

The Gaze of the Other in Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and Hitchcock's *The Birds**

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Abstract

Here I first briefly review the Western metaphysical conceptualization of “self”/“other,” based on the logic of identity-and-difference, and the post-Hegelian, post-structuralist move *away* from this logic toward a notion of “difference” or “otherness” that cannot be contained within the hegemony of a (Eurocentric) rational “self” (mind, consciousness)—particularly as we get this move in Lacan and Levinas. Then I look at Hitchcock's *The Birds* and (more substantially) Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* in (the Lacanian and Levinasian) terms of intersubjectivity, the inverted “gaze,” the self-negating (or abnegating) move toward/into the “other.” If the birds attacking from the sky are (as on Žižek's reading) an other which can “negatively” signify and thus absorb or replace the social conflicts among the characters—nature “above” becomes the inverted gaze of culture “below”—then in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* we are dealing with a more purely horizontal (socio-cultural) matrix of relationships in which the inverted gazes of/within the “pairs” (of warriors, friends or lovers) signify or signal inversions/reversals of identities or roles, including gender roles.

Keywords

Self, other, intersubjectivity, gaze, inversion, hiddenness, face, trace, cultural identity, politics of (mis)recognition, Ang Lee, Alfred Hitchcock, Emmanuel Levinas

Who what am I? My answer: I am the sum total of everything that went before me [...]. I repeat for the last time: to understand me, you'll have to swallow a world.

—Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children*

* This paper was first read at the International Conference on Subjectivity/Cultural Identity in an Age of Globalization, May 26-27, 2001, hosted by the Department of English, Shih Hsin University and the Department of Asian Studies, University of Alberta, Canada. Special thanks go to Peng-hsiang Chen, Terry Yip, Wang Ning, Jennifer Jay, Ted Yang, Sun-chieh Liang, Frank Stevenson and Kiss Chen for their valuable suggestions and comments.

In reality, who am I?

—Franz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*

I could not understand “I.” The Chinese “I” [我] has seven strokes, intricacies. How could the American “I,” assuredly wearing a hat like the Chinese, have only three strokes, the middle so straight?

—Maxine Hong Kingston, *The Woman Warrior*

In the beginning of his seminal essay “The Trace of the Other,” Levinas cites two narratives, the saga of Ulysses and the story of Abraham, which represent the Greek and Judaic concepts of the “other.” He then provides a third narrative: the trace of the other based on the Abraham story. These three narratives are, in fact, about the three faces of subjectivity. The Greek model of subjectivity presents the self who undertakes a journey, conquers the other and returns to the self again. The Judaic model portrays the self going on a journey under the instruction of God, an Absolute Other. As for the third narrative, which is obviously Levinas’s preferred version, it looks into the meaning of the other as *trace*. The other, for Levinas, carries two meanings: it serves either as a perceived *other* without qualities or as *the Absolute Other*, God. Here I’ll focus only on the former. Following Levinas’s critique of Cartesian, Hegelian, Husserlian and Heideggerian concepts of subjectivity, especially the Odyssean model of subjectivity in which the self “contains” the other and returns to the self again, I will first examine some notions of subjectivity as exemplified by Cartesian ego, Hegelian self-consciousness or Absolute Spirit and Heideggerian “being-with-others” (*Mitsein*) and point out that the other serves for these thinkers only as a background, a catalyst, a token or a springboard. Then I will trace the *emerging* other and highlight its subversive potential. Finally, I will look at Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and Alfred Hitchcock’s *The Birds* in terms of Levinas’s ethical Other and Lacan’s theory of the eye and the gaze.

The specter of Descartes has haunted the imagination of many post-Cartesian Western philosophers, anthropologists, and psychoanalysts, including Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Derrida, Levinas and Lacan. They are not comfortable with the Cartesian concept of “certain” and “evident” knowledge predicated on the egological “I think” and its mode of value-formation grounded in Eurocentric culture—that is, its

inherent enlightenment cultural heritage from the European Enlightenment with its claustrophobic concept of Western Man. Kenneth Lieberman writes:

The marriage of the idea of self and civil authority propelled the political imagination of the Enlightenment and still characterizes the West today. Self-certain, rational individuals, protected by the Declaration of the Rights of Man and its progeny, freely select in a Hobbesian fashion a civil authority that in reality tolerates little diversion from the accepted corpus of reified truths (*theoria*). It is pertinent to note that Descartes's first moral rule in his epochal *Discourse on Method* was "to obey the law and customs of my country" and church. (128)

If we look into Western culture in terms of race, gender and class, we cannot fail to conclude that the history of Man is a history of discrimination by means of a "Manichean aesthetics" (JanMohamed 1-13; Goldberg 14-40). According to JanMohamed, Manicheism exercises rules of exclusion and punitive strategies so that the division of labor and tokenism are rendered possible: "Faced with an incomprehensible and multifaceted alterity, the European theoretically has the option of responding to the Other in terms of identity or difference" ("Colonialist Literature" 83). According to Charles Taylor, "Manichean aesthetics" (the aesthetics of a logical identity-and-difference) "shows not just a lack of due respect" for the Other. "It can inflict a grievous wound, saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred" (26).

The awakening from such narcissistic solipsism and grounding egocentrism leads us, for Nietzsche, to a revaluation of all values. With him the prestigious idols—"self," "God"—have reached their twilight and the chaotic, changing or self-different self appears. For the subject "I" to be taken as the condition of the predicate "think" is a falsification of facts since this correspondence between subject and object is quite arbitrary; there is no "subject," there is only an interplay of perspectives, forces, wills; what we think we know as "truth" can only be "a supposition, an assertion, and assuredly not an 'immediate certainty'" (*Beyond Good and Evil* 24). Thus in *The Will to Power*: "'Subject,' 'object,' 'attribute'—these distinctions are fabricated and are now imposed as a schematism upon all the apparent facts. The fundamental false observation is that I believe it is *I* who do something, suffer something, 'have' something, 'have' a quality" (294). Nietzsche's demystification of the *I* purports to say "yes" to life and to go beyond the asceticism of Western philosophy and the megalomaniac concept of subjectivity. Following a Nietzschean line of thought and

flight, Deleuze links up “life” with “vitalism” and “multiplicity”: “Pure immanence is A LIFE, and nothing else [...]. A life is the immanence of immanence, absolute immanence: it is sheer power, utter beatitude” (qtd. in Marks 39).

However, while Nietzsche is right in pointing out that the ego is a “conceptual synthesis,” his transevaluation of all values still revolves around a metaphysics of the myth of “Will” (Lyotard 29). Derrida, like Nietzsche, assumes that the history of Western ontology—a history of presence based on a single, originary, and ultimate truth or logocentrism, if you like, perceived by a transcendental ego—should be reconsidered in terms of a *difference* which, based in the self-difference of language (writing, meaning), breaks away from the Platonic and Hegelian logic of identity-and-difference. The problem of modern subjectivity thus becomes, for Levinas, an overemphasis on “the consciousness of an ego *identical* in its *I think*,” an ego which aims at and embraces, or perceives, “all alterity under its thematizing gaze” (“Diachrony and Representation” 97). In other words, the voice of the “other” remains in effect unheard since it is the correlate of an ego which, as seeing subject (Lacan), intends, veils, contains the seen at a distance. Thus the “I’s” in the above-quoted passages (my epigraphs) are really voices from the margin, voices of the other; as such they have a sort of double consciousness.

According to Fanon, then, such terms as “Man,” “Self,” and “individual” point to a Westernized, monologic “difference-blindness” discourse; they are all racialized residues of the White Man. Moreover:

For Europe, for ourselves, and for humanity, comrades, we must turn over a new leaf, we must work out new concepts, and try to set afoot a new man. [...] mankind, I believe in you. [...] From all sides dozens and hundreds of pages assail me and try to impose their wills on me. But a single line would be enough. Supply a single answer and the color problem would be stripped of all its importance. What does a man want? What does the black man want? (*Wretched* 316, 7-8)

For Fanon, “mankind” is a *man*-made construct based on Eurocentric White mythology. Under Western eyes, the subjectivity of the colored people and of those who are of interracial origins undergoes a process of diminishment. It is sacrificed and reduced into the background under the gaze of colonialism and cultural imperialism. Consequently, identity for those “others” who are *mis*-represented becomes an issue of life and death. They claim that a “[d]ue recognition [of the other] is not just a courtesy

we owe people” but that “[i]t is a vital human need” (Taylor 26).

I. The Emerging Other

A symptomatic reading of the (Eurocentric) narcissistic “I” then suggests that for it the other is always an “alter ego” or “object” and as such something that can be assimilated again within the purview or “gaze” of the “I”—the “other” as something truly *other to* or *different from* the self remains invisible and mute. Here I want to look a little more closely at the philosophical development of this I/other bifurcation, particularly in Descartes and Hegel, and then look briefly also at attempts since Nietzsche to salvage the “other” as that which escapes the hegemonic Western logic of identity-and-difference—particularly those of Lacan and Levinas.

The modern Western notion of self-centered “ego” or “consciousness” really begins with Descartes, who claims that even if he doubts the existence of “himself” he is “now doubting” it, and since doubting is a form of thinking he is “now thinking”: “I think, therefore I am,” that is, each moment in which I find myself thinking “I must exist, at least as a thinking thing.” But this notion of a unified self or consciousness is really posited over against that of absolute “other.” In the opening paragraph of *Meditation II*, Descartes employs “the Other” to derive his fundamental axiom of the *Cogito ergo sum*, arguing that the existence of God as a *malin genie* (“evil genius”) or absolute Other presupposes the existence of the self-identical subject. But in *Meditation III*, in his proof that a perfect God exists, he moves the other way, from a ground in the self to a ground in the other: “[...] when I turn my mind’s eye upon myself, I understand that I am a thing which is incomplete and dependent on an other and which aspires without limit to ever greater and better things; but I also understand at the same time that he on whom I depend has within him all those greater things, not just indefinitely and potentially but actually and infinitely, and hence that he is God” (Dicker 81). We may say that in both cases, Descartes employs the other to foreground the self. But Dalia Judovitz rephrases Derrida’s mistrust of Descartes’ strategy: “Thus the truth of the *cogito*’s existence is here established through the exercise of an impossible fiction, through a rhetoric of negation whose truth is based on the totalizing character of fiction and whose evidence relies on the power of representation to perform even its own negation, as if the verisimilitude of subject- tivity did not require

the substrate of language” (“Derrida and Descartes” 47).

While the empiricist Hume considers the sense of our “self” or “mind” to be a fiction based on an unwarranted inference from a series of incoming sense impressions, Kant combines Descartes and Hume by arguing that our “mind,” in effect, through space/time as projected forms of intuition and the logical categories of understanding imposes form or order upon the incoming impressions in the act of perception. But Kant therefore separated (as had Descartes) subject and object: our noumenal mind we could “think but not know” and the same for the noumenal “things in themselves;” all we could know was the overlap of the two in the phenomenal world of sense experience. Hegel then, following the German idealists Fichte and Schelling, argued essentially that there could be no firm subject-object dichotomy: the world (nature) is mind-becoming-conscious-of-itself through history, and mind or subjectivity becomes conscious of itself through a series of dialectical moves, casting itself out as other-to-itself and absorbing it (self) back again, based on a (dialectical) logic of identity-and-difference. “[S]elf-consciousness is the reflection out of the being of the world of sense and perception, and is essentially the return from *otherness*” (*Phenomenology* 105). Hegel’s dialectical logic, while insuring on the one hand that self and other “*recognize themselves as mutually recognizing one another,*” is also driven by a force of negativity which becomes another kind of “other,” a “bad infinity” that must remain in a sense “outside” the system. In this sense the true essence of the Hegelian other is “darkness” (419).

In his 20th-century reading of Hegel, Kojève emphasizes the role of recognition and desire in the dialectic: “the human reality is nothing but the fact of the *recognition* of one man by another man” (41). Man becomes *conscious of himself* when he says “I” but in the same moment he will be constituted, already for Hegel, as part of a more encompassing social consciousness; only within this wider intersubjective order does the notion (or the “positing”) of the “I,” after all, really make sense. (The “I” is also the “he” or “she.”) But for Kojève this dialectical movement of (self-) consciousness is also a dialectical movement of desire. When one contemplates a thing he is “absorbed” by it: it is through *desire as lack* that man becomes self-conscious because “the I of Desire is an emptiness that receives a real positive content only by negating action that satisfies Desire in destroying, transforming, and ‘assimilating’ the desired non-I” (4).

For Lacan, who attended Kojève’s Hegel lectures in Paris in the 1930’s, “recognition” or “identification” undergoes a still more complicated process. In “The Mirror Stage” of early childhood development—which occurs when the child first sees

“himself” (“herself”) as the image or “other” reflected in the mirror, that is, as a kind of “lack” or “difference”—we have “homeomorphic” identification and “heteromorphic” identification (*Écrits* 3). The former is related to the Lacanian “eye,” the latter to the “gaze.” Unlike Sartre, who conflates the gaze with “the act of looking,” Lacan distinguishes “eye” and “gaze” and ties the latter to “the object of the act of looking” (Evans 72). In the scopic field there is not completely symmetrical reciprocity of seer-seen: “when the subject looks at an object, the object is always already gazing back at the subject, but from a point at which the subject cannot see it” (Evans 72). Looked at in this way “self-identity” is fluid, subject to the interaction between self and other. Identity as a self-sufficient, autonomous, sacrosanct entity—as one term in a stable self-other dialectical polarity—becomes problematic now that the other (as perhaps predicted by Hegelian pure negativity) appears as an “event.”

With Levinas, who is influenced by Kierkegaard’s post-Hegelian concern with God’s absolute “command” to Abraham (the non-logical or absurd command of an absolute Other), we get the notion of the other as *demand*, the demand for a (for its own) “space of enunciation.” This demand is “the call of the Other” as the “articulating [of] a need” (Evans 34-35). From a Levinasian perspective, then, the relationship between self and other is not dialectical but properly *ethical* since the other is now seen as one’s neighbor, one’s “fellow man” whose *demand* on us (on our own “subjectivity”) “signifies otherwise than as [...] presenting essence and entities” in the old Hegelian way (*Otherwise* 46). Therefore the self (our self, myself) can no longer essentialize the consciousness of the Other or reduce it to the “I think.” In speaking, communicating, “saying,” we close the self-other distance: “[t]o say is to approach a neighbor” (48). Though saying is communication, then, this cannot be reduced to a phenomenology of truth. The “subject” is no longer in, at home with, “himself”—like the “saying” which answers the other’s demand the subject becomes now a kind of passive force, an existence-for-the-other that is free of intentionality, cognition, representation, horizon, and interiority.: “An exposure to the other [...] the-one-for-the-other to the point of substitution, but a substitution in separation, that is, responsibility” (54). In communication, “[a]lterity comes to me [the self] from without, and comes by exceeding my capacities” (*Otherwise* 4). The world of self is the world of *Da* [There]. It is a world of existence without existants, a transcendence and a passing over ending at beings’ *other* (*Otherwise* 3).

Levinas critiques not only the Cartesian-Kantian-Hegelian tradition in Western philosophy, built on notions of ego and reason associated with light and knowledge,

but also Husserl's (ultimately Cartesian and Platonic) phenomenology which sees consciousness as "intentionality," the field of consciousness as a "field of meaning-intending acts." For Levinas "[t]he intentionality of consciousness allows one to distinguish the ego from things, but it does not make solipsism disappear: its element—light—renders us master of the exterior world but is incapable of discovering a peer for us there" (65). The other thus "hidden from our view"—for after all it is in one way impossible to stop thinking in "Cartesian" terms—is culturally, historically, and philosophically a "being without a face." S/he is forever re-moved and back-grounded, unable to become a central figure in the/our scopic field.

Levinas therefore claims that perhaps art should seek to give a "face" to the other. In what follows, then, I will venture an interpretation of two cinematic texts—Alfred Hitchcock's *The Birds* and (more substantially) Ang Lee's *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and—in (Lacanian and Levinasian) terms of caged egos, inverted gazes and the self-other relationship.

II. *Gazing Birds, Hidden Dragons*

Hitchcock's *The Birds* explores the interaction between subject and object, the eye and the gaze, culture and nature. It opens with seabirds (seagulls) soaring up into the sky as a moving background. After an opening sequence that plays on various forms of "gaze," recognition and misrecognition in a pet shop, Hitchcock places (*via* a coincidence) all his characters and events within a familial web thematizing three kinds of "birds": (1) *caged love-birds* which stand for the human "ego," (2) the *caged* members of Mitch's family, especially Mitch's mother Lydia who lives in her Oedipal, imaginary world, and (3) the *wild seabirds* that represent the "other."¹ The former two are "tamed" while the latter (as the Other) is beyond man's ken. What's fascinating here is that Mitch's "visitor" Melanie is unaware of the impending danger—the triangular web of love in which she is trapped and the attack of malicious seabirds that mirrors Lydia's jealousy, possessiveness and aggressiveness (Horwitz 279).

Being the fourth piece in a *tetralogy* about "the maternal superego"—the others are *Rear Window*, *The Man Who Knew Too Much* and *Psycho*, and *The Birds*—this

¹ For Horwitz, "birds are associated with female hysteria and destructiveness" and the wild birds are symbols of "maternal anxiety which seeks to punish any form of sexual expression" (282).

film, Slavoj Žižek suggests, should be taken *serially* (98). Instead of regarding the attacking birds as “an expression of Lydia’s jealousy,” Žižek sees them as a catalyst and a *solution* to the domestic problem confronted by Mitch’s family members:

There is a key detail that supports our reading; at the very end of the film, Mitch’s mother “accepts” Melanie as her son’s wife, gives her consent, and abandons her superego role (as indicated by the fleeting smile she and Melanie exchange in the car)—and that is why, at that moment, they are all able to leave the property that is being threatened by the birds: the birds are no longer needed, their role is finished. (106)

Žižek thus offers us a structural and functional reading of the attacking birds, one perhaps congruent with Horwitz’s interpretation of the birds as an agent (or agents) of “surveillance.” Horwitz suggests that *The Birds* stages a “female rivalry over Mitch between his old lover Annie, Melanie, and Lydia” and that the attacking birds are the “key” to this familial dilemma (280). After their traumatic experience, Mitch’s whole “family” can finally, by getting rid of the birds, cast out the nightmare of their contorted inter-relationships. (And for Freud, we remember, a nightmare is still a form, however “twisted” or out of control, of wish fulfillment, of desire.) Thus though the ending *seems* a happy one and Hitchcock does create a formal unity in the film, the problem of the birds is not yet resolved; it merits our further reflection. In “The Hitchcockian Blot,” Žižek summarizes Robin Wood’s three ways of reading the film:

According to the first, “cosmological” reading, the attack of the birds can be viewed as embodying Hitchcock’s vision of the universe, of the (human) cosmos as system [...] that can be upset at any time, that can be thrown into chaos by the intervention of pure chance [...].

For the second, “ecological” reading, the film’s title could have been *Birds of the World, Unite!*: in this reading, the birds function as a condensation of exploited nature that finally rises up against man’s heedless exploitation [...].

The third reading sees the key to the film in the intersubjective relations between the main characters (Melanie, Mitch, and his mother), which are far from being merely an insignificant sideline to the “true” plot, the attack of the birds: the attacking birds only “embody” a fundamental discord [...]. (97-98)

Žižek then focuses more on the third reading, a “phenomenological” reading in terms of human intersubjectivity.² If we follow Žižek’s reading of Hitchcock seriously and serially, we will find that the director has always loved birds:

In *North by Northwest* we have what is perhaps the most famous Hitchcockian scene, the attack by the plane—a steel bird—that pursues the hero across a flat, sun-baked landscape; in *Psycho*, Norman’s room is filled with stuffed mounted birds, and even the body of his mummified mother reminds us of a stuffed bird; in *The Birds*, after the (metaphorical) steel bird and the (metonymic) stuffed birds, we finally have actual live birds attacking the town. (99)

In privileging the emotional intrigues and inter-relationships of characters above cosmological and ecological themes, Žižek is also privileging culture over nature in the order of things. As an *other* to culture, nature is doubly removed from culture. It is not only alienated from the civilized world but also from man’s reason. But while the purely natural force of attacking birds becomes a force of intra-cultural, inter-subjective passions (a “storm of passion”) and thus too a solution to these social conflicts—in particular here intra-familial conflicts—they still remain a raw force of nature and as such an Other to *our* human society. In this way they may be contrasted with the mild lovebirds—Melanie’s gift to Mitch’s sister—which, rather than the indefinable force of desire itself, can be seen as the objects of desire, as tamed egos.

As a rewriting of the visible and the invisible and of self and other, Lacan’s theory of the eye and the gaze can help us revisit Hitchcock’s *The Birds*. Though he does not explore the Cartesian meditation in terms of phenomenological intentionality, Lacan’s use of visual theories to formulate “I saw myself seeing myself” is itself a masterstroke, in that it is, indeed, the paraphrase of a “Cartesian *cogito* by which the subject apprehends himself as thought” (*Four Fundamental Essays* 80). It resembles a dream vision in which the dreamer enters into his own mind (into the mind of the subject as

² In his *The Ticklish Subject*, Žižek defends the Cartesian subject: “All academic powers have entered into a holy alliance to exorcise this [the Cartesian subject] spectre: the New Age obscurantist [...] and the Heideggerian proponet of the thought of Being [...] and Deep Ecologist (who blames Cartesian mechanist materialism for providing the philosophical foundation for the ruthless exploitation of nature)” (1). He then makes two claims: (1) “Cartesian subjectivity continues to be acknowledged by all academic powers as a powerful and still active intellectual tradition,” and (2) “It is high time that the partisans of Cartesian subjectivity should, in the face of the whole world, publish their aims, their tendencies, and meet this nursery tale of the Spectre of Cartesian subjectivity with the philosophical manifesto of Cartesian subjectivity itself” (1-2).

character within the dream) and looks at what “he” (or “she”) is looking at. Lacan later explains that this formulation captures the notion that “the consciousness, in its illusion of *seeing itself seeing itself*, finds its basis in the inside-out structure of the gaze” (82). Thus self and other in the Cartesian “I think” becomes the problem of the eye and the gaze—“Seeing itself seeing itself.” In the scopic field the other is always already backgrounded, and the gaze is always imagined, for the human eye is disrupted by the gaze of the Other: the relationship between the eye and the gaze, like the relationship between self and other, is interactive, mutually implicated; they are contradictory yet complementary. Thus Lacan asks: “Where is the background? Is it absent? No. Rupture, split, the stroke of the opening makes absence emerge—just as the cry does not stand out against a background of silence but on the contrary makes the silence emerge as silence” (26). And so the birds in Hitchcock’s *The Birds* always lurch in the background as “others”: they are ourselves “overseeing” ourselves (as superego), Horwitz’s “agents of surveillance” seen now as an inverted inter- subjective and intra-subjective gaze, culture gazed down upon by a nature that has itself already become the inverted gaze of culture.

In Ang Lee’s *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* we get no birds attacking from above but humans (“named” as tigers and dragons) attacking one another. Such a description perhaps reinforces the conventional claim in comparative metaphysics that whereas Western thinking posits a duality of immanent and transcendent, human and divine worlds—nature (or rather the supernatural, the “divine”) as pure “other” to the world of human society and culture—Chinese thinking posits a pervasively immanent culture (or “extended family”) that in effect “contains” the otherness of nature/the supernatural, in part by including its own history in the form of the disembodied spirits of the ancestors.³ Thus the issue in Ang Lee’s film becomes, not the mechanism by which a natural/supernatural Other (Hitchcock’s attacking birds from the sky) can, through the force of its inverted “gaze,” negatively signify and thus somehow release, heal or absorb the intra-cultural, intra-social, intra-familial, intersubjective conflicts, but rather that by which the inverted intersubjective gaze of individuals locked in the embrace of mortal combat and/or romantic love (or friendship) resolves their

³ See e.g. Hall and Ames, Hansen, Graham. The correlated Western dualities or hierarchies, absorbed into a larger unity in the Chinese model, include transcendent/immanent, gods/humans, soul (spirit, mind)/body, subject/object: thus we come back to a Western logic of identity-and-difference that was already present in Plato and Parmenides. Hansen goes so far as to claim that, whereas in Greek philosophical discourse (based on the logic of Indo-European languages) a subject states “truths” about an “objective reality,” Chinese philosophical discourse is a performative (rather than prepositional or constative) use of language, a “socially-guiding” (or “formatting”) discourse.

“conflicts” by in effect reversing or inverting their identities (or at least their “roles,” and in particular gender roles),⁴ through a dynamic of self-abnegation and being-for-the-other (and its correlative being-for-self), within this fully immanent, horizontal, socio-cultural matrix.

Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon was originally a martial arts novel by Du-lu Wang (1909-77) who became known, along with Bao-yu Kung, Sho-ming Lee, and Chen-ying Chen, as an “Old-style” martial arts fiction writer in northern China (Chou 1-13). Wang published a pentalogy of martial arts fiction: *The Crane in Kung-lung*, *Precious Sword and Famous Ladies*, *The Sword’s Breath and Its Glamor*, *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, and *The Iron Steed and the Silver Jar*, the “Kung-Iron pentalogy” (Chou 10). Ssu-nian Hsu reads these five popular fictions in terms of the heroes’ “inability” rather than “ability” to achieve a heroic deed, a point which distinguishes Wang from other popular martial arts fiction writers:

They have a single purpose in life—to fight for the right they think right, but are sometimes at a loss about the noble cause they are supposed to achieve, not because they are unwilling to sacrifice themselves but because they are all too willing to sacrifice themselves while not having the slightest hope of bringing happiness to those they love. The tragedy of love is not entirely imposed from outside, as with the traditional feudal laws or manners. Highly skilled in martial arts and all the strategies of hand-to-hand combat, they can get the upper hand over their enemies, but when confronted with their own character, psychological foibles, inner self, they are nevertheless fighting a losing cause. Seen in this perspective, their enemy is themselves. (Wang 1: 2; translation mine)

Hsu aptly points out that Wang’s heroes are “anti-heroes.” Yet, trapped in the web of social interaction in the world of martial arts, they still have to be “heroes”—if not in order to survive than at least in order to catch and hold the reader’s interest. What is tragic in Wang’s novelistic world is his writing of the limit: we sense that his anti-heroic fighters are imprisoned, unable to transcend a largely self-imposed limit. And yet inasmuch as this limiting force is a function of the characters’ own self-sacrifice or self-negation, it arguably leads to its own “transcendence”: the major

⁴ Ang Lee’s film is about *anti-ethics*; it is a rewriting of the traditionally male-centered Chinese (personal and cultural) identity; it points toward conversion, rupture, a new direction. Ang Lee wants the film’s viewers to consider the possibility of reconceptualizing (their own) (inter-)subjectivity. That is, the film presents (in Levinasian terms) not only the possibility of being compassionate toward the other but the possibility of becoming (interchanging with) the other.

“heroes” move out of themselves into the (their) “other” on the purely horizontal plane of intersubjective relationships, in a dynamic suggestive more of Levinas than Hegel.

Thus Mu-bai (played by Chou Ren Fa in the film), already in Wang’s novel and more clearly in Ang Lee’s film, is not merely “skilled in sword-wielding, a man with good manners, generous and righteous” (Wang 15); having undergone a kind of negative epiphany during the intense meditation practiced by the highest-level martial arts masters, he is a man already tired of what he has become, a man ready to step out of the “world of River and Lake.”⁵ In the film this attitude is powerfully presented in Mu-bai’s conversations with Hsiu-lian (Michelle Yeow’s character), his old friend and “first love.” This is a couple that has indefinitely suspended or deferred what would have seemed to be their destined marriage, for both chose instead the warrior’s life of self-negation—that is, negation of desire, of erotic love; they have therefore become “equals” in a world from which the possibility of the consummation of their romance has (by themselves) been removed. The self-abnegation theme is most explicit in Mu Bai’s paradoxical Buddhist reflections on life: he remarks to Hsiu-lian that “One can’t grasp firmly anything in life; we can only hold onto things by letting them go.”

Nonetheless the possibility of a final joining (reconciliation) of the two “lovers,” and thus a final “attainment,” is suggested in Ang Lee’s beautifully-staged cave scene near the end of the film—in effect the first of two parallel climaxes. Here Mu-bai tells Hsiu-lian, in whose lap his head rests as he slowly dies from the poisoned darts of Jade Fox (whom he has just killed):⁶ “I will remain nearby as a ghost until you die rather than enter heaven before you.” However, this “conclusion”—the promise of reconciliation at last in the “other world”—has been called one of Ang Lee’s several “gestures” to the heartstrings of his largely Western film audience;⁷ to give this

⁵ Here I follow Sharon Lai’s translation of *chiang-hu* 江湖. (See her “Translating Jin Yong,” Chiu-quei Wang 376-78.) This phrase suggests a kind of unpredictably wild, open-ended world.

⁶ The novel’s ending differs considerably from the film’s. In Wang’s novel Jade Fox, shortly after killing General Chiu Tsai, was killed by a machete-wielding Hsiu-lian in the garden, and Mu-bai remains safe and sound. In his stunning cinematic ending Ang Lee weaves a web that pushes all the main characters to the limit of their destiny: the death of Jade Fox followed closely by Mu-bai’s death and Beloved Dragon’s death/life.

⁷ This issue was much discussed at the Shih Hsin International Conference on Subjectivity/Cultural Identity (May 2001, see note on the title page). In one paper this particular “line” of Mu-bai’s (quoted above) was accused of being in the first place a mistranslation from the Chinese. (In the original the focus is apparently, as befits the standard comparative model, more on a this-worldly suspension or—rather wild and hopeless, as if still in the world of River and Lake—“hanging around” of Mu-bai’s ghost. Although I have emphasized at the outset the Eurocentrism of the “hegemonic self” model, and am thus implicitly suggesting that Wang’s/Ang Lee’s more “Levinasian” dynamics of self/other are also in a sense more “Chinese,” I have opted not to pursue here the issue of whether or to what degree Ang Lee, making a commercial film for a world audience, has “sold out” his original culture.

Heaven too transcendental (or perhaps Christian as against Buddhist) a “spin” would after all set us back within what is, according to the standard comparative view mentioned above, a Western metaphysical framework. But we can also read this cave as a not-quite-Platonic one, and this line as suggesting a sort of indefinite “suspension”⁸—which frees one from limits—rather than a (totalizing) “conclusion.” This reading is strongly suggested by the second and final climax that, closely following it, echoes the first: standing with her lover Tiny Tiger on the top of a high cliff near a famous Buddhist temple, Beloved Dragon suddenly jumps and, as the film ends, remains suspended (or floating, hovering) in the air.

A Levinasian reading does after all compel us to resist the temptations (stronger no doubt in the film than in the novel) of a vertical-transcendent “Other” here, and focus rather on the purely horizontal (and social) self-negation or self-becoming-other of the world-weary but *still living* Mu-bai.⁹ What may be clearer in the (more purely “Chinese”) novel than in the film is the importance of Mu-bai’s relationship with the young woman, Beloved Dragon: he becomes concerned about her, wants to control (for her own sake) her “wildness” and guide her on the “correct path.” Thus after first meeting her Mu-bai assumes a responsibility which now begins to consume him; he abandons any dream he might have had of a future for *himself* (for instance, the ever-deferred dream of still marrying Hsiu-lian) and becomes what Levinas would call a fully ethical being, one who negates him/herself by putting him/herself fully in the service of another (an “other”). But it is almost as if Beloved Dragon “expands” with the added force or presence of her other (Mu-bai) “within” her: she becomes increasingly egocentric and hedonistic (as we also clearly see in the film) as Mu-bai gradually “decreases,” loses his subjectivity. We could also say that Mu-bai, rather than wishing to construct or expand his own subjectivity based on dreams of the future and the old “warrior code,” welcomes the other’s (Beloved Dragon’s) “disruption” of his world, welcomes the full disruptive force of the “face” of the other, becomes a truly Levinasian anti-hero. As his other’s desire (or “other desire”) points toward the infinite and wishes to reach the “beyond”—this is again the indefinite (infinite) suspension of Beloved Dragon’s climactic plunge from the cliff—Mu-bai’s negated or

⁸ See preceding note on Mu-bai’s dying words. In Plato’s *Republic* the “philosopher” escapes from the cave of “mere appearances” up into the sunlight of “true forms” (“reality”); but Ang Lee gives us a ray of sunlight slanting down into the darkened cave, suggesting not so much that this cave may already picture or point to a “transcendent” world as that (once again) the transcendent/immanent duality or hierarchy has been broken down, the “difference” suspended.

⁹ And the Chinese sense of Mu-bai’s dying words may be (note 7) that he doesn’t (one doesn’t) really die; ancestral spirits are still part of a this-worldly extended family.

abnegated desire turns inward and approaches a kind of infinite inwardness (Kierkegaard), an infinite being-for-the-other as self-negativity which in itself engenders a kind of absolute freedom. An inward-turned desire, an inward-turned gaze: an inverted gaze perhaps repeated (echoed, reflected) with variation by Beloved Dragon herself when she takes her final leap (of faith) into pure suspension, while a shocked Tiny Tiger gazes *out* and *down* at her floating body.

This “inverted gaze” also signals, of course, or allows for, that gender-ambiguity (androgyny) or gender-shifting which explains to a degree the popularity of the film (especially in the West). Implicit in the novel and more explicit in the film—in part, again, because Ang Lee is appealing to a largely Western audience—is the feeling that the passive, self-negating “knight” (*gung-fu* anti-hero) becomes woman-like (according to the traditional, perhaps patriarchal characterization of “women”) while the aggressive women fighters become manlike. Thus not only is Mu-bai forced to indefinitely postpone “marriage” with Hsiu-lian but he even *dies before her* (in both senses of “before”) and in dying he announces that he will “wait for her to go first” before entering Heaven.¹⁰ Beloved Dragon easily beats the numerous men she fights and she can even beat her lover Tiny Tiger (who is rather “tiny” compared to her “dragon”) at least sometimes; the film portrays her initial “encounter” with him as combat-becoming-eroticism, as if she could perhaps (as a variation on Hsiu-lian) only understand romantic-erotic love in terms of mortal combat; in the final scene it is he who stands by shocked as she boldly jumps, takes her “leap of faith.” This is again a passing of self into other on a horizontal (socio-cultural) scale now marked in terms of gender—and as such may be read as one function, really, or one “face,” of a Levinasian self-negation that leads to inner freedom, now seen as the freedom from predetermined gender roles.

If an inverted gaze suspended “above” (or “below”) us, as in the final scene of Beloved Dragon’s leap “beyond limits,” reminds us of Hitchcock’s birds “in flight” (on the Lacanian reading), then the attacking, pecking, stabbing force of the birds is also suggested by the sword, “Green Destiny,” in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Mu-bai’s sword—four hundred years old, heavy, beautiful, dangerous, 2.9 feet in length, 1.1 inches in width, 1 inch thick at the handle, with seven rubies missing from the hilt—was Mu-bai’s gift to Sir Te and, by being stolen, it draws Mu-bai against his will back into the web of the complex world of River and Lake; it directly connects

¹⁰ At least in the English and perhaps Eurocentric translation; see note 7.

Mu-bai to Beloved Dragon, situating them as mutual others (with respect to it). This sword, which even when it kills draws no blood and is (therefore) the very embodiment of Mu-bai's "righteousness" and "moral integrity" (Ye 290), is then a transcendental signifier that signifies by its *absence*, an absent (lacking, desired) other which (like Hitchcock's birds) "replaces" the intersubjective relationships of the plot but also in a sense brings them into play: its theft (by Beloved Dragon) is what immediately brings, at least in the film version, Mu-bai and Beloved Dragon face-to-face. Indeed the sword, in replacing or substituting for their "faces," is itself a sort of face to which all the narrative traces lead: a "face" is not definable (Levinas) unless it establishes a relationship with *illegitimacy* (infinite alterity), beyond (its) *ipseity* (selfhood), beyond being (*au delà de l'être*). The presence of the other (sword, birds) signifies a trace which points to a beyond.

Perhaps we can read both Hitchcock's and Ang Lee's films, then, in the light of Levinas's notion that the importance of the other lies in her/his/its calling into question the concept of an "I." This calling is a sort of summoning, as if "from above": "[I]t is the summoning of myself by the other (*autrui*), it is a responsibility toward those whom we do not even know" (*Philosophical Writings* 81), or those who remain *hidden* from us—perhaps even (though this may seem to "transcend" the purview of Levinas) those birds zooming down upon us from the sky which, as a pure force nature that is (paradoxically) always already acculturated, can save us from ourselves. But if Beloved Dragon is heeding such a "call" when she takes her leap, then she is obeying a sense of responsibility not to God or Nature, not to some generalized or absolute other but to someone she *does* know. In the film the incentive for her leap is related to her (future) romance with Tiny Tiger; in the novel she jumps for her father who lies prostrate on his sick bed because Beloved Dragon (through her egocentric, "male" ambition) has wrought havoc on her family. She is acting on the traditional belief that whoever jumps from this place (near the sacred temple) and still lives can save her family (or, in the film's perhaps more Westernized, romanticized spin, save her "romance"). In the novel she jumps in a mood of self-abnegation, ashamed of her previous conduct, with a heart willing at last to sacrifice (itself) for the other (for her family). For Levinas, "Here to be or not to be is not the question where transcendence is concerned" (*Otherwise* 3)—for we move *au delà de l'être*, "beyond being" (to the Other), where the "difference" will no longer "matter." But we have to be careful about "transcendence" when looking at *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. A "Chinese" reading of Levinas's "to be or not to be is not the question" is perhaps more likely to

be grounded in (or to include) an *aleatory* dynamic: Beloved Dragon is *taking a gamble* with her jump, the outcome (life or death) is still indeterminate, suspended in time; and after all, it is by *still living* that she will save her family.¹¹ Echoing in a way Mu-bai's dying scene/words, this jump suggests a negation of life through which the anti-heroine *may and therefore does* regain life and re-establish a bond, an apprenticeship between herself and Mu-bai, self and other, seer and seen, eye and gaze. The crucial term here is the (temporally suspended) *may*: the ending remains (in Ang Lee's hands)¹² *open*, the question of Beloved Dragon's life or death remains an open-ended one, an enigma. It is a more dynamic and aleatory turn, angle, aspect or "face" of Levinas's notion that "what matters" is merely filled with an "*il y a*" ("there is")—which is finally indistinguishable from the "*il n'y a pas*," "there is not."¹³

But ethics has to do finally with "praxis" or "use"; Levinas's demand that, by "gazing" at it, we in some sense lose ourselves and *become* (the face of) the Other—the *other person*—is so difficult not in its abstraction but in its concreteness, in the heavy weight of actually *doing* this, actually *acting* this way. And Chinese thinking has always emphasized, on both the Confucian and Taoist/Buddhist sides, real-life praxis. In the *Chou I* (which precedes and underlies both Confucianism and Taoism), "under" the first hexagram—*Ch'ien*, pure activity or *actualization*, pure creativity, the *pure yang/male* principle—the reading for "Nine at the beginning" is (Wilhelm 7): "Hidden dragon. Do not act." (*Chian long, wu yong*, 潛龍無用, "hidden dragon, no use," where *chian*—"hidden" with its "water" radical is related to "dive.") But the "Hidden Dragon" of the novel and film's title is a *Tsang Long*, 藏龍, where *tsang*—"conceal" is grass-over-treasure or grass-over-spoils (of war); this *dzang*—"spoils" is also *dzang*—"attack." Thus the *Chou I*'s deep-diving dragon (of the self-hidden or other-hiding self) becomes for Du-lu Wang and Ang Lee the dragon of concealed or potential attack—or of what is in effect the memory or trace of the

¹¹ And if the pure suspension of an open ending (pure chance, uncertainty but also perhaps hope or "faith") is more "Chinese" than in this case Ang Lee remains true to his ancestors. While the film ends famously with an "open ending," in Du-lu Wang's *The Iron Steed and the Silver Jar* Beloved Dragon jumps (at this moment taking the risk to save her father and family) but does not die; she is pregnant with a baby who gets stolen, and she will die later on while looking for it—so that in a sense she does and does not save her family.

¹² See the previous note.

¹³ This (Levinasian and/or Chinese) characterization of the "enigma" may remind us of Dickinson's open-ended closing lines—e.g. "And then the Windows failed—and then / I could not see to see—" ("I heard a Fly buzz—when I died—") or "I first surmised the Horses Heads / Were toward Eternity—" (in "Because I could not stop for Death—"). Dickinson is of course subverting, or calling into question, in her own way the traditional "Western" (and male, patriarchal) logic of identity-and-difference, by leaving open the question of God/no God or Being/Nothingness.

attack—where we can read “attack” also as “actualization” or “use.” And the *Chou I*’s reading for Hexagram I, “Nine in the fourth place” goes (Wilhelm 9): “Wavering flight over the depths. No blame.” (*Hwo yueh dzai yuan, wu jyou*; “Jump above deep water/gulf/abyss, no blame.” Here 躍-“jump” is “feet plus bird/pheasant,” 淵-“abyss,” also “profound,” is “water plus whirlpool/abyss.”)¹⁴

Thus as Mu-bai awaits death in Ang Lee’s penultimate cave scene his trance-like meditative praxis is in fact a holding in/onto his *chi*-breath as long as possible. To practice the circulation of *chi* (氣, “rice dispersed like air”) within the body is of paramount importance because *chi* is considered a “substance” (*ti*, 體) while the sword is an “expediency” (*yong*, 用) (Shahar 128). In the scene as Ang Lee films it both breath and sword are rendered useless, they cannot ostensibly “save” Mu-bai; yet this is a uselessness through which, like the beam of sunlight slanting down obliquely into the dark cave, the Other speaks to us. Or, coming back to Levinas’s (arguably still Eurocentric) perspective from the vantage point of Chuang-tzu, the “call” of the (hidden or inverted) “Other” is perhaps also the “use” of those *yen* (言)/words/discourses “so big” that they appear (at least to ordinary people, locked within a rational way of thinking) to be “useless.”

Said Hui Shih to Chuang-tzu, “These sayings of yours are useless (*yen wu yung*, words no use, talk no use).”

“It is only with people who know about the useless that there is any point in talking about uses (*yen yung*). In all the immensity of heaven and earth, a man uses no more than is room for his feet. If recognizing this we were to dig away the ground round his feet all the way down to the Underworld (Huang Chuan, Yellow Springs), would it still be useful to the man?

“It would be useless.”

“Then it is plain that the useless does serve a use.”

(Chuang-tzu 26, Graham 100)¹⁵

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¹⁴ The “judgment” for this first hexagram is “*Yuan heng. Li zhen*,” which Huang (22) renders “Sign of the Great Sacrifice. Auspicious omen.”

¹⁵ Graham puts this in his “Passages related to the Inner chapters,” those most clearly Chuang-tzu’s own, in *Chuang-tzu: The Inner Chapters*.

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[Received 7 October 2001;
accepted December 20 2001;
revised December 26 2001]