“Ideal Friend”—Genre, Trauma, and Modernity in Song at Midnight

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Abstract. Although the ideal body, which consistently appears in the revolutionary manifests, transformative movements, and artworks, plays an important role in imagining a Utopian humanity of modern China, it proves to be impossible because of the destructive acceleration and fragmentation of the questionable local modernity. Probing into the last Chinese horror film before the Sino-Japan War, I would explore the strategies that artists experimented with to manifest, memorize, and mask the perceptive discomfort aroused by the deformed city and corporality. A nice young man from a roving theatrical troupe is identified by a disfigured artist-revolutionist as his ideal friend who shares the same objet petit a in the struggle for a brighter future. Set against the complicated social condition as well as the consumption culture, Song at Midnight articulates the conflicting discourses and the cinematic technologies to encapsulate the traumatic experiences. The monstrous hero, who lives in a fiercely expressionist world, calls himself “a historian suffering from the excruciation” that hints being deprived of any sexual interaction with his lover, a psychopath expelled by her wealthy and tyrannic father. Eventually, the healthy and handsome actor becomes the incarnation of Song who commits suicide, while the dandy vitriol-throws and inhumanly murders. Virilio quotes Renoir’s remarks that the war “subverts the proper experience of sex and death.” (2009, p. 28) As a reference to both the social and the psychological disorders, the film stirs and releases the public obsession with subjective purity. The wounded won’t quiet, keeping the two approaches to produce prosthesis embodied in the occupational shift of Lu Xun in suspense. The deceased will “sits up in his tomb, saying ’when I turn to ashes, you will see me smile.’” (Lu Xun, 2003, p.82)

Our literature as a whole at times seems a chamber of horrors disguised as an amusement park “fun house,” where we pay to play at terror and are confronted in the innermost chamber with a series of inter-reflecting mirrors which present us with a thousand versions of our own face.

(Skal, 2001, p. 29)

1. Prelusion

Under natural and artificial destruction, films have increasingly become isolated cultural data that must be canonized, showcased and commemorated, while the original perceptions and public spectacles connected with them are confined to a series of presupposed common senses. The technological limitations in horror films that hinder authenticity, reflected in the visual black and white, acoustic experimentation and exaggerated performances, seem to attenuate the element of terror that these films aim to manifest. Despite the ideological interpretation and technological immaturity of these films, one may wonder what helps to bring the mechanics of visual suppression, such as the closing of the eyes, to their full strength. Song at Midnight (Ma-Xu Weibang, 1937), released at the dawn of the Sino-Japan Wars, reflects the inter-related social and psychological symptoms that can be traced back to the threshold of Chinese revolutionary modernity.

Most reviewers agree with the historical narration of political leftists as well as emphasize the motifs of anti-imperialism and anti-conservatism. Such motifs are reinforced by the corporative playwright Tian Han, also the writer of the three theme songs in Song at Midnight, and more notably, the PRC national anthem. This statement implies that the fear of being persecuted by the power, from which the element of horror comes from, must be resisted and eliminated.
Zhang Zhen shares a clear, elaborate discussion of Song at Midnight in the last chapter of her book The Amorous History of Silver Screen (2005). Zhang (2005) defines Song at Midnight as an iconic node in the music industry which integrates different technical aspects of silent and sound films. Films explore the intertextuality within the film industry and social events, as well as investigate the cinematic technologies that induce terror or elicit other emotions from the audience.

In response to the ideologist approach, this paper emphasizes the “hazard” of both art and revolution, as well as the situational complexity of films, generated by the different political and commercial conditions in Shanghai during the 1930s. The fear of uncontrolled art and revolution comes from the experienced transgression that characterizes both actions. Filmmakers often adopted several strategies to answer back the political panopticon of the Xin Hua Film Company and the concession government. They also resorted to this approach in order to in the film industry during a period of financial struggle and uncertainty.

Although Zhang has provided an insightful analysis on Song at Midnight, several of her arguments can be extended to create a broader picture of the relationship between the representation of trauma and the film language in horrors. Zhang (2005) defines the revelation of the monstrous face of the hero as the pivotal moment. However, she has failed to probe deeper into the decisive moment with a closer look at the concatenation of media representations in and out of the movie, and more broadly, the desire for a new human that has emerged alongside the social transformation of modern China. Body politics presents another relevant, which relates the geographical and spatial knowledge to the corporal experience.

2. Economy of Revolution and Politics of Desire

Ge (2008) implied a sort of performance dilemma to reconsider the discourse of an integral leftist’s movements in dramatic arts, which are unintentionally involved in the Shanghai mosaic. Artworks, especially those created by the avant-garde and the political vanguard, are supposed to address, and revitalize the anti-imperialism craze during the construction of a new China. Despite these Utopian invocations, the artists must maintain some sort of balance on the multilayered spectrum that stretches across mechanization and propagandism, across quality and public access, and across consensus and private desire. In other words, theatrical art represents a hybridity form forged by various conflicting motifs to combine the “grotesque” with the “rational”.

The film begins by showing a troupe of traveling dramatists arriving at a deserted theater—a spatial setting that plays a disquieting role in horror films—and faces the risk of encountering financial burden and identity crises. This situation, which reflects that of Chinese dramatists in 1930s’, effectively represents leftist influence that dominates the urban spaces of the region. The indistinct association of domestic companies with official or unofficial leaders guarantees provisional stability; however, criticisms from the “political-right” camps are inevitable. The producer of Song at Midnight has lived a legendary and disputed life. Zhang Shankun was a keen believer of film commercialization, which greatly contradicted the supposed binary opposition between art and business. The commercial success of Song at Midnight has provided a half-unshackled political space during his negotiation with Japanese cultural personalities concerning the possibilities of conducting a “cinema war” (Shao, 2012, p.153) and the strategic protection of Chinese film artists under the command of the nationalist secret service (Shao, p. 201). As one of the landmark films of the Xin Hua Film Company, Song at Midnight has embraced equivocal anti-imperialist ideologies, with the theme songs aiming to induce a heated vox populi with regards to the development of an integral and sturdy nation.

Vanguard political ideologies were not advertised by Shun Pao, one of the most popular influential media outlets in modern China. In addition, the genre stamp and the vigor of the audience, rather than their revolutionary appeal, have become crucial in the development of an attraction economy: “Street gossip goes as ‘zombie is coming!’.....The first horror in the film industry to make your soul stirred.....Cold moonlights, dreary midnight wind, song on a thread, flickering ghost.....Wailing of the attic phantom in the depth of night.”(From the documentary still in Ma-Xu Weibang and Song at Night, Old Shanghai, Old Films (2005))
A piece of advertisement by a periodical, Radio Research, is inserted at the bottom left part. The recording of Song at Midnight is developed by radio made by “China Radio Laboratory”, including its theme songs that play in the movie, the emporium, other public spaces, and households. The invention of the phonograph introduced a new way of listening to movies, which along with the radio, was initially imagined as an experimental art form; however, it was soon subjected under the manipulation of political and economic institutions.

Business mogul Zhang Shankun, who introduced late shows and multimedia dramas in Shanghai, was urged to conduct performance experiments as a strategy to attract more spectators. In Madam White Snake, a fake snake creeps through the beams and transforms into a human being. Creative performances were also used in the marketing of Song at Midnight, including the stretching a huge Gorgonian poster that extended from seven to eight floors, and the placing of an actual coffin at the movie house (Shao, 2012, pp. 193–194). These examples of inserting fantasy into reality create an immersive experience in both the artistic and commercial interfaces of filmic and urban spectacles.

Meanwhile, one vital feature of the star system is its exploitation of sexual desires of the audience. At the same time, the star culture of the film industry represents a contradiction between the economy of desire and the leftist ideology. All the leading roles in Song at Midnight were filled by major celebrities in China at that time, such as Jin Shan, Hu Ping, Zhou Wenzhu, and Shi Chao. The role of the villain, Tang Jun, who went to Gu Menghe, a pioneering actor in the early film industry and was famous for the recording of March of the Volunteers. In the film, Tang Jun covets Li and orders the destruction Song out of jealousy. The audience may feel contradicting emotions toward Tang because he is the only person in the film who can exhibit the same dandy manners of Sun (Zhang, 2005) as well as the menacing brutality and sexuality that can be demonstrated by the man-beast and the man-devil. In the film, Sun can only prove his masculinity by performing the heroic roles assigned to him both on and off stage. The feminization of male characters is intensified in Qiu Haitang (1943), in which the lead character suffers from a sexual identity crisis because of the queer role he plays in the Peking Opera.

It is apparent that persistent revolts exist against the torments brought about by carriage trade function as the impulsion of epitasis. However, the oppression of the feminized male protagonist, Sun Xiao’ou, by another force, i.e., the true director of the boffo dramas, the backstage disfigured revolutionist Song Danping, is not as apparent. After being deprived of the skills to sing and fall in love in public, Song enlightens Sun while Sun appears hesitant to accept his profession and affection. In other words, Sun intensifies his subjectivity by yielding to a stronger will, as reflected by Song’s obsession over an unfinished revolution and his beloved woman. Resistance and libido cannot simply represent participation of leftists in the film industry. The endeavors of Sun to express his identity with progressive calling do not project the sensitivity and political ambiguity of the director’s. The industrialization and entertainment of Chinese films at that time offer additional resources for the manipulation of materials that cannot be derived from the experiences of filmmakers. The depressed zeitgeist of “here and now” (Fu, 2008, p. 51) needs to be re-instilled as soon as possible.

3. Technology of Veiling and Revealing

The decisive moment in the film is extended to prolong the feeling of pain and suspension, which is represented by the doctor removing the bandages that cover Song’s face. Although Song talks to his caregivers in a hushed voice, the audience can still feel a sense of terror in his voice as it passes through the strips of clothing that cover his mouth. Such feeling of dread stems from the sense of uncertainty and the delayed revelation of truth. Mask has become a crucial motif in other horror films, such as The Phantom of the Opera (Lon Chaney et al., 1925), Eyes Without a Face (Georges Franju, 1960), Devil Woman (Kaneto Shindô, 1964), through The Face of Another (Hiroshi Teshigahara, 1966), and The Cat and the Canary (Radley Metzger, 1979). In this sense, it can be said that cinematic technology guides and hinders the ability of the audience to feel or not to feel. The horror of procrastination is reminiscent of the short story, Monkey’s Paw (W. W. Jacobs, 1902), in which a father wishes for the disappearance of an unearthy being that’s been knocking on the door of his house, whom he assumes to be his dead, mutilated son.
Going back to our movie, the valiant sacrifice of the hero in Song at Midnight is almost forgotten at the end of the film when the mobs hunt and kill the monstrous figure. The face of the hero is not immediately shown to the audience. Instead, Song eventually sees his face on the mirror reflected by a dim candlelight, which he breaks in despair to declare his “death.” In the end, the director cleverly reveals the disfigured face of the lead character through a reflection rather than a close-up to make the scene less traumatic for the audience.

Samuel Beckett’s Film (Alan Schneider, 1965) offers an insightful investigation of the visual technologies often adopted by filmmakers. In blind man’s buff, the character and the audience continue to encounter real and geometric eyes despite the dodging camera angles; this technique shows deep disfavor of eye contact, which can be likened to the revelation of truth. Wrapping or tearing up the verification of visuality by no means prevents him from facing the mirror image of his own, whose blind eye uncovers the glory and animosity of his memory of war.

Song shows an old photo to Sun as a way of narrating personal history. After the introduction of photography in China as a new form of media, people have begun to believe that shadows ingest the souls of the human or objects that cast them. It may sound strange but this seems reasonable if the mechanical capacity of cameras to capture a “gone” self is considered. Old people always look serious in photographs not only because of the extended exposure time, but also because of the role of the photographs in preserving the reputation of the host. Ge and Shi (2011) claim that photographs help maintain the identity of a person because “fame is maintained as long as the image exists” (p. 25). The authors point that majority of the early customers to the photograph studios were prostitutes, opera singers and “new women,” but they fail to put enough emphasis on the souvenir photos of revolutionists (Ge & Shi, 2011, pp. 40–41).

Song uses the photograph to reconstruct his ego physically and mentally as well as to lure Sun to become “pengyou”, the Chinese term for a friend, who shares the same ambition. Instead of calling Sun by his real name, Song keeps calling his as an “ideal friend.” In the title song, Song identifies himself as a “historiographer suffering from castration,” which implies that he is incapable of achieving the objects of his desire, namely, the revolution and the female body. Thus, after Sun satisfying the desires, Song rushes off to his death.

By eradicating the concept of “beast”, the film asks the audience what they must look for in an ideal friend, i.e., an ideal friend inside and outside of the movie? And how traumatic histories collide and intertwine with the development of a utopian future?

The humiliation and destruction of imperialism in China has also increased the demand for an evolution. The conceptual newness of modernity alludes to a future that is modeled on contemporary Western society, and a determined farewell to the past. The Chinese term for revolution implies that the success of revolution depends on the extent to which the old institutions are purged violently. The finalism mode, which is the French mode of revolution, was repeated in 1912 anti-Manchu revolt. On the other side of the spectrum, we can see the utopian spectacle of a new man and of a new China that has been waived profoundly into the practical national transformations (e.g., the New Life Movement and the Rectification Movement). These were launched by the Nationalist and Communist parties, respectively, to promote health, wellness and political rightness. Hence, violences and dissection of identities make the promotion of a purified newness an impossible task to achieve.

According to Foucault (1975–1995), the mobilization of power can be realized by the public display of atrocity. The barbaric of punishments that are scattered throughout Chinese history continue to astonish the spectators despite the fact that they have been captured in images. The disfigured soldiers represent another sort of power display, namely, the power of machine lethality and national violence. Although the face of has been disfigured by the throwing of a modern hazard (nitric acid), his deformed face reminds the audience of the veterans who stagger in the urban area of their country? Each individual, therefore, becomes a target of the potential dangers, lynchings and wars that they strive to avoid. Similar to avant-garde art, the political revolutions in China are always handicapped by the “monstrosity” of daily knowledge, especially about power and sex, as well as by the mythical divide between the intelligentsia and the proletariat. Therefore, as a “return
of the repressed” (Keas, 2011, p. 101), the image of Song must be killed both inside and outside of the screen. Because “the boundaries of their bodies no longer existed; the inside had become the outside, and was no longer contained within the boundaries of the self. This experience has the effect of blurring and confusing the senses. Corpses become not only a visual but also a physical reality. More importantly, they become the embodiment of lack of containment. Corpses have to be disposed of, or just ignored.” (Koureas, 2007, p. 98)

4. Peceptional Topology

Titford (1973), meanwhile, suggests that the spatial design of the expressionist films contributes induces claustrophobic feelings from the audience. In fact, the relationship between artistic space and subjective feelings has been examined long before the invention of films. Despite the lack of empirical research, several key German philosophers and estheticians proposed that the perception of space (rather than visual) is more sensual. In other words, our bodily interiors mold, and reproduce the spatial topology that embraces us. With regards the mutual construction of war trauma and cinematic spectatorship, Keas (2011) concludes that the presentation of cramped spaces in expressionist films echo the hypnotic experiences of individuals when walking in trenches and tombs.

Although I have not obtained any material about the influence of expressionist films on Ma-Xu Weibang, such influence is still evident in his films, as Zhang (2005) has noted. The expressionist style is notable in the works by Ma-Xu Weibang. Psychos, creeps, phantoms, freaks and murderers strike on one stage after another, pushing the expressionist carnival to its climax. The audiovisual dynamics of the stage design and mise-en-scene in expressionist films also present a subject of interest. Apart from the strange feelings that emanate from gothic theaters and frosty groves, the cinematography of these films creates a situation in which the audience can feel either confused or scared. In Song at Midnight, the adventure of the dramatic troupe through the theater corridors is captured by the longitudinal shots of the troupe members facing the audience and the endless dark pathway. Hence, the entire scene pushes the audience into feelings of suspension and insecurity.

By emphasizing the cinematic articulation among dead woods, storms and the corporal and spiritual conditions of the characters, Zhang (2005) also shows how the images of natural phenomena simultaneously relate to images of beauty and horror. The national identity of the human body must be further discussed considering that understanding corporality is crucial in understanding the cultural construction of China as a nation. Here, the bodily metaphors in pre-modern times are in stock, as expressed in the Chan Kuo idiom, “the lips being lost, the teeth feel cold,” especially during the rise of the imperialism. The modern poet Wen Yiduo wrote the “Songs of Seven Sons” in 1925, which heavily used the bodily metaphor runs through the whole poem from the first part of “Macao”, one of the most famous contemporary Chinese poems: “You know? Macau is not my name real. Mother! I have been far from the swaddle for long. But it is my body that they ravish. Still you are taking good care of my soul...” (Wen Yiduo, 1925)

The image of China the youngster (Shaonian zhongguo) has reemerged in modern Chinese art and literature, reflecting a greater myth that the antagonism of the older and new generation facilitates the evaluation of the national organism. Revolution, at least in partial and political propagandas, is widely perceived as a once-and-for-all project that aims to create a new China from the ruins of its dying fragments. Hence, the screening of Song at Midnight amid the looming Sino-Japan War reflects the desire of the Chinese to exclude multifaceted otherness. However, imperialism exists in a dispersive, interpretive space. Despite the parallelisms between the disfigured face of Qiu Haitang and that of China under imperial rule taking the shape of Qiu Haitang flower (begonia) on map the script can still be performed and filmed after modification, thus implying the enemy of Asia (i.e., the West) or referring to grand illusions of “justice” and “patriotism” (Shao, 2012, p. 197; p. 219).

The fractured images of ceaseless hiatus and reconstruction provide the ontological topology for framing the materiality and spirituality of the 20th century China. One considerable image of art and revolution is the aerial photograph of air attack explosion that captures the moment of the
surface inside out. I am not trying to imply that the freakish physiognomy of Song symbolizes the destruction of the nation, though the perceptual relevance between history and its iterations and incarnations is still enlightening. However, by drawing similarities between a crowd avoiding an airplane swoop to a blossoming rose (Virilio, 2009, p. 25), Benito Mussolini perceived the overhead view of a mise-en-scene, which is typical in a traditional musical film. The images of the cities under attack, and of women always concur in the “womb of civilization.” However, Fu (2008) states that the discourse of body politics points to the disgrace of the national and of males rather than to the trauma of the private individuals, especially the females (pp. 127–130).

Francis Derwent Wood, Who reconstructed the disfigured faces of war survivors in the Nose Room of the Third London Hospital, also created the Machine Gun Corps Memorial (1925). This work is a smooth, strong male body armed with weapons, which are considered as the extensions of his own masculinity. The mask tries to restore the face from the wounds, but fails to do so because the mask/inside is made from the mold/outside, which reveals the coloboma. The memories of the sculptor and of the patients can hardly be relieved (Kourtas, 2007, pp. 138–142). Considering the surface of the wound and the insufficient medical and constructive surgery techniques at that time, Song’s facial reconstruction seemed impossible. Hence, the cloak and the mask that hide his physiognomy, also inevitably expose his situation.

5. Film as Event

The doubt of human knowledge, which expressionist films often keep open, allows for the alternative and subversive interpretations of a seemingly concluded scenario. The ambiguity of the narrative partly results from the mental sickness of the protagonist, as can be seen in The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari (Robert Wiene, 1920) and Nosferatu (F. W. Murnau, 1922). I also want to discuss the dubitable happy ending of the film, where Sun embraces Li from the back with the rising sun in the background. Dismissing dead ex-lovers and the nightmares seem too hurried although it may satisfy the movie ending preferences of the Chinese audience. Meanwhile, Japanese military force had begun to assault Shanghai six months after the screening of Song at Midnight, which was followed by the assault of the eastern Paris. The war-related trauma and the effect of the film would be integrated into the daily life of the people. However, there is an implied idea that a brighter future would come for them.

According to Douban website (http://movie.douban.com/), which focuses on sharing of artistic information, Ma-Xu has directed 29 films, and co-directed seven films, acted in six, and co-wrote three films. However, only three of his cinematic works can be accessed by the public online, including Song at Midnight (1937), Qiu Haitang (1943) and Blood-Stained Flowers (1954), remain open to public access online.

Meanwhile, the documentary Old Films and Old Shanghai (2005) underscores the disappearance of Hu Ping and the death of Zhou Wenzhu at a grand movie house. The canonization of artwork pushes forward the question of whether the horror of film, or the film of horror, is rooted in the audiovisual representation per se (the lagging and discordance of the sound effects in Song at Midnight distracts the audience as well as reflects the insufficient sound technology), in the social construction of the horror that has yet to be experienced, in the fantasies and ideologies of the producers (i.e., the procrastination and trademark black costumes of Ma-Xu, or the perceived perceptive frame of references that is inherent in the audience.

As reported by Shun Pao, the victim is frightened by the imitative living dead right after stepping out of an electric tramway. Ma-Xu Weibang died in a road accident 24 years after the release of Song at Midnight. Travels, adventures and accidents that distort the existing structure of space and time underlie the basic, visceral experience of modern adventurers (the recent horror stories about new media add to the genealogy). Horror films, as it were, encourage the audience to participate in a virtual dangerous journey where they are exposed to monstrosities and the converse with other co-genres. However, in reality, such confrontation is doomed to be suppressed, exterminated, and recollected in deformation, both artistically and politically. The decisive moment in 1937 that engendered waves of fleeing to the outfields China also saw the bloodiest war in East Asia during
the 20th century. Then the war leaves the haunting of the other, the “Japanese devil”, for us to reevaluate history and knowledge.

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Appendix

Figure 1. Song’s Invisible Face.

Retrieved from http://movie.douban.com/photos/photo/1640125729/
Figure 2. Avulsion of Surface by Modernized Violence.

Retrieved from http://www.lzbs.com.cn/wb/2009-04/22/content_1801132.htm