of Instagram images

the familiar story of avant-gardism turned into an established and profitable norm, and to obtain the once radical potential of her concept, Marks maintains, the production of haptic image "need[s] to be *motivated* by something radical."[29] She proposes to return to the crucial element of intercultural cinema to which her book is devoted: a kind of personal filmmaking driven by the urge to capture, preserve, and evoke an elusive memory that emerges out of "the encounter between different cultural organizations of knowledge"—almost always a hierarchical encounter between a dominant system of knowledge and a minority culture that, in the films and videos she examines, takes up the form of a collision between the "hegemonic, white, Euro-American culture" and its sundry Others.[30] In order to be radical (again), haptic visuality needs to operate on both stylistic and political fronts.

I have demonstrated how *Sweet Bean* ties haptic visuality to Tokue's identity as a leper. Elsewhere the film takes a step further and contextualizes her shamanic capacity within the medical history of leprosy in modern Japan on an institutional level larger and more abstract than any individual identity. Consider the scene where Wakana routinely visits the dorayaki store with her schoolmates before they go to cram schools. After her schoolmates leave, Wakana cannot help but inquire, with a tinge of hesitation, about the elephant in the room that both she and Sentaro have noticed for a while: "Uh, Tokue, what happened to your fingers?" The question is

---

uploaded by users from Bangkok, Berlin, Moscow, São Paulo, and Tokyo from December 5 to December 11 in 2013, out of 100,000 Instagram photos uploaded from these five cities, 49.6% of pictures devoted to "food and drinks" were from Tokyo. This percentage is the highest among the five chosen cities, greatly suppressing the second highest, Bangkok's 17.7%. See Lev Manovich, *Instagram and Contemporary Image* [Open Access eBook], 2017, 65, available at http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image. Though this data analysis does not offer a cultural or historical contextualization of this phenomenon, given the time when the data was collected (the same year when the original novel of *Sweet Bean* was published), one wonders if it doesn't also reflect the lingering concern about food security in post-Fukushima Japan, which I shall discuss later in this chapter.

[29] Laura U. Marks, "Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes," 82.

[30] In the case of *Sniff*, for instance, the memory that the man longs to retrieve is "not only about the transience of love, but also about loss in the time of AIDS." Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2000), 7, 172.

not immediately acknowledged as Tokue happens to be coughing and complaining about the cold she has caught. It is unclear if Tokue has heard Wakana, though the film confirms the clarity of the question by cutting directly to Sentaro's reaction and asserting his awareness of the sensitivity of this topic. Distracted from work and all ears now, his expression betrays a mixture of surprise, unease, and curiosity but he does not interrupt. Wakana decides to pose the question again, leaving Tokue no room but to face a topic she has chosen not to address. While it seems like Tokue is not at all offended by the question, she nevertheless circumvents a direct response by lamenting how her fingers simply "ended up crooked like this" after a childhood illness. The conversation comes to an abrupt end as Tokue turns her back to Wakana and fans Sentaro with a paper fan. As the camera follows the air flow by swiftly panning left from Tokue's back through her moving right hand to Sentaro, the medium shot pauses for an extra beat in the middle of its trajectory to emphasize her slightly deformed hand and fingers. A small but clear lump on the joints of her wrist is also discernable. Later at a bookstore, with the help of a friend Wakana finds a photographic collection devoted to the documentation of former leprosy patients' lives. They flip through several black-and-white photographs before pausing to study one striking image in which an aged blind man "reads" a Braille book by deciphering each symbol with the tip of his tongue (figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1. Tongue Reading

This particular image is collected in Terashima Mariko's 2001 *Yamai ietemo: Hansenbyo kyosei kakuri 90nen kara jinken kaifuku e* [Even if Cured: The Recovery of Human Rights 90 Years after the Forced Quarantine of Hansen's Disease Patients]. The accompanying caption in the book, not shown in the film, reads: "Given that the perception of the fingertip is paralyzed, the Braille book is read with the tongue. Mr. Kim Ha-il said that during the six months when he learned tongue reading, his tongue kept bleeding."[31] On its own, the image of tongue reading presents a rather common motif in the visual culture of leper representation. Similar images circulated in media surrounding the wake of a series of lawsuits and activist campaigns, from the early-2000s, against the Japanese government's violation of the segregated people's human rights. Another photography book published a year later in 2002, Chō Konzai's *Chō Konzai shashinshū: Hansenbyō o toritsuzukete* [The Photography of Cho Konzai: Photographing

[31] Terashima Mariko, *Yamai ietemo: Hansenbyo kyosei kakuri 90nen kara jinken kaifuku e* (Tokyo: Kōseisha Book, 2001), 12-13.

Hansen's Disease Continuously], for instance, also includes an untitled, black-and-white photograph of a man reading a Braille book with his tongue.[32]

While I fully acknowledge the impact and visibility of tongue reading as a motif in this historical moment of visual activism, something specific about it beckons, particularly when we consider it in relation to haptic visuality. I cannot help but recall a similar image that twice adorns both the cover and the title page of Marks's book: a still from Ming-Yuen S. Ma's video *Sniff* (1996) in which the naked artist closes his eyes, crawling on his bed and tasting the sheet with his tongue (figure 4.2). This image well exemplifies the thesis of Marks's book, not only because it represents a man's touching, sniffing, and tasting his bed sheet in search for the lingering smell and residual taste that a lover has left behind (which metonymically point to a broader body of absence at the height of AIDS crisis), but also because, through close-ups and the technique of analog dubbing, it becomes unfathomable by instrumental vision alone and gradually "loses its coherence the way smell particles disperse, taking memory away with them."[33]

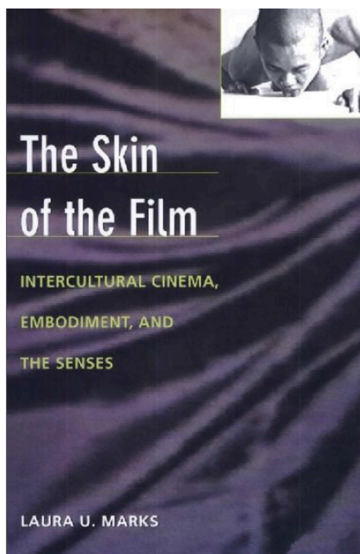

Figure 4.2. A Still from *Sniff* on the cover of Marks's book

---

[32] Chō Konzai, *Chō Konzai shashinshū: Hansenbyō o toritsuzukete* (Tokyo: Sōfūkan, 2002). The book does not include page number; the image I refer to is the 59th one.
[33] Laura U. Marks, *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*, 172.

Perhaps no filmmaker has more thoroughly explored the potentials of haptic image in relation to the recuperation of elusive memory and irreversible loss than Kawase across all possible locations on the ideological spectrum from the politically progressive to the commercially lucrative. Both the privileged aesthetic devices of haptic visuality and the body's desire to touch (either another body or the surface of an image) lie at the core of Kawase's films since her early documentaries, several of which are intimate self-portraits about her family members, especially her missing father (*Embracing*, 1992; *Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth*, 2001) and her grandfather's older sister who adopts her since childhood after her parents' divorce (*Katatsumori*, 1994; *See Heaven*, 1995; *Sun on the Horizon*, 1996). These films thematize the act of touching a surface: as Kawase affectionately caresses the face of her great-aunt (whom she calls "grandma") in *Katatsumori*; or when she gets a tattoo that painfully covers the entirety of her back in *Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth* as a way to reconcile with the passing of her estranged father. According to Adrian Martin's description of Kawase's physical presence in these films, "while the camera films, while the eye sees, a hand—the hand of the photographer-director herself—enters the frame. As if to verify by touch the reality of what is seen; as if to ground the body of the filmmaker right within that reality."[34] Reverberating with Marks's comments on the ephemerality of memory on which intercultural cinema reflects, Martin likewise notes that

---

[34] Adrian Martin, "A Certain Dark Corner of Modern Cinema: Naomi Kawase's Self-portraits," in *Performance and Temporalisation: Time Happens*, ed. Stuart Grant, Jodie McNeilly and Maeva Veerapen (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015), 182. What Martin observes in Kawase's early documentaries has been said to apply to her later fiction films as well. Rie Karatsu, for instance, has similarly suggested that "Kawase's kinaesthetic designs aim at the body of the audience and stimulate their senses. Kawase regards her own artistic project as creating reality, seeking to generate a sensory awakening without reverting to voyeurism." Erly Vieira Jr. also lists Kawase as one of the contemporary filmmakers (along with Hou Hsiao-hsien, Tsai Ming-Liang, Lucrecia Martel, Claire Denis, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, among others) most well-versed in articulating sensory, especially tactile, experiences. Rie Karatsu, "Questions for a Women's Cinema: Fact, Fiction and Memory in the Films of Naomi Kawase," *Visual Anthropology* 22 (2009), 174; Erly Vieira Jr, "Sensory Realism: Body, Emotion, and Flow in Contemporary Cinema," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 33.6 (2016).

Kawase's "fingers never truly grasp what the eye sees or what the camera frames," resulting in a failure for realities that operate at distinct levels to converge.[35] Unlike the mainstream's appropriation of the haptic image for profit, these documentaries have a more uneasy relation with how spectatorial desires might be managed, insofar as they restrain the viewer from relating to or accessing the profound mystery of Kawase's filmed subject. Such a discrepancy that remains discrepant through and through, Martin argues, situates Kawase's work among "the resistant, political cutting-edge of today's most progressive cinema," which drastically differs from "a modishly New Age filmmaking, illustrating the comfortable, soft, quasi-mystical platitudes."[36]

This view that ties Kawase's haptic aesthetics to a political gesture, however, gets complicated when we confront a basic question posed by *Sweet Bean*, itself a dead end for moralistic (film) criticism: is it not only a reading against the grain of the film but also a denial of our incited desire to not have even the slightest curiosity of the taste of dorayaki after leaving the theater? Indeed, Kawase seems to be perfectly aware of the power and challenge of the haptic image, especially when she, too, has mobilized it for her films that do not tackle any marginalized subject position, such as her 2016 short, *Seed*, commissioned to promote Miu Miu,

[35] Adrian Martin, "A Certain Dark Corner of Modern Cinema: Naomi Kawase's Self-portraits," 182.
[36] Ibid., 187. This comment directly counters another tradition of reading that considers the focus on this inaccessible, personal realm as regressive. In this line of criticism, documentary politics is established chiefly upon the filmmaker's involvement in the public and social domains. Abé Mark Nornes, for instance, has suggested that "private films nearly always disappoint in terms of conceptualization. The artists seem unable to articulate what they are doing or to comprehend the political and social implications of their work in representing the world. They present a politics of public exposure strikingly naive about the relationship between subjectivity and representation; theirs is a politics devoid of politics. […] the private filmmakers retreat to the family rooms and bedrooms." Abé Mark Nornes, *Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 136. While *Sweet Bean* is quite haptic but not a documentary; while its subject matter concerning the history of leprosy in modern Japan inarguably situates Tokue's individual story in a much larger social domain, I do not think any of these markers—hapticity; the documentary mode; individuality; sociality—can alone form the basis of a valid evaluation of the film's politics. Rather, by thinking about the film's aesthetics and its representation of social issues *together*, one of the objectives of this chapter is to use *Sweet Bean* as an example to shed light on a more wholistic approach to the issue of just where the politics of any given film might lie.

a high-end Italian fashion brand of women's clothing and accessory.[37] With its juxtaposition of the repression of modernity and the exuberance of a joy that is at once salivating and spiritual, *Sweet Bean* serves as a great example for us to reexamine the fraught tension between the aesthetics and politics of a given image, in relation to our spectatorial desire and pleasure.

In the specific case of Terashima's photograph of tongue reading, its incorporation into the film functions as a record of the traumatic memory at once personal and collective in the leper colony, which complicates Kawase's own proclivity for cinematic hapticity in her early documentaries. More than just an individual pursuit of an ideal familial unity, the attempt to make connection with the world through one's tongue seems to carry much higher ethical stakes. I want to think more about this configuration of the haptic image, its subject matter, and the space of the leper colony. What is it about this space of isolation and marginalization that makes someone like Tokue discursively closer to nature, as *Sweet Bean* imagines? How is the specific identity of the leper—forged in modern history by a set of cultural practices—epitomizes the gap between systems of knowledges deemed as the driving force behind the film's aesthetics? And how has the film responded and endowed new significances to this identity in our contemporary moment when its spatial configuration, i.e., the leper colony as a state institute, no longer stands legally?

When the Margin Disappears

[37] Through the same set of vocabulary that Martin mobilizes, Marks has pointed out that haptic criticism should "[a]void new-age touchy-feelyness!" But what she means here is slightly different from Martin: the politics of "optic" or "haptic" mode of image production is not inherently associated with a political stance. Just because the haptic quality of an image is emphasized does not mean that the image promotes progressive ideologies. Laura U. Marks, "Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes," 82.

A small detail in Tokue's resignation letter to Sentaro provides some clues: "the hedge of the holly" which the breeze has traversed. The holly here refers to false holy, a species of flowering plant native to East Asia, including Japan. This detail beckons because, as one passage in the original novel clarifies, given that the stiff and spiky leaves of false holly would harm those who attempt escapes false holly, it is the very plant that has been consciously chosen to grow into an "impenetrable" botanic barrier that encloses the leper colony.[38] Even though the film does not spell out this piece of information, the reference to the hedge in the letter as an obstacle that the wind-messenger must overcome, once again, testifies to the condition of forced isolation that used to separate Tokue's lived reality from the world outside. That fact that a natural entity has been cultivated and arranged in such a way to hinder the leper's communication with other natural entities also reiterates the film's recurring interrogation of the categorical similarity, dissonance, and crossing between animist porosity and the lack thereof in an otherwise disenchanted world.

The developmental history of the leper colony in modern Japan, itself, invites the film's dialectical treatment between porosity and closure. According to Susan L. Burns's historical account, the welding of leprosy treatment with total segregation was a decidedly modern phenomenon in Japan beginning from the late 19th century. The state's desire to present itself as a civilized, progressive society motivated the transformation of the leper from a group of physically visible and medically attended part of the society into a national abject whose presence should remain unseen and thoroughly controlled, insofar as leprosy was considered to be one of the emblematic diseases of a backward civilization according to Western society's

[38] The description in the novel reads: "The eastern side of the street was a residential area while the other side was bordered by *an impenetrable holly hedg*e that extended into the distance like a green demarcating line without end [emphasis mine]." Durian Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 99.

hygienic discourse. By contrasting pre-modern leper communities in Japan (known as the *monoyoshi* village) with the modern system of institutionalized segregation, Burns argues that the ideological ordering of the Meiji government's public health policy targeted at dismantling the former and creating a new culture of exclusivity, all while it established a constructed genealogy between them. That is, the officials attributed the "origin" of a modern invention to an early modern tradition, thereby legitimizing their policy even though, in effect,

> the *monoyoshi* villages of the early modern period bore scant resemblance to the 'isolation centres' and 'hospitals' that these authors were advocating. The borders of the former had been permeable, while in the latter every aspect of daily life would come to be regulated by the officials who administered them as state employees."[39]

The ultimate ends of the creation of an institutional lineage was to eliminate, by force and legal regulation, the possible lifestyles and treatments for the patient that had remained alternative to the ones privileged by the state. In this gradual process, "the inmate [of the leper colony] was 'colonised' or 'converted' into accepting that existence within the institution was in some ways better than life 'outside'."[40] While this meant that compliance to the system was encouraged and awarded, police enforcement was the chief agent that executed the public health laws. The majority of the patients thereby arrived in custody. Japanese leper colonies, in this line, were modeled not so much after hospital as prison, and the same system of imprisonment, control, and rehabilitation would later be implemented into Taiwan, Korea, and others colonial regions under

---

[39] Susan L. Burns, "From 'Leper Villages' to Leprosaria: Public health, Nationalism and the Culture of Exclusion in Japan," 103.

[40] Ibid., 105-106. As Hirokawa Waka also points out, "[t]he Japanese government did not declare a single method for managing the disease, but its policies in the end severely impaired the possibilities of alternative forms of treatment." This exclusivity increased from the pre-war era through the "total war" to the post-war time, as Japan witnessed growing restrictions on individual freedom more generally. The aftermath of this exclusivity was that the general public lacked understanding of the disease; social stigma thereby persisted, which significantly delayed conversations surrounding the abolishment of the segregation law. Hirokawa Waka, "A Colony or a Sanitarium? A Comparative History of Segregation Politics of Hansen's Disease in Modern Japan," in *Science, Technology, and Medicine in the Modern Japanese Empire*, ed. David G. Wittner and Philip C. Brown (New York: Routledge, 2016), 128.

the rule of the Japanese Empire.[41] Given the twofold colonialism—Western expansion and, later, Japan's intra-Asian invasion—that drove and guided this history of a modern state apparatus, it is most apposite to term this space "leper *colony*"—as this chapter has insisted on from the outset—rather than the understated "house," "hospital," or "sanitarium."

Reading against this historical backdrop, the conceptual intricacies behind the leper as an identity and the leper colony as an ideological space in *Sweet Bean* emerge. In the film's appropriation, recuperation, and revision of these terms originally defined in relation to modernity, the logic of segregation has been altered. Aside from reconfiguring the leper's body through the classical notion of corporeal porosity in relation to the wind in East Asian medicine, the leper colony, too, transforms from a modern facility of autonomy into an animist sphere where connectivity between patients and, recalling Tokue's letter, "everything in this world" transpires. In a perhaps ethically daring move, the film complicates how we might typically think about the leper colony: while there is no question that, historically, it has been a site of repression, could utopian potentiality also emerge out of the traumatic detritus of modernity? Indeed, towards the end of the novel, the penultimate letter that Tokue writes to Sentaro before her death reiterates her shamanic capacity and identifies its deep groundedness within the leper colony:

> I listened to the birds that visited Tenshoen, and the insects, trees, grass, and flowers. To the wind, rain, and light. And to the moon. I believe they all have voices. I can easily spend a whole day Listening to them. When I am in the woods at Tenshoen the whole world is there too. When I hear stars whispering at night I feel part of the eternal flow of time.[42]

[41] "For patients who failed to follow the institution's rules," according to Burns, "a system of punishments was created, again closely modelled on prison practices. These included restrictions on food and drink, censorship of letters, and solitary confinement. Patient rooms were also modelled on prisons of the period: eight patients were housed in twelve-mat *tatami* rooms (each mat measuring approximately 6 by 3 feet)." Susan L. Burns, "From 'Leper Villages' to Leprosaria: Public health, Nationalism and the Culture of Exclusion in Japan," 106.
[42] Durian Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 164-165.

A kind of cosmic oneness—of both space and time—into which those who open themselves up to the signs of nature are absorbed: such is the conceptual sphere where Tokue has dwelled for decades up to the historical moment of 1996.

The leper colony's ecological significance becomes even more evident when we contextualize *Sweet Bean* within Kawase's artistic trajectory. Examined from a thematic perspective, it becomes clear that the film conceptualizes the leper colony as a reservoir of a non-alienated human-nature relationship that undergirds prominent tensions in almost all of Kawase's fiction features. *Sweet Bean* reflects on Kawase's sustained topoi and imageries, related to none other than animism and its human agents, including shamans understood in the ethnographic sense. While the majority of films explored in this dissertation approach the shaman metaphorically (with the exception of Maya Deren's ethnographical commitment explored in Chapter Three), many of Kawase's films feature characters who are actually ritual leaders, among other participants of various textual traditions also known as religions: Shinto, Buddhism, and the Ryūkyūan worldview (the belief system of the Ryūkyū Islands, including Amami Ōshima where her 2014 *Still the Water* is set). To better understand how *Sweet Bean* dovetails the shamanic figure of the leper and ritualistic shamans, it is worthy to note some common features of Kawase's cinematic rituals, even as the scopes and functions of them vary from film to film. On the narrative front, they are communal events where participants dance and chant together; after the rituals the protagonists are catharized as some individual and/or familial traumas come to be addressed and gradually worked through. Stylistically, the rituals are frequently shot in long takes with handheld camera, which constantly travels and reframes to follow the participants' movements and actions. The cinematographic fluidity, routinely

combined with a compositional strategy that tightly frames human figures from medium shots to close-ups, give viewers an impression that they partake in the rituals not as distant observers but as participants on the ground. During or after the rituals, the transformation that the protagonists undergo is visibly signaled by the advent of a state of togetherness wherein they find themselves enfolded, immanently, into the embrace of the world. Recalling the martial artist's participation in the snow in Chapter Three, Kawase's characters are similarly surrounded by natural elements. But if the former manages to control the snow down to the micro level of each snowflake, the entirety of the latter is immersed within the depth of nature, which quite literally "cleanse" them with water (such as rain and ocean).

Consider, for instance, the remarkable depiction in *Shara* (2003) of the annual Basara Festival that takes place in Nara, Japan's ancient capital that regularly boasts, in Kawase's films, sundry antique architectures, shrines, temples, mountains, and old-growth forests. In the beginning of this 7-minute sequence composed of only ten shots, Yu, the young female protagonist who has recently discovered that the woman who raised her is not her biological mother, stands as the lead dancer of the ritual on a packed street flanked by spectators; Shun, the young male protagonist who has suffered the consequence of the sudden, mysterious disappearance of his twin brother five years ago, guards on one side of the street to separate the dancers from the crowd. As the festive dance and music unfold, all the participants—from the dancers to the guards to the spectators—begin to enter a state of collective joy, which culminates in an ecstatic outburst when an unexpected downpour undiscriminatingly wets everyone. Shun, then, promptly leave his duty behind and joins the dance, and so does his father who has been guarding as well. The mothers of the two protagonists—Yu is played by Kawase herself—who have been watching them in the crowd from the outset are, at this moment, seen dancing and

chanting along as well. An epiphany of some sort transpires, appeasing two fraught families and uniting them into one larger whole, which includes all other participants likewise bathed in the downpour. After this sequence, the film enters its conclusive section and ends on a hopeful note with the coming of a new life into the young man's family.

Comparable instances that exhibit the healing power of nature, understood as a source of spiritual sustenance, abound in Kawase's films.[43] It comes as no surprise that the majority of her works are set in places where people's access to nature constitutes a crucial part of the everyday life. The mountains and forests of Nara where Kawase grew up have unfailingly served as her privileged settings in *Suzaku* (1997), *Firefly* (2000), *The Mourning Forest* (2007), *Hanezu* (2011), *Radiance* (2017), and *Vision* (2018). To be clear, Nara has not been presented as a Romantic wonderland utterly untouched by traces of modernization; rather, it functions as a screen heterotopia where distinctions between the old and the new, the sacred and the profane simply do not hold water. In almost all of her films, Kawase seeks to foster such an enchanted chronotope where the presence of nature—indexed by extensive shots of trees, flowers, insects, among other natural imageries—is edited into an urban environment, be it Nara or not. Even as Kawase's films leave her favorite city, they manage to return to her familiar milieu of a primeval forest in Thailand (*Nanayo*, 2008) or the spiritual Amami Ōshima. The fact that *Sweet Bean* is filmed entirely in Tokyo and features a narrative driven, at least initially, by the capitalist system of enterprise and profit thereby situates it in a curious position in Kawase's oeuvre. How should we make sense of this incongruity on both the spatial and thematic levels? In what ways does

[43] Another memorable example appears at the end of *Still the Water* wherein a young man and a young woman swim together, completely naked in the sea. Their total immersion into an infinite blueness takes place after the film sees them come to terms with, respectively, his discontent with his single mother's wanton lifestyle and her acceptance of the chronical illness and, later, death of her mother, a respected shaman in the local community.

these choices speak to the contesting relation between first and second nature that Kawase insists on articulating through the cinematic image over a career that has now spanned over 20 years?

An intuitive response to the anomaly of *Sweet Bean* is to see it as a reaction to critical pressure, insofar as Kawase's thematic interests and stylistic signatures that had earned her a place at the forefront of international art cinema started to be viewed by some critics as stagnancy. Mark Schilling's review of Kawase's *Still the Water*, for instance, seems to be as much about the film as the over-saturation of thematic certainty and stylistic consistency across her recent films in general: "[Kawase] overdoes this sort of thing. The pearls of mystical wisdom begin to cloy, as do the repeated shots of sunlight filtering through the huge banyan tree […] We get it, we get it *and* we get it."[44] Similarly, Adam Cook's harsh review of *Sweet Bean* questions the reason behind Cannes Film Festival's repeated selections of Kawase's films over the years: "How does something like this beat out films by newer, promising directors? Surely it can't be Kawase's tarnished reputation as an artist (it's been a good while since her more favorably-received documentary work had its day)."[45] But rather than seeing the changes in *Sweet Bean* as mere reactions to some cynical critiques which have begun, like Cook, to see Kawase's success at the international film festival circuit as nothing but a convenient token of women's visibility ("a surefire miss than something that will steal the spotlight from the boys' club"), I hope to contextualize them differently as reflections on decidedly more pressing pressures larger than stylistic innovation or individual identity.

[44] Mark Schilling, "Reflections on the Dark Side of a Tropical Island," *The Japan Times*, July 2014, available at https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2014/07/16/films/film-reviews/reflections-dark-side-tropical-island/#.WxXBNS2ZOgQ.
[45] Adam Cook, "Why Does the Cannes Film Festival Keep Programming Naomi Kawase's Movies?," *IndieWire*, May 2015, available at https://www.indiewire.com/2015/05/why-does-the-cannes-film-festival-keep-programming-naomi-kawases-movies-61786/.

Sweet Bean, I think, poses questions crucial not only to our understanding of Kawase's creative trajectory but also to the relevance of Romantic narrative to present-day environmental realities, not least the by-now widespread Anthropocene truism that argues for the obliteration of the distance between nature and culture.[46] Dialectically the film reproduces and continues such a distance, before soon rendering it obsolete and intangible. No longer set in Nara or a remote island, the film relocates to Tokyo, one of the symbolic centers of global modernity par excellence; no longer featuring primeval forests or the Pacific Ocean, the traces of nature to which the viewer has had access through her films are now limited to the presence of street trees and carefully maintained parks. That said, in this new space of filmmaking seemingly characterized by the totalizing power of modernization, *Sweet Bean* theorizes the leper colony in relation to nature and emplaces the peculiar configuration of such a built environment within an imaginary Tokyo—a mini-Nara within this world city, so to say. What used to be a modern institute of state segregation, ironically, becomes a site of preservation, wherein the openness of the leper's body allows Tokue to follow, in reverse, the wind that has penetrated and forever altered her subjectivity. Indeed, the first time when Sentaro and Wakana visit Tokue in the leper colony, after getting off the bus they have to walk down a narrow path flanked by lofty trees and nothing else. This lingering path that leads to the residential area of the leper colony—itself a portal to the animist sphere—is filmed in such a way that recalls the default setting where classical fairy tales routinely begin: an enchanted forest that grows and operates according to its

[46] As per this view motivated by the advent of the Anthropocene, nature and culture have been inexorably intertwined to the extent that no hard line separates the natural from the cultural anymore. Developing from the ideology of a nature that could no longer be purely natural, for instance, Timothy Morton has proposed that ecocriticism today, in order to function, must let go of the fantasy of an abstract entity called "nature" that lies somewhere out there and awaits protection and restoration. "Putting something called Nature on a pedestal and admiring it from afar," Morton argues, "does for the environment what patriarchy does for the figure of Woman. It is a paradoxical act of sadistic admiration." Timothy Morton, *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 5.

own magical rule, uninterrupted by the changes and conflicts in the world of culture outside (figure 4.3).

4.3. The path to the animist leper colony in a forest of enchantment.

While an affinity with the animism is curiously maintained by the leper colony in the chosen setting of *Sweet Bean*, it would soon turn nonviable—at least discursively—after the repeal of the Leprosy Prevention Law. Indeed, if the film redefines the leper colony from an animist perspective, it also destabilizes such a redefinition by recounting a story set not during the period of absolute segregation but, rather, after its opening: an event that marks the conclusion of the kind of natural poetry that Kawase has been writing with her caméra-stylo.[47] What the film thus portrays is, instead, an elegiac lament over the loss of this fantastical, if not escapist, security that once accompanies the exclusivity of the leper colony, imagined here as the last resort for the possibility of Romanticism. As the repeal of the segregation law propels, metaphorically, the fading of differences between animist and non-animist realms, so the leper's

[47] The opening of leper colonies across the world has indeed prompted filmmakers to reflect on the adequate means of depicting the lives of these formerly segregated subjects *outside* such spaces of confinement. Another recent example, set in Egypt, is Abu Bakr Shawky's *Yomeddine* (2018) in which the protagonist leaves, for the first time, the leper colony where he has dwelled since childhood.

return to the thick of the metropolitan everyday comes with a price: when spatialities between the center of culture and the margin of nature, and when the associated temporalities between the teleology of global modernity and cyclical pastoralism can no longer—not even provisionally—be kept apart. Such a negation of coevalness enacts a formidable undifferentiation between nature and culture, which ruthlessly demolishes even the false holly hedge behind which the possibility of enchantment could still hide. When segregation of time and space stops sheltering Kawase's animist imagination, the illusion of power generated by her privileged natural imagery is put into question: what if this illusion is only an illusion and this power not total? Unlike Miyazaki's isolated Iron Town workers that follow a representational stereotype of the leper as a group of marginalized, invisible community away from the heat of civilization, Tokue too becomes a store employee.

Unlike Sentaro, however, Tokue does not live paycheck to paycheck. Remuneration—in fact, profit of any sort—simply does not constitute the primary goal of her labor. Her advent not only represents the bounty of nature but also introduces it into the modern life as an unconditional gift. As I have demonstrated, *Sweet Bean*, through associating haptic visuality with the mysticism of Tokue's animist capacity, departs from the original novel in allowing her animism to maintain an absolute singularity that cannot be appropriated let alone commodified, even as she navigates an otherwise disenchanted world. To an extent, her unfitness for other human beings puts her in touch with nature in a discrete way, but by no means is she confined solely to the leper colony either. Instead, her daily excursus to and activity at the dorayaki shop, in and of themselves, generate a sense of fulfillment that distinguishes her from her fellow lepers who are never shown outside of the leper colony throughout the film. Straddling the animist and the non-animist realms, Tokue occupies a liminal space occupied by her only. Under her

guidance, Sentaro has been exposed to the ways in which the world can be viewed similarly once he, too, occupies the same position. The rest of this chapter dwells on this state of liminality and the sentiment of loneliness which Tokue has endured in the discriminative city of Tokyo, and which Sentaro will be enduring as he, too, transforms into a shamanic figure at the end of the film. I propose that the sentiment of loneliness that accompanies the structural singularity of being shamanic is best described as melodramatic.

All That Animism Allows

Distinct from such documentary works in the early 2000s as Terashima's and Chō's activist photographs, several fictionalized accounts featuring the Hansen's disease have more recently appeared in Japan, recounting and testifying to stories about former leprosy patients' survival within the leper colony and beyond. Many of the creators of these narratives, including both Sukegawa and Kawase, have neither personally contracted the illness nor experienced the traumatic past that forms the subject of their depiction. This gap between text and reality has invited rethinking of the ethical license by which artistic representations approach this complex history, if not more straightforward critiques of their appropriation of others' plight for a combination of sensationalism and sentimentalism that sells.

With a main storyline that centers around a former leprosy patient discriminated based on her physical deformities and the misinformation on the risk of contagion, culminating in her unaccompanied death in the leper colony before any social stigma could be marginally confronted let alone washed away, *Sweet Bean* does seem sentimental—and unapologetically so. Not to mention the catalog of melodramatic attributes exhibited across various sequences of the film: Tokue's physical suffering, verbal discriminations against leprosy patients, excessive

expressions of depression and frustration, tears (both Sentaro and Wakana cry after Tokue's death), and occulted virtues of the individual. As Kathryn Tanaka suggests, however, "this dismissal overlooks questions of how stories are borrowed, retold, and integrated into a broader, national discourse" that involves such issues as gender and sexuality, the formation of family life, and transitional justice.[48] Echoing Tanaka's observation, the stories in both the original novel and the film solicit more than cheap tears. Through mobilizing the language of melodrama, they address urgent issues pertinent to both the contemporary Japanese society and the late-capitalist world more generally. Ultimately, the question that *Sweet Bean* poses is fundamental to any animist imagination: What meanings of life are we missing out when we refuse to recognize nonhuman entities as animate beings and attend to their personhood?

Peter Brooks's canonical *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* has greatly inspired my thinking of this question, insofar as its conceptualization of melodrama ties the imaginary quality of this textual tradition with an ideological task of proffering a moral compass through which meanings can be located in an age of chaos. The melodramatic imagination emerges in the West, as Brooks advances, from a post-sacred world where moral legibility—the Manichean presentations of innocence and guilt—confirmed previously by the Church's authority has been obfuscated after the French Revolution:

> the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred and its representative institutions (Church and Monarch), the shattering of the myth of Christendom, the dissolution of an organic and hierarchically cohesive society, and the invalidation of the literary forms—tragedy, comedy of manners—that depended on such a society.[49]

---

[48] While Tanaka's main object of study is four-volume manga series, *Mugi baa no shima*, she includes Sukegawa's novel and Kawase's film in this group of works and suggests some bases for comparison: from thematic concerns to identities of the narrator; from the authors' preparatory work to the shared depiction of extended families. Kathryn Tanaka, "Hansen's Disease and Family: Reflections on Reading and Teaching *Mugi baa no shima* (Grandma Mugi's Island) Part1," *Igaku-shi to shakai no taiwa*, December 2018, available at https://igakushitosyakai.jp/article/post1450e/?fbclid=IwAR3mbjWnZeoFJjCdDalCrN2c7qjOq7zwpsykpD3MUfEPZ8bkUw5kHL8H5P9I.

[49] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995), 15.

When all that is solids melts into air, including the once established and secured standards of morality, confusion transpires. A persistent desire of order defines the primary ideological function of melodrama: a textual attempt to locate meanings and, ultimately, truths in a befogging world through the assignation of virtue and vice. Melodrama thereby aims at baring and decoding the sources of all value, significance, and clarity occulted by a deceptive surface reality. Somewhat tragically, however, melodrama is also fully aware of the eventual failure of its longing for transcendental moral principles, given that they have come to be atomized down to the level of the individual. The holy guidance to a once essential Truth has disappeared; the best one can hope for now, instead, are moralized persons and personified moralities that take up the form of specific characters in narrative fiction: those victims (who might or might not be their own heroes and heroines) and villains who occupy the center of melodrama on stage and paper.

I emphasize this conceptual origin of melodrama constructed by Brooks because so often studies of melodrama that follow his account, many of which are devoted to film melodrama, downscale its significance and dwell, instead, on the aesthetic devices and pronounced performances—on stage and on film alike—that articulate the victim's suffering/virtue or solicit particular kinds of spectatorial responses. Linda Williams's "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," published in 1991, most famously outlines a schematic amount of melodrama organized by the type of bodily excess it displays ("emotion") and the presumed body it affects (passive women).[50] Insightful as this mapping of melodrama might be, a problem that Williams herself retrospectively acknowledges in her 2014 monograph on the TV series *The Wire* lies in its

---

[50] Linda Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (1991), 9.

inability to go beyond the realm of the individual, into the clarity of structural morality to which Brooks's original concept aspires. "Might it be possible," Williams provocatively asks,

> to forge a less self-righteous kind of melodrama, less dependent on wild swings between pathos and action, less a matter of cycles of victimization and retributive violence (whether based on inequities of race, gender, or class), and more a matter of reaching beyond personal good or evil to determinations of better justice?[51]

For melodrama to be relevant to issues that operate at an abstract, systemic scale, the conventional Manichean theme of good versus evil that manifests itself through individual character's motion and emotion should likewise be elevated to a quest for moral legibility on an institutional level.[52] William's move, in this view, can be described as a return to melodrama's primary ideological function that makes visible the structure of a post-sacred world.

What I am purposing is a recuperation of the oft-neglected metaphysics in Brooks through Williams's emphasis on institutional illumination. Specifically, I want to think about how the beans in *Sweet Bean* are used in such a way that allows melodrama to similarly move away from its conventional individual and human-centered affairs. The higher register at which *Sweet Bean* operates concerns the animist worldview. While Brooks specifies the historical context of French Revolution as the starting point of melodramatic sensibility, Kawase's emphatically melodramatic film advances an understanding of modernity beyond a single (Western) event. Indeed, Brooks's concept of "the melodramatic imagination" directly informs my coinage of the animist imagination because of the shared quest for a solution to onrushing

---

[51] Linda Williams, *On* The Wire (Durham: Duke University Press, 2014), 115.

[52] Essentially, then, Williams rethinks melodrama by pointing out that it could share the same concern with the articulation of social totality in Jamesonian realism, so long as we are willing to let go its associated aesthetic baggage, which includes not only melodrama's Manichean worldview of good versus evil but also the manifestation of said worldview through excess. As Williams argues by taking on Brooks, "I would even venture to say that there is no set aesthetics of melodrama, not even what Peter Brooks has called the 'aesthetics of astonishment' or the 'mode of excess'. It is pleasurable to recognize melodrama this way, but it is also possible to mistake it by limiting it to mere aesthetic 'excess'." Ibid., 83.

crisis—whether there is any solution is a different story. Paralleling the split between the sacred and the post-sacred world, the animist imagination updates the melodramatic imagination, insofar as it grapples with the dialectical tension between forces of enchantment and disenchantment that plays a pivotal role in our ecological sensibilities. As an animist imagination, *Sweet Bean* redefines the post-sacred world as one wherein people, except for shamanic figures like Tokue, have lost the capacity of attending to and communicating with specific nonhuman entities, if not nature in general. The institutional justice that the film seeks to recognize thereby encompasses not only issues related to transitional justice and the human rights of the former leprosy patients but also the lost connectivity with the occulted animist realm: Tokue's personal virtue is bound up with her ability to recognize the personified virtue of the bean—down to each single bean as indexed by its suitability for the production of the sweet bean paste—and of everything in the world. That which has been clouded and unrecognized is therefore not merely her personal virtue but the larger ecological situation of which her relationship with every entity is paradigmatic. In this line, the film's aesthetics of melodrama is not oriented around her—or any single person—but a bygone relationality between the human and the nonhuman that this dissertation has described as animist.

It is not arbitrary that the film would resort to the language of melodrama to present its quest of the lost animist order. Brooks has, himself, compared melodrama with Gothic literature in which the Freudian notion of the uncanny—generated by none other than the residue of archaic animist thought in modern society—plays a crucial role. What makes *Sweet Bean* melodramatic and not Gothic, borrowing Brooks's elaboration, is that it "demonstrates over and over that the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible."[53] Tokue

[53] Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*, 18-20.

unmasks and deciphers these signs from nature through Listening; the film, then, makes them legible and tangible through the devices of haptic visuality. Such a unity of ideological pursuit and cinematic stylistics characterize the film, perhaps one can say, as an animist melodrama about structural issues that lie exterior to the general melodramatic emphasis on the individual.

One conceptual split between the lost animist realm and the disenchanted world through which we could situate and interpret *Sweet Bean* immediately comes to mind: the ecological condition of contemporary Japanese society after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, which triggered a massive tsunami on March 11 and led to the release of radioactive materials from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in the following days. That the film thematizes the occulted virtue of each bean, its revelation based on its fitness to be made into the bean paste, and said paste's eventual palatability speaks cogently to Japan's cultural and agricultural landscapes after these catastrophic events. Such a culturo-historical intersection between the film and real-life incidents stands not only because, in Akira Mizuta Lippit's words, the sublimity of nuclear catastrophe has haunted Japanese cinema since the epochal events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by transforming it into "a medium framed by disasters past and yet to come" given that Lippit conceptualizes disaster as both a devastation of matter and the foreclosure of futurity.[54] It is also because Tokue's capacity of recognizing the "goodness" of culinary ingredients reflects a collective effort to examine each edible item as several food-monitoring programs across the country have attempted to discern the radioactivity in different agricultural regions and of their products since the wake of the nuclear disaster. For many, overnight, the daily bread has become a matter of biosecurity; the ordinariness of eating a heightened thriller. Not to mention how the export of

---

[54] A special tautology between disaster and Japanese cinema thus transpires: "the cinematic medium is the representation of disaster in Japan, a cinema of 3.11 before the fact. The medium of disaster is disaster." Akira Mizuta Lippit, "Between Disaster, Medium 3.11," *Mechademia* 10 (2015), 4-5.

food products from five Japanese prefectures most severely affected by the nuclear spill has since been instrumentalized into a bargaining chip at the negotiation table of international politics.[55]

One could speculate how such a collective anxiety bled into the creative processes of both Kawase's film and the original novel. As Kath Weston's urban ethnography notes, post-3.11 earthquake was indeed a period when "the language of protection—in both Japanese and English—seemed to pop up everywhere in public discourse on nuclear power."[56] Personified radioisotopes, not unlike frustrating harassers or obsessive suitors, brought about "unwanted intimacy" across all aspects of the thick of the everyday. The subject of protection included not only the human (especially children) but also the nonhuman—companion and economic animals (such as pets and livestock) and "trees, mountains, and streams that historically made veneration and protection in a wider sense possible"—as the former have always been in an inextricably interdependent network with the latter through the essential act of drinking and eating.[57] The allegorical assimilation of the other that operates at the orifice of orality becomes, in this context, urgently embodied. As the evil wind that has formed the aetiological source of all diseases in traditional East Asian medicine now takes up the form of radioisotopes that physically circulate in the air, so the inferential relationship of the environment to the human comes to be characterized by a mix of affective responses that comprises suspicion, inimicality, and even paranoia.

---

[55] For instance, the Chinese government's lift of import restrictions on certain food products from Japan at a bilateral summit between Xi Jinping and Abe Shinzo in October 2018 was interpreted as symbol of warming diplomatic relationship, whereas, in November 2018, Taiwanese voters' approval of a referendum to maintain a ban on the import of food products from five prefectures, many believed, would significantly impact the signing of a full free trade agreement between Taiwan and Japan.
[56] Kath Weston, *Animate Planet: Making Visceral Sense of Living in a High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2017), 96.
[57] Weston notes that certain vegetables like lotus roots, for instance, concentrated more radioisotopes and should hence not be served at school lunch. Ibid., 97-98.

Such a biopolitical condition recalls the dialectics between corporeal openness and closeness crucial to my previous discussion of leprosy, further highlighting the relevance of what Derrida has proposed as an ethical imperative of "eating well." For the philosopher, the basis of all kinds of relations entails the subject's assimilation of the other, symbolical and literal alike. The specific example on which Derrida reflects is people's consumption of meat. Given the buccal nature of relationality, however, the moral question that human subjects should constantly pose to themselves when consuming the nonhuman more generally is thereby not

> should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that, the living or the nonliving, man or animal, but since *one must* eat in any case and since it is and tastes good [*bien*] to eat, and since there's no other definition of the good [*du bien*], *how* for goodness sake should one eat well [*bien manger*].[58]

This open inquiry concerning not *what* but *how* to eat poses an extra challenge to our melodramatic shaman tasked to illuminate the virtue of each bean. On the most instrumental front, Tokue is not only capable of discerning the good, unpolluted beans from those unsuitable for her confection, she also owns the animist knowledge of precisely how that goodness can be preserved in the process of cooking as previously explored. Given that she must eat and that she must respect the edible other at once, her non-recipe at once maintains an ethical commitment to the beans even as she violates the ontological boundary between her and the beans by transforming them into the bean paste and, then, interiorizing it.

Beyond the specific context of recent events in Japan, the contrast between temporalities that the melodrama of *Sweet Bean* dramatizes takes place, too, at another level that fundamentally stretches the limit of instrumentality. Unlike the task of eating-well, however, this time not even Tokue's skill could overcome the conceptual division that such a contrast creates,

---

[58] Jacques Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," in *Who Comes after the Subject?*, ed. Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy (New York: Routledge, 1991), 115.

one between different registers of things: exchange value, use value, or something that altogether transcends the calculation of value. To reiterate a point previously made, Tokue's motivation to work at the dorayaki store is out of a consummate form of altruism that seeks no reciprocity of any sort; she comes to "Listen" to the unrecognized virtue of the bean, bring joy to the world, and generously share with Sentaro her method of opening up the self to the world. One could even say that, freed from the need to make a living, Tokue is available to the world in a different way that no one else is, even as she deals with the bean's use and exchange value on a daily basis—animism as a gift rather an a use. That said, her return to the leper colony under societal pressure and her eventual death there mark the failure of her utopian quest. Indeed, in Williams's definition melodrama "always offers the contrast between how things are and how they could be, or should be. This is its fundamental utopianism."[59] The contrast between Tokue's commitment to giving her gift that keeps on giving and the trenched social reality that her vision cannot alter constitutes precisely a melodramatic sentiment of loneliness that permeates the film. If Tokue's yearning to communicate with and thus potentially enlighten her human fellows gives her the courage to exit the comfort zone of the leper colony at the dawn of her life, she remains largely alone as her Listening—and all the wonders it has opened up and achieved—proves to be uncommunicative, not entertained even slightly by the general public.

Is there any way out of this prison of melodramatic affect? Does *Sweet Bean* allow Sentaro to rid of this loneliness that has haunted Tokue when he finally masters Tokue's recipe—even though the learning and production process remains unsaid? The answers seem to be negative, unhappily. Consider the final sequence which most effectively demonstrates the film's insistence upon the opacity and privacy of the animist realm. In a park full of cherry trees

[59] Linda Williams, *On* The Wire, 84.

in full blossom—a nod to the novel's depiction of Tokue's hometown in Sentaro's dream—where numerous families are picnicking, Sentaro stands next to a small food cart, making pancakes and soliciting people's attention by shouting, repeatedly, "Dorayaki! Come and get them!" He first appears in a long shot that begins by slowly panning down from treetops to where he stands. He reappears, two shots later, in a medium shot which gradually reframes into a close-up. Curiously, despite the various shot scales at which he is filmed, none of the shots captures the presence of surrounding picnickers. When we hear a little girl eventually approach him to purchase ten pancakes, the film has already cut to the white rolling credits against a black background. That is, when Sentaro finally makes contact with someone who recognizes and responds to his calling, the interlocuter is revealed to be a spectral acousmêtre—perhaps indeed a specter like the young Tokue he dreams of in the novel. Might this little girl be the shamanic figure of the child, discussed in Chapter One, whose presence indicates a hopeful future of animism's development in a disenchanted metropolis? The film implies such a possibility but refuses to grant us an insight—in fact, not even a sight—of just what this future could look like.

Such an ending marks a major difference between *Sweet Bean* and the other animist imaginations examined throughout this dissertation. Most of the films I have studied are pedagogical to the extent that the shamanic figures' animist capacities are translated into concrete methods of viewings through which spectators can engage with the moving image: for instance, the extreme attentiveness to mise-en-scène down to insectile scale that *The Assassin* solicits (Chapter Two); the intense frame-by-frame looking without which the digital wonder in *The Grandmaster* remains imperceptible (Chapter Three). While *Sweet Bean* is largely optimistic in tone, it nevertheless casts doubt on the sureness with regards to the transability between the fashioning of an animist realm on screen and the spectatorial participation in this realm. Against

the backdrop of splendid weather and a gorgeous park, a sense of cruelty hovers above the final sequence, quietly restraining Sentaro from any possibility of interpersonal connection in a public space densely populated by one cheerful family after another. Framing Sentaro under the cherry trees and in close-up, the last shots witness his transformation into Tokue. One recalls how Tokue, too, is similarly framed under blossoming cherry trees in the opening sequence of the film. A year has passed; the cycle of Sentaro's transformation completes. As a result of this transformation, however, Sentaro begins to pay the same price of isolation as Tokue did. Occupying a position structurally close to Tokue's, he now lives a life that comes as incompatible with all his customers outside of the frame. But as opposed to Tokue, he remains subject to relations of exchange—i.e. he still needs to sell dorayaki for a living—and yet aspires to a world governed by qualitative values wherein what matters the most is not maximum profit or efficiency but those things that supposedly matter the most in an ideal world: the value for life, pleasure, beauty, enjoyment, meaning. Indeed, the ambivalent position in which Sentaro, as the initiated shaman, finds himself is reflected in his final invitation of "Dorayaki! Come and get them!" Although he certainly needs to sell his products to survive, there is a pronounced difference from his earlier involvement in commodity culture—a sense that he, too, might be offering the dorayaki as a gift to the world in the same way that Tokue used to offer hers.

The holly hedge of the leper colony might no longer deliver its intended blockage and harm, but the animist sphere once contained by it does not thereby open up to the visitors. In a different form segregation persists. At the end of the day, *Sweet Bean* which most explicitly dwells on the existence and mechanism of animist capacity among all the films examined in this dissertation is also most brutally honest about a harsh side of the animist imagination. Gently it reminds us of animism's mysticism and impenetrability, and of the cruel fact that the animist

imagination of cinema, sometimes, is nothing but an imagination. Alienation does not get abolished by animism, at least in any facile way. To slightly modulate Douglas Sirk's renowned take on the title of his melodramatic classic: all that animism allows is stingy. To those of us who aspire to an animist utopia wherein the human's relation with the environment no longer remains alienated, the ending of the film asks if we are ready to bear a lingering sense of loneliness even in the crowd, accompanied only by the voices of wandering souls in the wind.

CODA. THE FILM CRITIC

A really good detective never gets married.

—Raymond Chandler, "Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel"[1]

Sentaro's eventual solitude is not alone across the animist imaginations. Suzanne leads a busy life as a single parent; Simon's sister lives afar; Nozomi kills her lover by accident; Yoko has no intention of marrying the father of her child; Koichi chooses the world over the chance to be reunited with his father and brother; Gong Er's affection towards Ip Man stays unrequited until her death; and Tokue remains discriminated by the public with whom she has longed to interact. By hinting at the companionship between Nie and the mirror polisher when they walk into the distance at the end of *The Assassin*, Hou Hsiao-hsien's treatment of his shamanic figure is perhaps the kindest of all, even if we know that, in a version of the film created specifically for the Japanese market, an additional sequence shows the mirror polisher's newly-wed wife who awaits his return at home. Whatever feelings they have for each other, Nie is only escorting him back to his lover.

If, like the supreme detective in Raymond Chandler's principle of characterization, the shamanic figures similarly attend to the occulted nonhuman personhood and disclose to the public the evidence of its existence, must their desires to be with fellow humans—friendship, romantic love, family life—necessarily suffer? For them who are situated at the crossroad between the human and the nonhuman realms, collectives with nonhumans seem consistently easier to formulate than those with the human. Somewhat paradoxically, those who are forceful in crossing the human boundaries, much against their own wish and desire, cannot quite make

[1] Raymond Chandler, "Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel," in *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, ed. Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 70.

meaningful connections within their respective human societies. Most linked and most isolated at once—is this the inevitable price to pay for those who live in the present for the ecological future? On what ground if any, not without a tinge of melancholy, do humanist longings have a place in the cosmic polity of togetherness?

As if anticipating these questions that her conclusion of *Sweet Bean* would pose, Kawase provides some tangible responses in her subsequent film, *Radiance* (2017). Famed photographer Nakamori Masaya (played too by Nagase Masatoshi, the actor of Sentaro), constantly embittered due to his disappearing eyesight, joins an expert panel composed of visually impaired people. They have gathered in a small screening room to comment on the work of Misako (played by Misaki Ayame), an audio description writer, as she provides live narration to a romantic tearjerker that climaxes when an aged man bids farewell to his partner who has just passed away on a sandy beach, against the amplified sounds of roaring waves and a gray sky. The tension between Nakamori and Misako appears prickly at first, as the former harshly condemns how the latter's subjective feelings have contaminated her description of the film's final scene and created an overflow of meddling information that does not leave room for the trial "listeners'" own imaginations. Indeed, Nakamori's artist motto, revealed shortly when Misaki goes through one of his published photobooks, reads: "How small I am, facing the immensity of the world. I shall continue to confront it while holding my breath."[2]

Their professional confrontation does not deescalate at the second trial screening, either, when Misako removes the traces of her personal feelings in her revision. What she considers to be a careful presentation of objectivity is criticized by Nakamori as a cowardly escapism, her dodge from truly confronting something at the core of the image. Offended, Misako retaliates by

[2] All English translations of the film's subtitles come from the ones provided by the official streaming of the film on the platform of Prime Video.

accusing him of emotional ossification, deprived of the ability to engage with the world through his imagination as his eyesight abandons him. Nakamori storms out at once; the awkward session ends abruptly.

Following the trajectory of Kawase's work, perhaps it is not too far-fetched to see Nakamori as an extension of Sentaro, older but less hopeful with regards to preaching animism's communicative potential—the fact that they are played by the same actor certainly encourages this impression. The indescribable, unrepresentable process of knowing the world Sentaro/Nakamori once learned from Tokue he has not only failed to spread but also lost slowly, as his vision literally deteriorates day by day. He, too, now suffers from being misrecognized. Could offering his brutally honest feedback on the expert panel be Nakamori's last attempt to democratize the by now endangered animist worldview? In this line, perhaps Misaki who desperately seeks to master a specific kind of description of the moving image—to the point that she is constantly describing all the minutia in her daily surroundings as a way of practice—stands in as a surrogate for the ideal spectator that the animist imagination, itself, fantasizes. Indeed, Nakamori's methodological intervention during the two trial screenings is as good as a self-interrogation can be, not only of Kawase's own natural imagery but also of the animist imagination of cinema in general: For those of us who aspire to the intimacy with various nonhumans but do not possess the animist capacity to do so, will our understanding of them be perpetually clouded by our wishful projection? Can we really recognize nonhuman personhood in a way that transcends an all-or-nothing logic of personification? The answers seem to be negative at this point. The gap between the two characters' ways of seeing has been affectively imbricated into the antagonism that characterizes their encounters, which only reaffirms the difficulty of forming interpersonal connection between the shamanic figures and ordinary folks.

The ability to truly access the world constitutes the source of agony not only for Nakamori but also for Misaki who lacks the know-how of understanding and relating to his worldview.

The situation soon changes with a series of happenstance encounters that transform and deepen their relationship. As Nakamori gradually loses his vision until he exists in total darkness, Misaki supports him on various occasions, all while she experiments with different ways that might help her enter the depth of that final scene: walking on the street guiding tiles in order to feel the city from the perspective of a blind person; directly interviewing the film's director in hope of learning an authoritative interpretation (only to be given an abstract response); and wrestling with this final scene with the aid of Nakamori's camera-eye as she delves into his photographs as well. An identification of some sort transpires, finally, when Misaki asks Nakamori to take her to the setting of one of his works that depicts a glorious sunset, which reminds her of a similar location where, once in her childhood (that magical period when animism proves to be the rule rather than the exception), she too was bathed in sunlight with her father. Standing at that location next to Nakamori, she stares into the distance, uttering in a decidedly animist fashion her deepest longing: "I knew I could never catch it, but I used to love running after the setting sun. I wish there was some way to reach this blinding light. I'd run after it until it disappeared." In this moment of openness and vulnerability, Nakamori confesses that "Me to…. I did the same thing. A long time ago." An ecstatic rupture reconfigures their spacetime, as both of them open up about their thwarted commitment to the film's titular energy that bestows vitality into the world, itself a meta-cinematic comment on the foundation of cinema. In the heat of the moment Misaki kisses Nakamori. He reciprocates but hesitancy soon surges. He gently pushes her away, once again re-establishing the distance between them. Backlit by the twilight, their silhouettes dissolve within the sphere of a haptic image for which Kawase's

aesthetics is known, as lens flares and iridescent lights mystify the entire frame with an orange haze. Wordless, the scene leaves us left uncertain as to the future of their romance if any.

But this time Kawase is an optimist. *Radiance* soon concludes in a spacious movie theater where numerous people, visually normal and impaired alike, attend a formal screening of the film Misaki has been working on, accompanied by a woman's narration of the final version of her audio description. At the rear of the theater stands Misaki, overlooking the backs of fellow spectators, including Nakamori, and the moving image she has spent so much time fathoming. As everyone concentrates on the climactic scene, one close-up after another allows us to peruse a number of individuals' facial expressions. Distinct as they might be from person to person, each suggests deep absorption in both the image and Misaki's language which at once describe and elevate it. Sadness, contemplation, fixation, among other reactions—a wealth of emotions overwhelms the theater, especially when the male protagonist on screen, after his lover's decease, marches on towards a view of sunset, one as warm and dazzling as that which has previously embraced Misaki and Nakamori in its multicolored rays. A graceful cut, here, brings us from Misaki's viewing of the denouement in the theater to a high-angel shot of a street taken from a second-floor apartment later that evening after the screening. On the corridor outside of the apartment stands Misaki, looking down as if anticipating things to come. From around the corner Nakamori approaches, slowly but not aimlessly with the aid of his walking stick. Something about the final version of Misaki's description must have touched him during the screening, dissipating any lingering doubt he might have about their togetherness. Before Misaki rushes downstairs to help him, Nakamori insists that she stays still. This time he will come to her, now the beacon in his darkness. As he steadily proceeds, the film cuts back to the movie theater earlier that evening, giving us access to more spectators' reactions to the male

protagonist's similar ascension to the twilight. Both Misaki and Nakamori cry, along with so many others who are moved, too, by the very moment of this film experience.

Disrupting the chronological order of the story, parallel editing here works to enact not only its usual effect of simultaneity by identifying Misaki's insight into the film as the decisive instant when her coupling with Nakamori becomes possible, but it also anchors the private realm of individual romance within the public sphere of the cinema. Misaki's laborious efforts to understand and then narrate the film in her own words turn her into a structural equal to Nakamori—at least who he used to be before losing his vision. Neither a full-on projection of subjective feelings nor a complete withdrawal of them, her affecting translation of that indefinable something at the heart of the beach scene indicates her mastery of the ability to capture, finally, the dazzling radiance—of the sun, of life, of cinema—before it fades. What Misaki is now capable of communicating with others is the secret of the specific nonhuman entity known as the moving image. Perhaps we can say that her learning process exemplifies the operation of a new category of the shamanic figure: the film critic.

Unlike the four other shamanic figures we have seen, Misaki's animist capacity is developed not in solitude but in a community of fellow film viewers and listeners, with whom she openly exchanges her observations, thoughts, and feelings. They consider, in return, her interpretations both in speech and writing, all while encouraging, challenging her to further perfect them by encountering the sum of the image and all its parts without entirely losing her own voice in this process. The intimacy that characterizes all her interpersonal collaborations—essential to a focused and sustained inquiry of any filmic world—clarifies not only the public nature of film viewing and criticism but also a route to escape from the curse of the shamanic

figure's perpetual loneliness. A detective really good at discovering and describing the wonders of the moving image can never be alone.

Immediately *Radiance* acknowledges such an air of collectivity (and its hopeful undertone) that Misaki, Nakamori, and every film viewer participate. Following a close-up of Nakamori's face as he closes his eyes, the ending title sequence appears. But as if the film is not quite ready to depart from this magnificent unity specific to the cinema, a minute into the rolling white credits against a black background the camera returns us to the filmic world and captures, across eight shots this time, the smiles and satisfaction of so many joyous film viewers—with a noticeable number of children—who cannot take their eyes off the screen (figure 5.1). Judging from the differences in mise-en-scène, not least a variety of seats which significantly differ from those shown in the movie theater before the credits, the film viewers in these eight shots do not exist in the same temporospatial coordinate of the screening that finalizes the togetherness between Misaki and Nakamori. What these eight shots more likely display, rather, is the afterlife of Misaki's audio description, as it travels to numerous other sites of exhibition. Or, viewed more allegorically, they capture the sheer joy that cinema brings to people, which formulates its own community regardless of age, gender, physical abilities, among other markers of identity—though, recalling Chapter One, perhaps a general transformation of all viewers into childlike is not a bad idea after all.

Fig 5.1. Absorbed viewers in the cinema.

What better encapsulates the ambition and scope of the animist imagination of cinema? if my heuristic has explored the location of meaning in alienating urban environments, or the ways in which humans might approximate animals and natural environments, it does so through the mediation of individual films, our interpretations of which are inarguably collective efforts. As this dissertation has followed the lead of so many people from texts and in reality, so a method of criticism emerges. At the end of the day, if the animist imagination has any pedagogical value, it is not simply a call to recognize nonhuman personhood by learning from various human subjects who are structurally marginalized in one way or another. More importantly, it asks us to attend to the image in its singularity: one film and one character at a time. Most certainly no one, by the sheer act of seeing an animist imagination, would ever manage to acquire the ability to translate animal languages, move the floating snow nearby, or produce supreme confection that touches both the palette and the soul. But one could, indeed, get intrigued by a peculiar style of acting, a digital visual effect at once elegant and uncanny, or the productive process of a daily object long taken for granted. In turn, a portal to the image opens, inviting those who are willing to follow

these subtle, defamiliarizing clues into a transformative experience that changes how we perceive both cinema and the diverse forms that its intersection with reality could take up.

Such attentiveness to the screen, I must emphasize, dreams not the old, comforting formalist dream of immediacy where one dissects seemingly given cinematic elements or patterns in a state of sociocultural vacuum. Rather, this process of learning is, itself, routinely conducted in the realm of the public, crystalized in our engagement with the documented visions of sundry writers, artists, and filmmakers, other critics and scholars' takes, the profound insights of the interlocutors around us that reach their profundity most effectively through face-to-face dialogue, and the anticipated responses from potential readers with whom any act of criticism should hope to converse. All these flesh and blood participants' physical and intellectual involvements in the animist imagination of cinema form the necessary condition of its animism, which in return serves as an audiovisual archive where their wisdom and grace are preserved. As my dissertating of an aesthetic inquiry of nonhuman personhood comes to an end in self-isolation during a global pandemic that many have already personified as nature's revenge, the shamanic figure's onscreen seclusion becomes more impactful, felt than ever. Our connection with either human or nonhuman others, the animist imagination of cinema reminds us, should not be sacrificed at the expense of each other. The realization that it could take layers of cinematic mediation for this commonplace to register constitutes, alas, the biggest irony of my concept and our time.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Andriopoulos, Stefan. *Possessed: Hypnotic Crimes, Corporate Fiction, and the Invention of Cinema*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.

Ariès, Philippe. *Centuries of Childhood: A Social History of Family Life*. Translated by Robert Baldick. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1962.

Bai, Ruiwen. *Zhuhai shiguang—hou xiaoxian de guangyingjiyi* (Boiling the sea: Hou Hsiao-hsien's memories of shadows and lights). Taipei: Ink, 2014.

Balázs, Béla. *Béla Balázs: Early Film Theory:* Visible Man *and* The Spirit of Film. Edited by Erica Carter, translated by Rodney Livingstone. New York: Berghahn Books, 2010.

——. *Theory of Film: Character and Growth of a New Art*. Translated by Edith Bone. New York: Dover Publication, 1970.

Baker, Anthony D. "Recognizing Jake Contending with Formulaic and Spectacularized Representations of Autism in Film." In *Autism and Representation*, edited by Mark Osteen, 229-243. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Barthes, Roland. *Mythologies*. Translated by Richard Howard and Annette Lavers. New York: Hill and Wang, 2012.

Bataille, Georges. *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939*. Edited by Allen Stoekl. Translated by Allen Stoekl, Carl R. Lovitt, and Donald M. Leslie, Jr. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985.

Bazin, André. "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage." In *What is Cinema? Vol. 1*, edited and translated by Hugh Gray, 41-52. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

——. "*Le journal d'un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson." In *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, edited and translated by Hugh Gray, 125-143. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005.

Benjamin, Walter. "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility: Second Version." In *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media*, translated by Edmund Jephcott and Harry Zohn, edited by Michael W. Jennings et al., 19-55. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008.

——. "The Metaphysics of Youth." In *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings, Volume 1: 1913-1926*, edited by Marcus Bullock and Michael W. Jennings, 6-17. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1996.

Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2009.

Bersani, Leo. *Receptive Bodies*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Bettelheim, Bruno. *The Empty Fortress: Infantile Autism and the Birth of the Self*. New York: The Free Press, 1967.

Bingham, Adam. "Café Lumière." In *Directory of World Cinema: China*, edited by Gary Bettinson, 137-139. Bristol: Intellect, 2012.

Bloom, Michelle E. *Contemporary Sino-French Cinemas: Absent Fathers, Banned Books, and Red Balloons*. Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2016.

Bogost, Ian. *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012.

Brakhage, Stan. "Metaphors on Vision." In *Essential Brakhage: Selected Writings on Filmmaking by Stan Brakhage*, edited by Bruce R. McPherson, 12-13. Kingston, NY: McPherson & Company, 2001.

Briggs, Jonathyne. "The Enduring Fortress: The Influence of Bruno Bettelheim in the Politics of Autism in France." *Modern Intellectual History*. https://doi.org/10.1017/S1479244319000015.

Brooks, Peter. *The Melodramatic Imagination: Balzac, Henry James, Melodrama, and the Mode of Excess*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995.

Brown, Noel. *The Children's Film: Genre, Nation and Narrative*. London: Wallflower Press, 2017.

BUF. "*The Grandmaster*." *BUF*, 2013. http://buf.com/films/the-grandmaster/.

Burns, Susan L. "From 'Leper Villages' to Leprosaria: Public health, Nationalism and the Culture of Exclusion in Japan." In *Isolation: Places and Practices of Exclusion*, edited by Carolyn Strange and Alison Bashford, 97-110. London: Routledge, 2003.

Calvino, Italo. *Marcovaldo: Or, The Seasons in the City*. Translated by William Weaver. Orlando: Harcourt, 1983.

Cavell, Stanley. "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary." In *The Tanner Lectures on Human Values* VIII, edited by Sterling M. McMurrin, 81-118. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1988.

Chang Hsiao-hung. "Bali zhangjingtou: Hou xiaoxian yu hongqiqiu" (Paris long-take: Hou

Hsiao-hsien and *Flight of the Red Balloon*). *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly* 40.4 (2011): 39-73.

——. "Shenti chengshi de danrudanchu: Hou Hsiao-hsien yu jiafei shiguang" (Fade-in-fade-out of the body-city: Hou Hsiao-hsien and *Café Lumière*). *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly* 40.3 (2011): 7-37.

Chase, Cynthia. *Decomposing Figures: Rhetorical Readings in the Romantic Tradition*. Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986.

Chen, Timmy Chih-Ting and Chang Hsiao-hung. "The Three Ears of *The Assassin*." In *The Assassin: Hou Hsiao-hsien's World of Tang China*, edited by Peng Hsiao-yen, 99-113. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2019.

Chō Konzai. *Chō Konzai shashinshū: Hansenbyō o toritsuzukete* (The Photography of Cho Konzai: Photographing Hansen's Disease continuously). Tokyo: Sōfūkan, 2002.

Cho, Michelle. "A Disenchanted Fantastic: The Pathos of Objects in Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Air Doll*." In *Simultaneous Worlds: Global Science Fiction Cinema*, edited by Jennifer L. Feeley and Sarah Ann Wells, 223-242. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015.

Chu Tien-wen. *Hongqiqiu de luxing: Hou xiaoxian dianying jilu xubian* (Flight of the red balloon: Records of Hou Hsiao-hsien's films continued). Jinan: Shandong huabao chubanshe, 2009.

Chung, Hye Jean. *Media Heterotopias: Digital Effects and Material Labor in Global Film Production*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Cook, Adam, "Why Does the Cannes Film Festival Keep Programming Naomi Kawase's Movies?" *IndieWire*, May 17, 2015. https://www.indiewire.com/2015/05/why-does-the-cannes-film-festival-keep-programming-naomi-kawases-movies-61786/

Cooper, Sarah. *The Soul of Film Theory*. London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013.

De Certeau, Michel, Luce Giard, and Pierre Mayol. *The Practice of Everyday Life, Volume 2: Living and Cooking*. Translated by Timothy J. Tomasik. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

Derrida, Jacques. *The Animal That Therefore I Am*. Edited by Marie-Louis Mallet. Translated by David Wills. Fordham: Fordham University Press, 2008.

——. *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*. Translated by Peggy Kamuf. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992.

——. "'Eating Well,' or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida." In

Who Comes after the Subject?, edited by Eduardo Cadava, Peter Connor, Jean-Luc Nancy, 96-119. New York: Routledge, 1991.

Descola, Philippe. "Between Nature and Culture." In *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, edited by Graham Harvey, 77-91. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Deutsch, A. J. "A Subway Named Möbius." In *The Platform Edge: Uncanny Tales of the Railways*, edited by Mike Ashley, 201-222. London: The British Library, 2019.

Diffrient, David Scott, Carl R. Burgchardt. "A Tale of Two Balloons: Intercultural Cinema and Transnational Nostalgia in *Le voyage du ballon rouge*." In *Transnational Film Remakes*, edited by Iain Robert Smith and Constantine Verevis, 147-163. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017.

Durkheim, Emile. *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*. Translated by Karen E. Fields. New York: The Free Press, 1995.

Eberly, Susan Schoon. "Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids and the Solitary Fairy." *Folklore* 99.1 (1988): 58-77.

Eisenstein, Sergei. *Nonindifferent Nature: Film and the Structure of Things*. Translated by Herbert Marshall. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987.

——. *Eisenstein on Disney*. Edited by Jay Leyda and translated by Alan Upchurch. Calcutta: Seagull Books, 1986.

Eliade, Mircea. *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004.

Elsaesser, Thomas. *Film History as Media Archaeology: Tracking Digital Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2016.

Epstein, Jean. *The Intelligence of a Machine*. Translated by Christophe Wall-Romana. Minneapolis: Univocal, 2014.

——. "The Senses I (b)." In *French Film Theory and Criticism: A History/Anthology: 1907-1939*, edited by Richard Abel, translated by Stuart Liebman, 241-246. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1988.

Farquhar, Judith and Qicheng Zhang. *Ten Thousand Things: Nurturing Life in Contemporary Beijing*. New York: Zone Books, 2012.

Farrer, D. S. "Becoming-animal in the Chinese Martial Arts." In *Living Beings:Perspectives on Interspecies Engagements*, edited by Penelope Dransart, 145-166. London: Bloomsbury, 2013.

Ferguson, Frances. “Climate Change and Us.” *diacritics* 41.3 (2013): 32-38.

Foster, Hal. *Bad News Day: Art, Criticism, Emergency*. New York: Verso, 2015.

——. *Prosthetic Gods*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2004.

Foster, Michael Dylan. “Haunting Modernity: *Tanuki*, Trains, and Transformation in Japan.” *Asian Ethnology* 71.1 (2012): 3-29.

Frank, Hannah. *Frame by Frame: A Materialist Aesthetics of Animated Cartoons*. Oakland, CA: University of California Press, 2019.

Frei, Vincent. “*The Grandmaster* (Yi Dai Zong Shi): Isabelle Perin-Leduc –VFX Supervisor – BUF.” *Art of VFX*, April 19, 2013. http://www.artofvfx.com/?p=4203.

Freud, Sigmund. “The Uncanny.” In *The Uncanny*, translated by David McLintock, 121-162. New York: Penguin Books, 2003.

Friend, Tim. *Animal Talk: Breaking the Codes of Animal Language*. New York: Free Press, 2004.

Frith, Uta, Francesca Happé and Frances Siddons. “Autism and Theory of Mind in Everyday Life.” *Social Development* 3.2 (1994): 108-124.

Goble, Andrew Edmund. *Confluences of Medicine in Medieval Japan: Buddhist Healing, Chinese Knowledge, Islamic Formulas, and Wounds of War*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 2011.

Goodey, C. F., Tim Stainton, “Intellectual Disability and the Myth of the Changeling Myth.” *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences* 37.3 (2001): 223-240.

Gopnik, Adam. *Paris to the Moon*. New York: Random House Trade Paperback, 2000.

Gorky, Maxim. “Lumière Projections.” In *Kino, A History of the Russian and Soviet Film*, edited by Jay Leyda, 407–409. London: Allen and Unwin, 1960.

Gouda Yoshiie. *Gōda tetsugakudō: Kūki ningyō* (*Gôda’s Philosophical Discourse: “The Pneumatic Figure of a Girl”*). Tokyo: Shōgakukan, 2000.

Grandin, Temple. *Thinking in Pictures: My Life with Autism*. New York: Vintage Book, 2006.

Grandin, Temple and Catherine Johnson. *Animals in Translation: Using the Mysteries of Autism to Decode Animal Behavior*. Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2005.

Gunning, Tom. “Animating the Nineteenth Century: Bringing Pictures to Life (or Life to Pictures?).” *Nineteenth-Century Contexts* 36.5 (2014): 459-472.

——. Preface to *Jean Epstein: Critical Essays and New Translations*, edited by Sarah Keller and Jason N. Paul, 13-22. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012.

——. "Shooting into Outer Space: Reframing Modern Vision." In *Fantastic Voyages of the Cinematic Imagination: Georges Méliès Trip to the Moon*, edited by Matthew Solomon, 97-114. Albany: SUNY Press, 2011.

——. "To Scan a Ghost: The Ontology of Mediated Vision." *Grey Room* 26 (Winter 2007): 94-127.

——. "Gollum and Golem: Special Effects and the Technology of Artificial Bodies." In *From Hobbits to Hollywood: Essays on Peter Jackson's* Lord of the Rings, edited by Ernest Mathijs and Murray Pomerance, 319-349. Leiden: Brill, 2006.

——. "Systematizing the Electric Message: Narrative Form, Gender, and Modernity in *The Lonedale Operator*." In *American Cinema's Transitional Era: Audiences, Institutions, Practices*, edited by Charlie Keil and Shelley Stamp, 15-50. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

——. "The Ghost in the Machine: Animated Pictures at the Haunted Hotel of Early Cinema." *Living Pictures: The Journal of the Popular and Projected Image before 1914* 1.1 (2001): 3-17.

——. "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator." In *Viewing Positions: Ways of Seeing Film*, edited by Linda Williams, 114-133. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 1995.

——. "Heard Over the Phone: *The Lonely Villa* and the de Lorde Tradition of the Terrors of Technology." *Screen* 32.2 (1991): 184-196.

Haraway, Donna J. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Harper, Donald J. *Early Chinese Medical Literature: The Mawangdui Medical Manuscripts*. London: Kegan Paul International, 1998.

Harris, Neil. *Humbug: The Art of P. T. Barnum*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981.

Harrison, Rebecca. *From Steam to Screen: Cinema, the Railways and Modernity*. London: I.B. Tauris, 2018.

Harvey, Graham. *Animism: Respecting the Living World*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2006.

Hasumi, Shigehiko. "The Eloquence of the Taciturn: An Essay on Hou Hsiao-Hsien." *Inter-Asia*

Cultural Studies 9.2 (2008): 184-194.

——. "Sunny Skies." In *Ozu's Tokyo Story*, edited by David Desser, 118-130. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

——. "Sadao Yamanaka or the New Wave in the 1930s in Kyoto." *Cinemaya* 2 (1988): 46-49.

Hirokawa, Waka. "A Colony or a Sanitarium? A Comparative History of Segregation Politics of Hansen's Disease in Modern Japan." In *Science, Technology, and Medicine in the Modern Japanese Empire*, edited by David G. Wittner and Philip C. Brown, 117-129. New York: Routledge, 2016.

Hsieh Hai-meng. *Xingyunji—cike nieyinniang paishe celu* (Records of an accompanying cloud: Documentation of the shooting of *The Assassin*). Taipei: Ink Publishing, 2015.

Huang Wen-ying. *Baifang cike tangchuanqi* (An Assassin's visit). Taipei: Ink Publishing, 2015.

Huang Wen-ying, Hsieh Chun-qing. *Tang fengshang* (Tang dynasty fashion). Taipei: Ink Publishing, 2015.

Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, Or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1991.

Jentsch, Ernst. "On the Psychology of the Uncanny." Translated by Roy Sellars. *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities* 2.1 (1997): 7-16.

Jones, Ian. "Flight of the Red Balloon (2007, France)." *Cinematrics*, May 10, 2009. http://www.cinemetrics.lv/movie.php?movie_ID=3104.

Jullien, François. *The Impossible Nude: Chinese Art and Western Aesthetics*. Translated by Maev de la Guardia. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Karatsu, Rie. "Questions for a Women's Cinema: Fact, Fiction and Memory in the Films of Naomi Kawase." *Visual Anthropology* 22 (2009): 167-181.

Keenleyside, Heather. *Animals and Other People: Literary Forms and the Living Beings in the Long Eighteenth Century*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2016.

——. "The First-Person Form of Life: Locke, Stern, and the Autobiographical Animal." *Critical Inquiry* 39.1 (Autumn 2012): 116-141.

Keller, Marjorie. *The Untutored Eye: Childhood in the Films of Cocteau, Cornell, and Brakhage*. Teaneck: Fairleigh Dickinson University Press, 1986.

Keller, Sarah. *Maya Deren: Incomplete Control*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2015.

Kermode, Mark. "*The Assassin* Review—Martial Arts to Die For." *The Guardian*, January 24, 2016. https://www.theguardian.com/film/2016/jan/24/the-assassin-review-hou-hsiao-hsien-nie-yinniang.

Kirby, Lynne. *Parallel Tracks: The Railroad and Silent Cinema*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1997.

Kleist, Heinrich von. "On the Marionette Theatre." *The Drama Review: TDR* 16.3 (1972): 22-26.

Kore-eda Hirokazu. *Eiga o torinagara kangaeta koto* (What I consider when I shoot films). Tokyo: Mishimasha, 2016.

Kore-eda Hirokazu, Wu Yi-fen. "Zhangjingtou yu feirenzhongxin zhuyi: fang shizhi yuhe" (Long take/long shot stylistics and "non-anthropocentrism": Interview with Kore-eda Hirokazu). *Dianying xinshang* 36.3-4 (2014): 153-158.

Krauss, Rosalind E. *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1985.

Kuriyama, Shigehisa. *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*. New York: Zone Books, 1999.

——. "The Imaginations of Winds and the Development of the Chinese Conception of the Body." In *Body, Subject, and Power in China*, edited by Angela Zito, Tani E. Barlow, 23-41. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994.

Latour, Bruno. *Politics of Nature: How to Bring the Sciences into Democracy*. Translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004.

Lattanzio, Ryan. "5 Questions for Hou Hsiao-Hsien About Filmmaking and 'The Assassin'." *IndieWire*, October 16, 2015. https://www.indiewire.com/2015/10/5-questions-for-hou-hsiao-hsien-about-filmmaking-and-the-assassin-176242/.

Lau, Dorothy Wai-sim. "Remediating the Star Body: Donnie Yen's Kung Fu Persona in Hypermedia." *Studies in Media and Communication* 4.2 (2016): 90-98.

Leask, J., Leask, A., Silove, N. "Evidence for Autism in Folklore?" *Archives of Disease in Childhood* 90.3 (2005): 271.

Lee, Ann. "Wong Kar-wai: Fighting is Like Kissing." *Dazed*, December 4, 2014. https://www.dazeddigital.com/artsandculture/article/22783/1/wong-kar-wai-fighting-is-like-kissing?fbclid=IwAR3tgW1kBiPh7OLBILWhLJaGx8WnfNLA2SCr8S3d_n9IUoFS9OXUbeOqiik.

Lee, Vivian. "Virtual bodies, Flying Objects: The Digital Imaginary in Contemporary Martial

Arts Films." *Journal of Chinese Cinemas* 1.1 (2016): 9-26.

Leeder, Murray. *The Modern Supernatural and the Beginnings of Cinema.* New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017.

Leung, Angela Ki Che. *Leprosy in China: A History*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2009.

Lewis, Diane Wei. "From Manga to Film: Gender, Precarity and the Textual Transformation of *Air Doll*." *Screen* 60.1 (2019): 99-121.

Lewis, Mark Edward. *The Construction of Space in Early China*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006.

Li Zhongxuan, Xu Haofeng. *Shiqu de wulin—1934 nian de qiuwu jishi* (The Bygone world of martial arts: records of martial arts acquisition in 1934). Beijing: Dangdai zhongguo chubanshe, 2006.

Lin Wen-chi. "Xiangcunchengshi: hou xiaoxian yu chen kunhou chengshixiju zhong de taibei" (City as country: Taipei in Hou Hsiao-hsien and Chen Kun-hou's urban comedies). *NCU Journal of Art Studies* 11 (2012): 1-50.

——. "Yiwai de chuntian yu jiafei shiguang de taocengmicang shixue" (The Poetics of *mise en abyme* in *The Sweet Hereafter* and *Café Lumière*). *NCU Journal of Art Studies* 5 (2009): 97-110.

Lippit, Akira Mizuta. "Between Disaster, Medium 3.11." *Mechademia* 10 (2015): 3-15.

Löffler, Petra. "Ghosts of the City: A Spectrology of Cinematic Spaces." *communication+1* 4.1 (2015): 1-19.

Loftis, Sonya Freeman. *Imagining Autism: Fiction and Stereotypes on the Spectrum*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2015.

Lorenz, Korad. *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways*. Translated by Marjorie Kerr Wilson. London: Routledge, 2002.

Loughrey, Clarisse. "Hayao Miyazaki Confirms Princess Mononoke Fan Theory Is True." *Independent*, February 1, 2016. https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/hayao-miyazaki-confirms-princess-mononoke-fan-theory-is-true-a6846096.html.

Lury, Karen *The Child in Film: Tears, Fears and Fairy Tales*. New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 2010.

Ma, Jean. *Melancholy Drift: Making Time in Chinese Cinema*. Hong Kong: Hong Kong

University Press, 2010.

Manning, Erin. *The Minor Gesture*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2016.

Manovich, Lev. *Instagram and Contemporary Image*. [Open Access eBook]. 2017. http://manovich.net/index.php/projects/instagram-and-contemporary-image

——. *The Language of New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2001.

Marks, Laura U. "Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes." *Framework: The Finnish Art Review* 2 (2004): 79-82.

——. *The Skin of the Film: Intercultural Cinema, Embodiment, and the Senses*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

Martin, Adrian. "A Certain Dark Corner of Modern Cinema: Naomi Kawase's Self-portraits." In *Performance and Temporalisation: Time Happens*, edited by Stuart Grant, Jodie McNeilly and Maeva Veerapen, 180-189. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2015.

Masschelein, Anneleen. *The Unconcept: The Freudian Uncanny in Late-Twentieth-Century Theory*. Albany: State University of New York Press, 2011.

Mauss, Marcel. *A General Theory of Magic*. Translated by Robert Brain. New York: Routledge, 2001.

McCormack, Derek P. *Atmospheric Things: On the Allure of Elemental Envelopment*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2018.

McKim, Kristi. *Cinema as Weather: Stylistic Screens and Atmospheric Change*. New York: Routledge, 2013.

Metz, Christian. "'Trucage' and the Film," translated by Françoise Meltzer. *Critical Inquiry* 3.4 (1997): 657-675.

Michelson, Annette. "'Anemic Cinema': Reflections on an Emblematic Work." *Artforum* 12 (October 1973): 64-69.

Mitchell, David T. and Sharon L. Snyder, "Precarity and Cross-Species Identification: Autism, the Critique of Normative Cognition, and Nonspeciesism." In *Disability Studies and the Environmental Humanities: Toward an Eco-Crip Theory*, edited by Sarah Jaquette Ray and Jay Sibara, 553-572. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2017.

Moore, Rachel. *Savage Theory: Cinema as Modern Magic*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999.

Montero, Barbara Gail. *Thought in Action: Expertise and the Conscious Mind*. Oxford: Oxford

University Press, 2016.

Morin, Edgar. *The Stars*. Translated by Richard Howard. New York: Grove Press, 1960.

Morton, Timothy. *The Ecological Thought*. Cambridge, MA.: Harvard University Press, 2012.

——. *Ecology without Nature: Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009.

Munro, Joyce Underwood. "The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as a Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children." In *The Good People: New Fairylore Essays*, edited by Peter Narváez, 251-283. Lexington, KY: The University Press of Kentucky, 1991.

Murray, Stuart. *Representing Autism: Culture, Narrative, Fascination*. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2008.

Nolletti, Jr., Arthur. "Kore-eda's Children: An Analysis of *Lessons from a Calf*, *Nobody Knows*, and *Still Walking*." *Film Criticism* 35. 2/3 (2011): 147-165.

Nornes, Abé Mark. *Forest of Pressure: Ogawa Shinsuke and Postwar Japanese Documentary*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2007.

Nussbaum, Martha C. *Frontiers of Justice: Disability, Nationality, Species Membership*. Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006.

Oe, Kenzaburo. *The Changeling*. Translated by Deborah Boliver Boehm. New York: Grove Press, 2010.

Ogihara-Schuck, Eriko. *Miyazaki's Animism Abroad: The Reception of Japanese Religious Themes by American and German Audiences*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014.

Pei Xing. "Nie Yinniang." In *Tangren chuanqi xiaoshuo* (Tang dynasty tales of strange events), edited by Wang Pijiang, 403-407. Taipei: World Book, 2014.

Peters, John Durham. *Speaking into the Air: A History of the Idea of Communication*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999.

Piaget, Jean. *The Child's Conception of the World*. Translated by Joan Tomlinson and Andrew Tomlinson. Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield, 2007.

Pollmann, Inga. "Cinematic Vitalism—Theories of Life and the Moving Image." PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2011.

——. "*Kalte Stimmung*, or the Mode of Mood: Ice and Snow in Melodrama." *Colloquia Germanica* 43.1/2 (2010): 79-96.

Price, Brian. *Neither God nor Master: Robert Bresson and Radical Politics*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011.

Raymond, Chandler. "Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel." In *Raymond Chandler Speaking*, edited by Dorothy Gardiner and Kathrine Sorley Walker, 45-71. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

Reeves, William T. "Particle Systems: A Technique for Modeling a Class of Fuzzy Objects." *ACM Transactions on Graphics* 2.2 (1983): 91-108.

Rogaski, Ruth. *Hygienic Modernity: Meanings of Health and Disease in Treaty-Port China*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 2004.

Russell, Catherine. "Ecstatic Ethnography: Maya Deren and the Filming of Possession Rituals." In *Rites of Realism: Essays on Corporeal Cinema*, edited by Ivone Margulies, 270-293. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003.

Rutherford, Anne. "What Is Body, What Is Space? Performance and the Cinematic Body in a Non-Anthropocentric Cinema." *Arts* 6.4 (2017). https://www.mdpi.com/2076-0752/6/4/19/htm.

Saso, Michael. "The Taoist Body and Cosmic Prayer." In *Religion and the Body*, edited by Sarah Coakley, 231-247. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997.

Scheid, Volker. "Transmitting Chinese Medicine Changing Perceptions of Body, Pathology, and Treatment in Late Imperial China." *Asian Medicine* 8 (2013): 299-360.

Schilling, Mark. "Reflections on the Dark Side of a Tropical Island." *The Japan Times*, July 16, 2014. https://www.japantimes.co.jp/culture/2014/07/16/films/film-reviews/reflections-dark-side-tropical-island/#.WxXBNS2ZOgQ.

Schivelbusch, Wolfgang. *The Railway Journey: The Industrialization of Time and Space in the Nineteenth Century*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2014.

Schonig, Jordan. "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the 'Wind in the Trees' in Early Cinema and CGI." *Discourse: Journal for Theoretical Studies in Media and Culture* 40.1 (Winter 2018): 30-61.

Sconce, Jeffrey. *Haunted Media: Electronic Presence from Telegraphy to Television*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2000.

Segal, Robert A. "Animism for Tylor." In *The Handbook of Contemporary Animism*, edited by Graham Harvey, 53-62. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Severson, Katherine DeMaria, James Arnt Aune, and Denise Jodlowski. "Bruno Bettelheim, Autism, and the Rhetoric of Scientific Authority." In *Autism and Representation*, edited by Mark Osteen, 65-77. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Shen Shiao-ying. "Benlai jiugai duokan liangbian—dianying meixue yu hou xiaoxian" (Could they be vegetables?: Film aesthetics and Hou Hsiao-hsien]. In *Xilian rensheng—hou xiaoxian dianying yanjiu* (Passionate detachment: Films of Hou Hsiao-hsien), edited by Lin Wen-chi, Li Zhen-ya, and Shen Shiao-ying, 61-92. Taipei: Rye Field, 2000.

Sing Song-yong, "'Fufangdianying' de youling xiaoying: lun hou xiaoxian de 'jiabei shiguang' yu 'hongqiqiu' zhi 'kuayingxiangxing' (The Phantom-effect of "cinema revisited": On "trans-imageity" of Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* and *Le voyage du ballon rouge*). *Chung Wai Literary Quarterly* 39.4 (2010): 135-169.

Skvirsky, Salomé Aguilera. *The Process Genre: Cinema and the Aesthetic of Labor*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2020.

Smith, Pamela H. *The Body of the Artisan: Art and Experience in the Scientific Revolution*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004.

Steimatsky, Noa. *The Face on Film*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017.

——. "Of the Face: In Reticence." In *Film, Art, New Media: Museum without Walls?*, edited by Angela Dalle Vacche, 159-177. London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2012.

Stern, Lesley. "'Once I've devoured your soul we are neither human nor animal': The Cinema as an Animist Universe'." *The Cine-Files* 10 (Spring 2016): 1-27.

Stewart, Garrett. "Digital Mayhem, Optical Decimation: The Technopoetics of Special Effects." *Journal of Popular Film and Television* 45.1 (2017): 4-15.

Stollberg, Gunnar. "Vitalism and Vital Force in Life Sciences—The Demise and Life of a Scientific Conception." (Unpublished manuscript, Bielefeld Institute for Global Society Studies). Accessed December 18, 2017. http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/soz/pdf/Vitalism.pdf.

Sukegawa, Durian. *Sweet Bean Paste*. Translated by Alison Watts. London: Oneworld, 2017.

Tanaka, Kathryn. "Hansen's Disease and Family: Reflections on Reading and Teaching *Mugi baa no shima* (Grandma Mugi's Island) Part1." *Igaku-shi to shakai no taiwa*, December 27, 2018. https://igakushitosyakai.jp/article/post1450e/?fbclid=IwAR3mbjWnZeoFJjCdDalCrN2c7qjOq7zwpsykpD3MUfEPZ8bkUw5kHL8H5P9I.

Tang, Pao-chen. "Of Dogs and Hot Dogs: Distractions in Early Cinema." *Early Popular Visual Culture* 15.1 (2017): 44-58.

Teo, Stephen. *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema: The* Wuxia *Tradition*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009.

——. *King Hu's* A Touch of Zen. Hong Kong: Hong Kong University Press, 2006.

Terashima Mariko. *Yamai ietemo: Hansenbyo kyosei kakuri 90nen kara jinken kaifuku e* (Even if cured: The Recovery of human rights 90 years after the forced quarantine of Hansen's Disease patients). Tokyo: Kōseisha Book, 2001.

Tsai Bi-ming. "'Shoujingdu' yu 'yuandu yi weijing': yitiao tixian lao, zhuang zhixue de shentijishu" ("Maintain the stillness of du meridian" and "align the dody along the du meridian": A study on body experience and body technique as a newly discovered method for bridging the studies of Laozi and Zhuangzi). *Bulletin of The Department of Chinese Literature, National Taiwan University* 34 (2011): 1-54.

Tweedie, James. *The Age of New Waves: Art Cinema and the Staging of Globalization*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013.

United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division. *World Urbanization Prospects: The 2018 Revision*. New York: United Nations, 2019.

University of Virginia Health System. "Missing Link Found between Brain, Immune System; Major Disease Implications." *Science Daily*, June 1, 2015. http://www.sciencedaily.com/releases/2015/06/150601122445.htm.

Vallortigara, Giorgio et al. "Are Animals Autistic Savants?" *PLOS Biology* 6.2 (2008): 208-214.

Vertov, Dziga. *Kino-Eye*, edied by Annette Michelson, translated by Kevin O'Brien. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984.

Vieira Jr, Erly. "Sensory Realism: Body, Emotion, and Flow in Contemporary Cinema." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 33.6 (2016): 511-528.

Wada-Marciano, Mitsuyo. "A Dialogue with 'Memory' in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003)." In *Reorienting Ozu: A Master and His Influence*, edited by Jinhee Choi, 59-76. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2018.

Wallace, David Foster. "Roger Federer as Religious Experience." *New York Times*, August 20, 2006. http://www.nytimes.com/2006/08/20/sports/playmagazine/20federer.html.

Weil, Kari. "Killing Them Softly: Animal Death, Linguistic Disability, and the Struggle for Ethics." *Configurations* 14.1-2 (2006): 87-96.

Weston, Kath. *Animate Planet: Making Visceral Sense of Living in a High-Tech Ecologically Damaged World*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2017.

Williams, Linda. *On* The Wire. Durham: Duke University Press, 2014.

——. "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess." *Film Quarterly* 44.4 (1991): 2-13.

Wing, Lorna. "The History of Ideas on Autism: Legends, Myths and Reality." *Autism* 1.1 (1997): 13-23.

Wojcik, Pamela Robertson. *Fantasies of Neglect: Imagining the Urban Child in American Film and Fiction*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, 2016.

Wolfe, Cary. "Learning from Temple Grandin, or, Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and Who Came after the Subject." In *Re-Imagining Nature: Environmental Humanities and Ecosemiotics*, edited by Alfred Kentigern Siewers, 91-108. Lewisburg: Bucknell University Press, 2014.

Xu Fei. "Xie haimeng jiemi nieyinniang: qifumu cong de xiaorong qifa le hou xiaoxian" (Hsieh Hai-meng Unveils *The Assassin*: Tsumabuki Satoshi's Smile Inspired Hou Hsiao-hsien). *Jiemian*, May 27, 2015. http://www.jiemian.com/article/290669.html.

Yeh, Emilie Yueh-yu. "Remaking Ozu : Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière*." In *The Poetics of Chinese Cinema*, edited by Gary Bettinson and James Udden, 97-118. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016.

Yuasa, Yasuo, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*. Albany: State University of New York, 1993.

Zhang, Zhen. *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896-1937*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005.