

Cinematic Style, Female Figure and Ideology in Lou Ye's Art Films

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Abstract: Lou Ye is a prominent Chinese film director. His films have a distinct aesthetic style known as postmodern which have a subtle ambiguity. Lou Ye has combined the elements of urban lifestyle, sexual relations, and social classes to create a unique style of cinema in his films. This research paper will analyze Lou Ye's artistic style and how it portrays the women image on screen as well as his cinematic concerns that violated the Chinese film censorship system.

1. Introduction

Lou Ye is one of the most leading industry figures among China's Sixth Generation filmmakers. He is a local Shanghainese and received his higher education in China's capital Beijing, and later expanded his career as an independent filmmaker in Paris while he was banned from film industrial production in Chinese mainland due to his dismissive attitude towards China's state censorship. Films of Lou Ye gained a good reputation through a series of international film festivals such as the *Venice Film Festival (Mostra Internazionale d'Arte Cinematografica della Biennale di Venezia)* and the *Cannes Film Festival (Festival de Cannes)*, as well as forming an enormous contrast to the desolated art film markets in Chinese mainland. His most controversial movies including *Suzhou River (Suzhou he, 2000)*, *Summer Palace (Yihe yuan, 2006)* and *Love and Bruises (Hua, 2011)* still remains disapproved of in film distribution under the state authority in Chinese mainland. In this paper, I will discuss the free-style of the subjective lens, a style of rich literary and philosophic narration, drifting/marginal groups and censorship in China, and how the physical body can suggest the character's mental dilemma as a communication carrier by focusing on Lou Ye's cinematic style, depictions of urban Chinese women, and ideological transformation.

2. Artistic Cinematic Style of Lou Ye

Lou Ye's films are always padded with abundant poetic philosophic narrations with a first-person perspective in fragmented events. The protagonists in his films often reveal powerful egocentric sentiments.^[1] 'My camera doesn't lie' - this famous statement selected as the slogan of the Sixth Generation actually comes from *Suzhou River*, in which the videographer states that his camera is to show everything it captures, whether his client likes it or not.^[2] *Suzhou River* is a romantic art film written and directed by Lou Ye in 2000, starring Zhou Xun and Jia Hongsheng. The film depicts the entanglements of love among the motorcycle driver Madar, an innocent girl named Moudan, the

videographer, and a dancer named Meimei who looks extremely like Moudan. *Suzhou River* is banned in Chinese mainland cinemas due to its submission to foreign film festivals without state approval. In *Suzhou River*, it is a very tricky move on the part of the director to show part of the videographer's body (eg. his hands). When the visual storytelling is believed subjective, the possibility of "me" lying rises. "I" was never the one who experienced the story between Madar and Moudan, perhaps the only visual description was an imagined fiction. When the camera gets back the subjective shots, the hidden identity "I" begins to confuse the audience again by adding a dizzy shaky feeling. As mentioned in the first-person narration at the beginning when wondering around the phantom ghostly old town by the Suzhou River, he stated "Don't believe me, I'm making all this up."

Apart from the first person voiceover, such as that featured in *Suzhou River* and *Summer Palace*, Lou Ye employs a highly mobile handheld camera to visibly introduce a subjective vision of the cinematic as well as phenomenal world contained in his films. *Suzhou River* begins with documentary footage that the director captured with a camcorder during the early stages of conceptualising the film.^[2] While fast-paced editing plus jump cuts puts together a cubist impression of life on the Suzhou River, an infamous neighbourhood in a neglected corner of Shanghai, a first person voice-over wonders about the possible tales of the real people seen on the river and gradually leads us into the narrative of the film.^[2] Throughout *Suzhou River*, the narrating videographer never appears in front of the camera except with a small part of his body, such as when he holds Meimei's face in his hands or when he drinks vodka after she leaves.

In fact, Lou began working on *Suzhou River* as a "documentary" before the story took salient shape. According to its German distribution company, *Suzhou River* was first planned to be made as a TV documentary of urban Shanghai. It is also the first film of the cinematographer Wang Yu. Wang Yu explored his talent through the production of *Suzhou River* and later was invited to work with many famous directors, such as Tian Zhuangzhuang and Li Yu. It is easy to find similar handheld cinematography within Lou Ye's *Purple Butterfly* (*Zi hudie*, 2003) and Li Yu's *Lost in Beijing* (*Pingguo*, 2007). For a month Lou Ye and Wang Yu wandered along the river and shot footage with a Super 8 camera; in so doing he gradually entered the space of the narrative in which the border between reality and fiction is never clearly demarcated. The invisible narrator holds his camera and drifts down the river on a boat, from which he surveys the people and the surrounding urban landscape.^[3] When asked about a few apparent incidents that filmmakers habitually avoid or correct, such as out-of-focus shots, Lou replies that being out of focus is itself part of film language.^[2]

Through the unstable shaky hand-held camera lens, the director Lou Ye creates a decadent desolate passive lifestyle, which contains a unique sense of beauty at the same time. Most of the times, he requires the cinematographer to put aside the tripod and starts to shoot with handheld cameras. "I hope to express the truth of everything through the camera lens, meanwhile expecting the actors free from the restraint of it."^[1] From the director's perspective, stable shots make the audience forget the existence of cameras while enjoying the movie. Lou Ye is a director who likes to restore the reality of images to the maximum; once if the audience were to forget the camera, the story would be missing an element of reality, and this would go against the director's intentions. Thus Lou Ye tries his best to create a shaky image in a "film within a film" atmosphere, as if there is always an outsider as the representation of the director himself to record every detail of various events.

The integration of handheld cinematography and actual sound recording combines the breathing, footsteps and touching together to reach at a persuasive visual-sound effect. What handheld cinematography does is not only reflect the unbounded freedom of film production but also draws a strong attention to individual artsy images. The director maximizes intimate emotions of anxiety and repression through his controversial art of lens, thus the viewers can directly feel the sense of loss when Hua is dumped by her French ex-boyfriend on the street of Paris, worry about the rebellious young college students movement at Tiananmen Square, sympathize with those lower class pier

porters looking straight into the camera at Suzhou River.

Lou Ye also has a very strong control of the use of documentary long takes. The tension raises up when the frame focus on the backwards suicidal fall of Moudan on the bridge and Madar's glance at Meimei in the dressing room. The sentimental diary-like narrative voice-over even maximizes the floating sorrow and loneliness to the extreme when Lou Ye uses one single long take for Yu Hong's rendezvous with her married lover on a rainy afternoon in *Summer Palace*.

Within one year after *Suzhou River*'s release, Lou Ye produced another individual 16-minute short documentary *In Shanghai*. The normalcy of daily Shanghainese lifestyle was tracked once again by one hidden identity, and the anxious cinematography recalls the previous opening documentary footage of *Suzhou River*. The director even acted as an aggressive stranger confronting the camera as well as attacking the videographer following by a two-minute long take of escaping in the night of Shanghai. Somehow this impulsive visual frame suggests Lou's sensitivity of the social ideological surroundings as a filmmaker. This kind of invisible pressure mainly comes from the state authorities, while also representing the lack of safety of filmmakers in Chinese mainland. Lou's radical move of breaking the routine brings him enormous controversy while getting him a global attention. In the last scene of the short film, Lou Ye ends the sequence with the close-up of a girl's face. What is worth a mention is that she is not a Shanghai local but one of the second generation of the poorly-educated workers from the construction sites, as can be inferred through her accent and the background setting. She belongs to the "floating and marginal" group. It is hard to guess what will be waiting for her in the near future - hope or loss, uncertainty or danger? Lou Ye certainly has no idea of it and he obviously does not want to get to the bottom of it, he simply leaves everything for his audience to perceive and imagine in front of the screen.

Close-up shots received an unwelcomed treatment in Chinese filming industry, and Lou Ye is not an exception. But he insists on using lots of close-ups in the sex scenes through his works. *Summer Palace* is the first mainland Chinese film containing explicit female frontal nudity. Lou Ye's bold movements directly leads the film's distribution to hit a bottleneck. In Chinese mainland, there is no film rating system. The use of explicit erotic images completely violates the rules for public release. However, Lou Ye's rebellion is not limited to sex scenes. It was *Summer Palace*, Lou's scandalously daring picture set around the democratic student movement of 1989, that got him punished and banned from making films for five years by the Chinese Government.^[2]

It is not surprisingly to notice that Lou Ye has a very strong desire for control in pursuing an authenticity of performance. When filming *Summer Palace*, he asked Hao Lei to re-perform in the scene of yachting on the lake more than forty-seven times exclusively. In *Mystery (Fu cheng mi shi, 2012)*, he even gave up on recruiting a lighting and costume crew and requested every actor put on no makeup during the filming. Despite this shockingly strange decision for the cast, the documentary-style filming makes various viable plans possible for the production except for the huge load of work during the post editing. For example, when *Summer Palace* was first edited, the initial duration of the movie lasts more than seven hours and then followed by a rough-cut version of four hours. For Lou Ye, "The film is already within the materials, the only thing I need to do is to find it out and make it a real one."^[1] Speaking of *Love and Bruises*, he makes an appositional comment in an interview:

Cinema is like documentary. I should document all the things that have taken place on the scene. Nobody can control what might or might not happen during the filming of a scene; I want to document that sense of [spontaneity and unpredictability].^[2]

Lou Ye's intentionally disorienting jump cuts suggest that life is a journey with undefined destinations. Although the editing brings a vertiginous illusion, elements of westernized post-industrialization are fulfilled in the motion images: the mermaid toy Madar gave to Moudan; the Hollywood drink at the bar; western wedding and birthday parties... *Suzhou River* is not a pure Chinese fairytale. Under the flashy magnificent cover of modernized Shanghai, the cruelty of life

drags the audience deep to the truth.

Through Lou Ye's films, main characters usually appear as symbolized forms. In *Suzhou River*, only Madar has both given name and surname. Meimei and Moudan only have first names. As for the videographer, the director tends to hold his identity unrevealed by giving him no name. Same situation occurs in *Love and Bruises* as well. The main character's name Hua means "flowers" in Chinese (The film's Chinese title is also *Hua*), with an ambiguous implication for both her attractive appearance and her dissolute nature. The original book, titled "*Hua*"^[4] and written by Jie Liu-Falin, begins the story with "Flowers are the genitals of plants." At the same time, Hua sounds so ordinary and common even hardly make people aware of her existence. It also echoes with the floating figure of anonymous characters under the title 663 and 223 in Wong Kar-wai's *Chungking Express* (*Chongqing senlin*, 1996). When a name loses its initial special unique content, it then becomes an abstract outer case.^[5]

3. Urban Chinese Female Figure

It's true that most segments in Lou Ye's films are of love. Thus it's easily to define his female protagonists as the combination of sentiments and romance. With a distinctive perspective of love, the director sets the background in young people's lives among urban cities to depict an epic blueprint of the whole generation.

If we could call the destruction of Madar and Moudan a dying dream, then the relationship of Meimei and the videographer would be the reflection of reality. Influenced by the incredible love story of Madar's, Meimei first held the suspicion of its authenticity but later fully appreciated Madar's innocence and self-redemption towards Moudan after realizing the shocking truth - Madar was not lying and Moudan really existed. She finally chose to leave the videographer for her strong belief in the legendary fairy-tale-like love by asking him, "If one day I take a left, will you look for me until the end of your days?" On the contrary, the videographer decided to stay for the next relationship. The encounter of Meimei and the dead Moudan by the Suzhou River demonstrates the director's ambivalence: He cannot believe in such an ideal love story rationally, but cannot help but hope that it will become real. Meanwhile, in *Summer Palace*, the director's ambiguous expression in liberation suggests the indivisible relationship among the struggle of individual maturity and the obscure political ideology under a certain period of time. In contrast to *Suzhou River*, love is portrayed as a process of finding and loss, a tragedy of how idealism fades in realism and also the self-exploration of authenticity and persistence for love.^[6]

During an interview conducted between Wang Zheng, a Chinese scholar studying in the United States, and Wang Anyi, a well-known young woman writer in China, Wang Zheng asked, "In view of your contact with and analysis of women, what do you think is the prominent problem facing Chinese women?" Wang Anyi replied, "I think China is tragic. In China women are only now beginning to have the right and the luxury to talk about the differences between men and women, to enjoy something that distinguishes women from men. That is the reason I absolutely deny that I am a feminist. I have a great aversion to that sort of feminism."^[7] In another interview, Wang Zheng told Dai Qing, a prominent female journalist, that "I've seen translations of Simone de Beauvoir's *The Second Sex* in the bookstalls. How are people responding to it?" Dai explained, "What readers see is sex not feminism. [Laughs.] My feeling is that Chinese are quite ignorant about things going on in Western post-industrial societies, things like homosexuality and feminism."^[7]

Women's liberation in China, is the outcome of socialist revolution rather than of feminist movements. A very prominent symbol would be the liberation of sex. Yet sex counts a huge portion in Lou Ye's love stories. Besides a frank portrayal of the 1989 democracy movement, *Summer Palace* features equally forthright depictions of sexuality and desire.^[8] Yu Hong's breakup with Zhou Wei

occurred on June Fourth, inextricably linking her lost lover with the violence, violation, and betrayal of the massacre. Thus, Yu Hong's subsequent downward spiral of sex and nihilistic self-destruction can be seen as the post-traumatic replaying of the lingering fantasies and nightmares of 1989.^[8]

Under the attack of time and reality, most people have already lost the passion, persistence, innocence, and obsession of love; instead, what they have been left is numbness, doubt, hesitation, and self-delusion. From Lou Ye's perspective, perhaps this is what the helpless people are supposed to believe in. Is Yu Hong really deeply in love with Zhou Wei as she writes in her own diary? It's hard to tell. Perhaps the Zhou Wei she loves only lives in her own imagined fantasy and the real one never was the same. Therefore, what she is truly obsessed with is love itself and the sentiments it brings, and when she soaks herself in this sorrow it helps her to find the sense of living.

In *Love and Bruises*, Hua is a twenty-eight-year-old Chinese student wandering alone between Paris and Beijing. She appears very obsessed in love although she seems never satisfied in her current relationships. There are two quite opposite qualities inside her, the devotion and unrestraint of love. She could possibly fell in love with a stranger even though it started with a violent rape, and what gets absurd is that she could even sacrifice everything she has for this unequal love regardless of the boundaries of social norms. When Matthieu first takes Hua home, there's an arrow-like scorpion tattoo on his back which symbolizes a very masculine representation as well as a hidden message of his extremely strongly aggressiveness. Black markets, night-clubs, immigrant group of lower working class friends, those series of uncertain exotic adventures and turbulence make her falls deep and deep in this self-exploring tour. That's what exactly attracts her from her boring predictable life in China and takes her back to France again. Throughout this separated image of social background and life details, love is simplified by sex and the integration of two bodies means the whole world of love, even goes further within the implication in life. The literal promise and the expectation of near future could never get her any sense of safety, instead, she feels the direct happiness and the meaning of life through the action of sex itself.^[9]

Let's take a look at the endings of *Suzhou River*, *Summer Palace*, and *Love and Bruises*. Meimei chooses to leave after both Madar and Moudan die in the car accident; Yu Hong decides to face her old lover Zhou Wei but he eventually sneakily escapes without saying goodbye; Hua comes back to France again for Mathieu but he immediately breaks up with her after realizing she's going to marry someone else in China, and the film ends with a closing close-up on the lonely Hua eating a piece of fruit at a crowded bus stop in the streets of Paris. Lou Ye's love stories always end without an happy ending. This is the reality within the director's eyes. Happy endings are for Hollywood blockbusters. There is no place for fairytales in reality and cruelty always is the best friend of sorrow.

Yu Hong was once a dream-filled passionate socialist advocator and was involved in the students' democracy movement in the year of 1989; ironically, that does not prevent her from working for the state authorities later in her life. Theoretically, Marxism sees gender in terms of class and women's emancipation as part of the proletarian revolution. As a universal category, the proletariat ignores not only gender differences between men and women, but also differences among women of various classes- for instance, between urban elites and peasants or between enlightened modern women and unawakened subalterns.^[7]

No matter if they ever received higher education, the fate of these female characters does not change any once they're involved in love. In Lou's lens, the working class, college students and even intellectuals, they are all the same. The original title of *Love and Bruises* was "bitch" while the novella was first named "naked". It's ironic that Hua's complete transformation from unappreciated international student to independent highly intellectual is geographically related to France and China. In the early twentieth century, for instance, the call for female consciousness and identity creation encouraged women to resist a patriarchal tradition. Under the socialist system, the nation-state offered women liberation and the possibility of participation in social, political, and economic spheres. Her

presence, however, is significant only when needed to exhibit the policy or ideology of the nation-state. After many “liberation”, the question remains: Does the transition from patriarchal family to collective nation-state (from *jia* to *guojia*) really bring a woman emancipation? Her escape from the family and to the state freed her from the father figure of the patriarchal household only to subordinate her to the collective father of communism. From familial daughter to socialist model, she has no name of her own, no subject position.^[7]

Regardless of their social identity, the female main characters of the three films are all marginalized at a certain point. They’re forever seen as floating around in this society and hardly communicate with others while refusing to reveal intimate feelings to anyone. All the female characters are lack of family bonds; at least the film does not mention anything about their family conditions after all. The only father figure of Moudan’s was an illegal smuggler in alcohol and he never shows up on screen during the movie.

4. Ideological Transition on Screen

The Sixth Generation, also known as the Urban Generation, consists of outstanding graduates of Beijing Film Academy mainly from the Class of 1990 (and soon after). Their life experiences are largely from urban spaces and complicated social lives. They represents a totally different artistic style than the Fifth Generation by setting the individual as the center of the story instead of exploring history and folklore. Their films tend to have a concentration on experiences of personal perception aimed at contemporary urban lives. Thus those films are imprinted by strong personal cinematic styles among different directors.

Even though Lou Ye’s stories set in metropolises like Shanghai, Beijing, and Paris, it is rare for audience to track down evidence of a luxurious material lifestyle. Only when the famous landmarks such as Oriental Pearl Tower, Tiananmen Square and Eiffel Tower were framed in a single short shot do the viewers realized the filming locations of the movies. Bars, mermaids, and rock music along with unprecedented spiritual liberation and ideological freedom remind the rest of us that China is no longer the mysterious oriental one which appeared in the Fifth Generation’s lens but is one showing much greater influence from globalized culture. The director purposely creates a blurred boundary aside the mainstream society to reflect the marginalization of characters.

Since the 1990s China’s urban modernization entered a stage of rapid development. In the eyes of ordinary people, Shanghai completely had all the elements of a large city structure, and was seen as a model of China’s contemporary urban modernity by the public. It is reasonable for the Sixth Generation to observe deep into contemporary China’s urbanization since their growing-up environment was just at the point that society was radically changing with marked economic development after the ‘ten years of chaos’ of the Cultural Revolution. What stands out is that no matter where Lou Ye films his story, he consistently prefers to narratively representing realistic love stories of women protagonists in contemporary urban China.

While many of the Urban Generation films are set in China’s political and cultural capital of Beijing including his later *Summer Palace*, Lou Ye started his filmmaking career aiming at Shanghai’s urban geography and social ecology as a proof of the revival of the Chinese metropolis.^[3] *Suzhou River* is not an allegory about a double life but a spiritual journey about finding lost love in contemporary urban China.^[10] He shows the loneliness of urban people’s life, but he seems deeply in love with the familiar everyday details of the city. Even at the end of *Love and Bruises* the protagonist stresses that she wants to change her place of living following by the ideal, “life is better elsewhere”, but she is no longer able to escape from the urban city life. Lou Ye is rational and moderate when it comes to narrative storytelling.^[11]

In *Summer Palace*, politics are always intricately tied to place. By the mid-1980s, almost a decade

after Deng's Open Door policy was instituted, most of China was already opening up and well on the way to Western-style liberalization. The film opens not in Beijing but in the Chinese-Korean border city, Tumen. Because of its close proximity to North Korea and large number of refugees and immigrants, Tumen represents one of the few locales still under the shadow of socialism, symbolized by the looming portrait of Kim Il-Sung in one of the opening shots.^[8] This film even contains extensive sequences depicting the 1989 protests and the eventual military crackdown, even featuring disturbing images of PLA troops firing on students. At one point, the director goes so far as to borrow stock news footage of the actual incident, which is intercut into the film.^[8] Lou Ye deserves credit for directly applying the Tiananmen Massacre documentary clips to his film rather than reproducing the scene. In the end, Summer Palace mimicked the characters' voyage from Beijing to Berlin, traveling from China to international screens, the only space where it can be rendered visible and the only forum where the trauma of Tiananmen is seemingly allowed to speak.^[8]

In *Love and Bruises*, Mathieu calls out, "All the intellectuals are bitches" while getting jealous at the meeting between Hua and her professor. What's worth mentioning is that later in the interview scene those professors are playing themselves, and Professors Cui Weiping, Zhang Xianmin and Hao Jian are friends of Lou Ye's. The interview content involves the opinion of intellectuals on the topics of society, ideology, and lifestyle. Although it has been almost ten years from filming *In Shanghai*, Lou Ye's black humor stays in shape as much as in those days and has even more potential.

The strong pursuit of identity reflects the "rootless" status of the people living in postmodern industrial cities. Under the background of globalization and international monopoly, we drink the same brand of beverages, wear the same brand of clothes, and even listen to the same pop music; everyone starts to get confused by the authenticity of one's own identity. People cannot set up his or her position from either families or careers.^[5] In other words, the protagonists are not searching for love but for a sense of belonging. Lack of shared local culture condemns them to their adrift marginalization. Chinese society is entering an era of cultural diversity and pluralistic values, and lots of people cannot keep up with this ideological globalization or find belonging in collapsing traditional values, as if going over the edge of the cliff of the human nature, followed by too many emotional tragedies. If we can get rid of this hardship of humanity, cultural conflicts will always take place between and among different social classes and different cultural groups and lead to unimagined damage.^[12]

In Lou Ye's understanding, independent films are made based on the director's own thoughts and ideas. In his opinion, choosing independent production means enjoying the freedom of production while carrying all the pressure at the same time.^[13] Considering of the future of Chinese independent films, Lou Ye points out that China is now in the most need of international independent producers and distributors who are familiar with the production process and good at communication so that they can share in the heavy transactions of the directors and be able to negotiate effectively with investors and distributors. For this reason, he has always been in a close cooperation with European filmmakers.^[13]

The success of Lou Ye proves that it is possible to get art films (independent art films in particular) made in China in the absence of state support, but there are "formidable challenges in trying to give a film a life after it leaves the editing table or the censor's screening room."^[3] Mainland independent filmmakers, increasingly left to their own devices to shoulder virtually all financial and political responsibilities, find themselves forced to undergo a self-taught crash course in professionalization and the reconceptualization of what it means to be a director, especially an independent one.

5. Conclusion

The integral style of the Sixth Generation filmmakers presents a blurry implication through

confounding and vague narrations. At present, although some of the directors' works maintain avant-garde cultural ideology within their small range, what seems lacking is a sense of mission and a sense of responsibility compared to the Fifth Generation's films, but they have blended the social classes art and folk popular art into a new stage of the film industry and have formed a new style of cinema. Films such as Lou Ye's works are often considered as reflecting the ambiguity of the postmodern aesthetic style.^[14] City is just a camouflage - making the statement of urban ordinary people's life struggles is the real aim of Lou Ye. Lou Ye's story can happen in any city and it also can be anyone's story.

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