Marginality in Negotiation: Emasculated Identity, Masculinities and Genre in Ang Lee’s “Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon” and “Brokeback Mountain”

Anita Chi-Kwan Lee
Tung Wah College, Hong Kong

Abstract

In his discussion of framing in “The Parergon” and his notion of the supplement, Jacques Derrida theorises a legitimate place and role for marginality, which frames the condition of existence for that which constitutes the centre. With the mission of reinventing and re-examining the specific cultural aesthetics of film genres, which presume a certain transnational universalism across spatial-temporal boundaries, Ang Lee’s oeuvre has rejuvenated and re-invigorated transnational cinema, as well as transnational canons and genres, while simultaneously also negotiating and adapting the traditional icons and images in new contexts. In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000), the martial arts genre was endowed upon with a twist—the sweeping mood of the feminist love story in the social milieu of the mandarin literati gently replacing the lethal action of the sword. Once again, in 2005, twisting another genre that is revered in American history, the Western, Ang Lee created uproar with the homoerotic content that is an adaptation of Annie Proulx’s short story, Brokeback Mountain. In art, form ameliorates delivery of content. The universality of form in subversion provides for a manoeuvre of challenging the conventions of the different forms of masculinity in the two films. In successfully employing the two film genres as a masquerade, challenging and breaking away with the conventions and reinventing the genres with new themes and visuals, Ang Lee has sabotaged the identity of both the Chinese knight-errant and the Western cowboy, undermining and marginalising their masculinities for a reinvention of new narrative meaning.

Keywords: marginality, masculinities, action film genre, the Western, Ang Lee
It is of great interest to me that I do a lot of genre hopping. But I don’t think I do straight genre films either—I mix them, I twist them. It must be a form that is just right to tell a particular story.--- Ang Lee (Berry 2005, p. 355)

This paper will focus on two films of Ang Lee, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon (2000) and Brokeback Mountain (2005). While the two films each could be explicitly identified with an unmistakable genre—the martial arts film, Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, and the Western that is Brokeback Mountain, Ang Lee has actually twisted both genres with his own rendition, employing both as a masquerade. The discussion here will centre on how the discursive strategies of Ang Lee have succeeded in subverting the dominant discourse and assumption of the universality, in this case, of film genres—how Ang Lee has managed to reinvent the canons and genres, and sabotaged the identity of both the Chinese knight-errant and the Western cowboy, meanwhile undermining and marginalising their masculinities for a reinvention of new narrative meaning.

In his discussion of framing and his notion of the supplement, Jacques Derrida theorises a legitimate place and role for marginality. Marginality, for Derrida, frames the condition of existence for that which constitutes the centre. Derrida concludes: “A parergon is against, beside, and above and beyond the ergon, the work accomplished, the accomplishment of the work. But it is not incidental: it is connected to and cooperates its operation from the outside” (Derrida 1979, p. 20). Meanwhile, Homi Bhabha proposes a way to rethink “the realm of the beyond”. By the notion of the beyond, he refers to the ‘in-between’ spaces, the interstices, which correspond to the position to negotiate strategies of cultural values and conventions that are typical of film genres. Bhabha writes in The Location of Culture,

What is theoretically innovative, and politically crucial, is the need to think beyond narratives of originary and initial subjectivities and to focus on those moments or processes that are produced in the articulation of cultural differences. These ‘in-between’ spaces provide the terrain for elaborating strategies of selfhood—singular or communal—that initiate new signs of identity, and innovative sites of collaboration, and contestation, in the act of defining the idea of society itself.

Due to the performative nature of cultural activities, descending tradition and conventions are not necessarily pursued or attended to, but renewed and rewritten through the process of restaging the past. With the interstitial passage between fixed positions and identities, there is a possibility for differences without assumed universality—a cultural hybridity for new meaning that could become exciting and even subversive.

Genre is the method of film categorization founded on similarities in the narrative elements from which films are constructed. This is anchored in the steadfast belief of the assumed universality in the tradition of genres, a set of given meaning descended from the past in a fixed framework. In a discussion about genre, it is necessary to identify the intrinsic features of what constitute a genre. These intrinsic features are essentially narrative elements found in a film that could be categorized according to
their theme, setting, mood and even the target audience and format. The setting is the milieu or environment where the story and action takes place. The theme or topic refers to the issues or concepts that the film revolves around. The mood is the emotional tone of the film. Format refers to the way the film was shot or the manner of presentation.

Despite extensive research into film genres, film theorist Robert Stam has actually questioned the existence of genres, whether they are just constructed for the convenience of analysis. He even questions whether genres are “…timeless Platonic essences or ephemeral, time-bound entities? Are genres culture-bound or trans-cultural?” (Stam 2000, p. 14) In this quote, he has highlighted the most significant point in our discussion of genres, that of the mutability of genres. Ang Lee has capitalized on this mutability of genres and managed to make a particular genre work for him, and in the case of both Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, and Brokeback Mountain, to communicate his theme of repression, and, by marginalising the masculinities of the heroes, to demonstrate how this repression has demanded sacrifices in the central characters who pay a steep price for not surmounting the difficult choice of self-liberation.

In the original Mandarin term of the martial arts genre, “wu xia pian”, “wu” means “martial arts”, “xia” means “chivalry” or “knight-errant”, while “pian” stands for “films” (Sek 1994, 2001). In martial arts films, the characters usually are knight-errants who belong to various sects, clans, or martial art schools and deal in affairs of the community called jianghu, which has its own rules of the game. For Ang Lee, the martial arts genre is a metaphor for Chineseness, and a genre that is the most iconic of Chinese film forms. In Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon, we see the use of the familiar narrative conventions of the martial arts genre: the revenge for the death of the master, the search for the lost book of martial arts secrets, the villain’s defiance of jianghu traditions, and the inexperienced student learning from the grave mistakes.

 Apparently, audiences also recognize in the conventions of the martial arts genre such stylistic features as chivalric sword-fights in defense of honour, fairy-like flying in defiance of gravity from the ground to rooftop and from rooftop to rooftop, aerial combats and tavern sequences. These conventions have been stylistically established by the films of King Hu (胡金銓) and Li Hanxiang (李翰祥), who are revered masters of the martial arts genre. It is evident that the tradition established by these two masters has a great impact on Ang Lee. The combat scene in the bamboo grove in Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon is a tribute to King Hu’s bamboo sequence in A Touch of Zen (《侠女》, 1971). Moreover, the tavern sequence is also an allusion to similar scenes in King Hu’s films in which traditional Chinese inns are the main setting.

Despite its extraordinary success internationally, the initial reception of Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon in a majority of the Chinese markets was lukewarm and the initial box-office receipts were not very encouraging. Chinese audiences lamented about the lack of action, with the first action sequence taking place only after 15 minutes into the film. Mainstream action films produced in Hong Kong or by Hong Kong filmmakers, like Jackie Chan or Tsui Hark, are normally marked by an action-packed beginning, with various action sequences dotting the plot in a higher
frequency than that found in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. Film critics also criticized the film for having failed to effectuate realization of the essence of King Hu, i.e. the tragic manifestation of heroism through chivalric violence. The leading roles are condemned as anti-heroes, even though the roles of Li Mubai (Chow Yun-fat) and Yu Shu Lien (Michelle Yeoh) do provide the look and façade of knights-errant, manifested in their outward appearance, demeanour and professional engagement in the business of *jianghu*. In this *jianghu*, heroes fight for a righteous and worthwhile cause, even to the point of death, in an ultimate showdown between the good and evil. But in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, there is no resolution from the lack of such a showdown, and even though Li Mubai eventually dies, he is killed not through his chivalric act but only by accident. And so this death does not attain the value of a heroic death that is characteristic of the martial arts genre, and the heroism and masculinity of the knight-errant becomes questionable.

So what is the theme of *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and how is it achieved through reinventing the martial arts genre? One of the most important recurrent themes in Ang Lee’s oeuvre is repression, and it is repression that is what both films in discussion are about. He thinks that “the great Chinese theme” of literature, painting, and other art forms, which “is just in our blood” (Lyman, 2001), is the distress of lovers who cannot act on their feelings for each other. To uphold the code of honour of the pitiless *jianghu*, both Li and Shu Lien in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* are unable to declare their love for each other, as they are bound by the respect for Li’s sworn brother and Shu Lien’s fiancé, who was killed in battle. Their personal desires are repressed to give way to the more oppressive social and filial responsibilities.

In contrast, the character of Jen (Zhang Ziyi), who is initially portrayed as a lady in anticipation of her wedding, but who actually has practised martial arts under the guidance of the clandestine Jade Fox (Cheng Pei-pei), is more daring in the recognition of her desires. Though some critics have commented on her being an ambivalent character, Jen is actually very straightforward in her likes and dislikes, a character trait which is also alien to the conventional portrayal of Chinese women. When she meets Shu Lien for the first time, she unambiguously expresses her admiration and longing for the lifestyle of a knight-errant, an alternative destiny that she wishes to create. Even though she has been trained under Jade Fox who was once a Wudang disciple, Jen defies *jianghu* etiquette and values: she steals Li’s Green Destiny sword “just for fun”, then her arrogance has caused a fight and commotion in the tavern, and finally she betrays her master. Ang Lee himself comments that the Jen character was the hidden dragon, “… this hidden dragon represents sexual repression, which is the hardest to tame.” (Berry 2005, p. 343). The portrayal of this character all through the film has been very different from that of the others: she has been allowed to follow the call in her heart, as contrasted with the others who have to repress their desires and emotions.

And replacing the esteemed male scholar as the master in the original story with the villainess Jade Fox as the teacher of Jen has confounded the convention of masculine morality in the *wuxia* genre. The mature Shu Lien is completely transformed from a secondary role in the original story to a major one in order to take the void left over by the trimming of the male bandit character. Even the most important and lengthy fighting scene is given over to the two female protagonists. Moreover, the tale of
recovery of Li’s stolen sword is interrupted by the extended flashback of Jen’s attempt to recover her stolen comb by chasing after the bandit. The female-oriented structure is a direct contrast to the classical plots, which usually privilege the male experience and have little to do with women, who take up decorative roles as the sisters or girlfriends of the male protagonist. In this film, the male lead has been in turn effeminated and his identity and masculinity as a Chinese knight-errant emasculated.

The cinematography also helps in achieving a different look for *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*. To accomplish the dramatic storytelling approach that Ang Lee aims for, in his manipulation of the martial arts genre for a mythical romance, he has resorted to an aesthetic that is reminiscent of the Chinese watercolour paintings, with “a low contrast visual approach” in subdued and “desaturated colours”, “avoiding extreme hues and contrasts,” said Peter Pau in an interview with *American Cinematographer* (Williams 2001, p. 55). This is a stark contrast to the established aesthetics of martial arts films, which employ hard lighting and a full range of colours. The only sequence with strong colours is the flashback in the desert, when the colours red and orange act as the visual metaphors of Jen’s unrestrained passion for her lover that appears once again in her memories. As we can see, Jen is the only character in the film that does not repress her desires but follows her passion. And then there are the much debated flying sequences that are considered too unrealistic by many Chinese viewers who are familiar with the genre, but in fact achieve a certain lyricism to match the film’s romantic quality in the narrative.

Meanwhile, the controversial *Brokeback Mountain* takes on the form of the Western, and yet also challenges the genre by both its queer content and powerful visuals. To qualify as a Western, there have to be a few signs: the setting at the frontier West, the protagonists as potent cowboys, their physical prowess heightened in the sensuous costumes of the hats, shirts and jeans, with iconic elements including horses, cattle, spurs, saddles, lassos, bandannas, guns, and rifles etc. The classic theme of a Western is the upholding of law and order on the frontier by the heroes, who are usually local law enforcement officers, army officers, ranchers, or cowboys. All skilled and fast-draw gunfighters, these heroes are normally masculine, courageous, independent and tough, maverick characters who could face dangers and challenges on their own.

The much-debated controversy of *Brokeback Mountain* is in the unexpected twist on the traditional icon of masculinity in the genre of the American Western that is the cowboy. And as mentioned, the central theme is the repression of desires and the price to be paid for not recognizing these desires. In the portrayal of the two major characters, we see the fundamentally tight-wound souls of characters who can barely contemplate the idea of emotional expression. This essential lack of affect in both characters is powerfully established in the opening scene, when Ennis and Jack meet for the first time at the job interview. The scene highlights the space between the two, the comfort zone for them to confront each other in the distance. Interaction between the two is non-verbal: we see the flashier Jack peeping at Ennis through the mirror of his car in his pretending act of shaving, while Ennis is dressed with all buttons done up, to give a “bottled-up feeling” (Production Notes 2005, p. 16), as described by Ang Lee, and the wide-brim hat for him to hide behind, signalling his overwhelming repression. Ennis is a character that lives inside himself, either avoiding or resisting the external world. His repression is portrayed by the earth tones of his clothes, his
inability to communication manifested in the closed mouth, the low voice and the mumbling of words.

In her plan for the climax of the original short story, Annie Proulx has inserted a dialogue for Ennis to explain his repressed feelings for Jack, and the unspeakable nature of these feelings. This segment has been deliberately cut away by Ang Lee in the film version; without it, the repression of Ennis is complete. It does not seem like his character to be able to talk about his feelings, not to mention they are feelings for Jack. The totalizing effect of repression in Ennis and Jack is evidently displayed in their dialogue after the sex scene: “They never talked about the sex...saying not a goddam word except once Ennis said, ‘I’m not no queer,’ and Jack jumped in with ‘Me neither. A one shot thing. Nobody’s business but ours.’” (Proulx et al 2005, p. 7)

To portray two cowboys falling in love and having sex on screen is more than blasphemous to a lot of people who regard the western frontier as America’s history and heritage. It must be remembered that the film text is very different from the literary text, not only in the medium itself but also in the mode of dissemination and the potential of the film to reach audiences worldwide within a short period of time. Such a tarnishing treatment on screen of the US masculine image both challenge the identity and undermine the masculinity of the cowboy. This treatment is also comparable to the damaging act of denigrating the country as a whole. The cowboy image represents American history and ideal American masculinity, which is internalized in public conscience and so untouchable.

The controversy of Brokeback Mountain is not only a result of the controversial theme, but also the deliberate visual arrangement and mise-en-scène, when traditional icons of the genre of the Western are subtly bestowed with an acutely different meaning, signalling a defiance of the connotations of the icons as employed in the genre. While the costumes of the cowboys make up an integral part of their cool masculinity, exemplified by the full gear of hats, shirts, jeans, boots, belts, buckles and bandannas, Jack in Brokeback Mountain tries to soothe the wounds on Ennis’ face with the bandanna, after the latter falls off the horse. Such a gesture gives a new meaning to the bandanna in its usability for the tender loving care of a cowboy for another. On the last day of the summer they work on Brokeback Mountain, Jack uses his lasso to rope Ennis, the gesture of which is, in fact, playing intimately with another cowboy to secure his heart metaphorically, using a potent and masculine gear that is normally employed for catching horses and cattle, in a simultaneous display of masculine prowess.

The visuals in the film have rendered the expansive landscape of the Wyoming terrain into the desolate outlooks of Western towns, and the suffocating and lonely vastness of the remote West. About the spaciousness of the sky, Ang Lee mentions: “You realize, when you place the camera you have to tilt it up a little bit; the sky is so grand. It’s not only the big landscape, but the big sky.” (Production Notes 2005, p. 19) Even though the landscape is vast, people’s minds remain narrow, and love could still suffocate in wide-open spaces. Meanwhile, the production designer discusses with Ang Lee about “making the color palette slightly de-saturated and somewhat subdued for most of the movie.” (Production Notes 2005, p. 14) The towns should be “colorless and cluttered”. (Production Notes 2005, p. 15)
with the cramped rooms. And the two protagonists could only find themselves in an extremely homophobic and repressive environment. The effect is achieved, again as in *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, with the use of subdued and desaturated colours. The lighting also helps in establishing a contrast between the love scene of the two male characters and the scenes of married life; the former look all dreamy and gorgeous in golden light, while the latter are shot in flat lighting.

The visual attention on the cowboy’s physique is amplified in the opening scene of the film when Jack fixes his gaze on Ennis through the rear-view mirror of the tractor parked outside the trailer office. This is a blatant unleashing of the normally repressed homosexual gaze rendered in the Westerns in the viewing experience of the male spectator through the accentuation of the cowboy’s movements on screen, the sensuousness contributed by the tight-fitting jeans. Meanwhile, the last scene of the film ends on Ennis’s final words of whispering a call on Jack after seeing their shirts hanging in the wardrobe, which wonderfully shows Jack’s shirt tucked inside that of Ennis’s. With the shirts soaked in blood and sweat from the fight on the mountain, they are symbols and extensions of the two protagonists, like the skin of their bodies. Jack’s narcissistic desire to incorporate the other now becomes Ennis’s desire. By “queering” the icon of the Westerns, this unspeakable same-sex eroticism has in effect emasculated the identity and masculinity of the cowboy.

In art, form ameliorates delivery of content. From the above discussion, it is seen that Ang Lee has employed the two genres as a masquerade, challenging and breaking away with the conventions, and reinventing the genres with new themes and visuals, while simultaneously also negotiating and adapting the traditional icons and images in new contexts. In *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon*, the martial arts genre was endowed upon with a twist—the sweeping mood of the feminist love story in the social milieu of the mandarin literati gently replacing the lethal action of the sword. Twisting another genre, once again in 2005, that is revered in American history—the Western, Ang Lee created uproar with the homoerotic content that is an adaptation of Annie Proulx’s short story, *Brokeback Mountain*. The common theme in both *Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon* and *Brokeback Mountain* is the repression of desires and the price to be paid for not recognizing these desires. Through the dis/mantling of codes and his innovative reinvention of the genres in discussion, Ang Lee has been successful in sabotaging the identity of both the Chinese knight-errant and the Western cowboy, undermining and marginalising their masculinities for a reinvention of new identities with new narrative meaning.

Reference List


Chandler, Daniel (1997): An Introduction to Genre Theory [Online]. Available from: 
http://www.aber.ac.uk/media/Documents/intgenre/intgenre.html [Accessed 30 April 2013].


Dirks, Tim. Westerns Films. Filmsite.org [Online]. Available from: 

IMDb. 2013. Brokeback Mountain [Online]. Available from: 

--------. Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon [Online]. Available from: 


Lyman, R. 2001. Watching Movies with/Ang Lee; Crouching Memory, Hidden Heart. 
New York Times [Online], 9 March. Available from: 

Production Notes—Brokeback Mountain. 2005. Focus Features [Online]. Available from: 


Williams, D. 2001. Enter the Dragon. American Cinematographer—The International 
Journal of Film & Digital Production Techniques, 82(1), pp. 68-70, 72, 74, 
76-77.

--------. High-Flying Adventure. American Cinematographer—The International 
Journal of Film & Digital Production Techniques, 82(1), pp. 54-56, 58, 60-62, 
66-67.