

## Chinese Cinema in the Global Age: *Ashes of Time*<sup>1</sup> and the Human Condition

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The spring silkworm won't stop spinning silk until it has given up its ghost,  
The candle won't stop shedding tears until it burns itself to ashes.  
Li Shangyin, "Wu Ti" ("Untitled")

But to what purpose  
Disturbing the dust on a bowl of rose-leaves  
I do not know.  
T. S. Eliot, "Burnt Norton"

I shall speak of (*a*), that letter of love,  
and its insistence in the (*a*)shes of time.

Wong Kar-wai's movie *Ashes of Time* begins with a well-known aphorism by the Buddhist monk Huineng: "The flags are still, the wind hasn't stirred: restlessness originates from the human heart" (*Yifa Pagoda Chronicles*). What creates this restlessness, what stirs (e) motions in the universe, is human desire. "Desire itself is movement, not in itself desirable"—T. S. Eliot's meditation in "Burnt Norton" can be used to illustrate this Buddhist teaching chosen by Wong to be the opening message of *Ashes of Time*.<sup>2</sup>

For Buddhism, the very nature of the self is desire—which is to say, the very nature of the self is time. The self is characterized by restlessness because desire is movement, and with (e)motions time comes into being. Desire temporalizes existence by introducing into human subjectivity the idea of a future and a past. Desire can, for instance, take the form of anticipation of a future when a desired object can be obtained. Desire can also manifest itself as memory fixated on a lost love or a missed encounter which could have brought fulfillment.

Whichever form desire assumes—be it anticipation or memory, expectation or regret—desire is bound to lead to human suffering according to Buddhism. Anticipation and expectation will always end in disillusionment due to the mutability of all phenomenal existence and the impermanence of all "possessions." Memory and regret likewise can only yield the pain of futile yearning for an irrevocable past. Desire which temporalizes existence and holds out promises of authenticating a subject by stirring a unique set of expectations and memories is paradoxically frustrated by time itself whose movement renders all human aspirations and regrets mere illusions. From a Buddhist perspective, desire as well as the memories and expectations it awakens are no

more than the restlessness that persists through time—the leftover from time that refuses to give up on its desired object despite the passing of time. As the subjective cause of time, desire is thus also the ashes of time and the desiccated remnant of lived experience. *Ashes of Time*, the English title of Wong’s movie, is in this sense a powerful image that crystallizes the relationships of desire, expectation, memory, and the tragic dimension of human existence. In keeping with Wong’s approach, my paper will explore human suffering arising from desire through exploring the subjective dimension of time.<sup>3</sup> In the course of my analysis, I will be comparing and contrasting insights from Buddhism, Schopenhauer, and Lacan—three perspectives which demonstrate not only thematic but also historical continuities and discontinuities.<sup>4</sup>

### **The Missed *Kairós* and the Insistence of the *objet a***

*Ashes of Time* repeatedly presents images of missed opportunities, wasted passion. If *kairós* represents the “fullness of time; the propitious moment for the performance of an action or the coming into being of a new state” (*Oxford English Dictionary*, 340), *kairós* is precisely the critical moment which is always lost, in the sense that action inevitably comes too late or too early to realize that momentous opportunity. *Kairós* also carries the connotation of “the right or critical place.”<sup>5</sup> In the movie, *kairós* in this spatial sense is merely a tantalizing idea inciting vain hopes and empty dreams.<sup>6</sup>

It is precisely because what is aimed at is always missed, that the *objet a* comes into being. The *objet a* fills in the place of the unrealized *kairós*. If *kairós* or the right opportunity could be “properly” seized and realized, time would be arrested, and the *objet a* negated, by the plenitude of Being. Only with the *objet a* does time come into being: time makes possible a promise that what is forbidden now can be obtained one day, and that what cannot be fulfilled now will become available when the “propitious” occasion arrives. In other words, the *objet a* exercises its illusory power by means of time. Through time, the *objet a* disguises the impossibility of *kairós* as a temporary prohibition of the good object. Time in this sense is a projection of the human will—a concept invented by human beings to explain away impossibility as a temporary inaccessibility.

### **Waiting: Between a *Kairós* That Never Was, and a *Kairós* That Never Will Be**

*Ashes of Time* is filled with poignant regret over the past. Different characters lament the choices they once made which have left them in a state of forlornness—a state from which they are seeking redemption. The opportunities they missed carry the existentialist weight of *kairós*—a critical moment when a decision has to be made—a decision upon which hinges the meaning and well being of one’s entire existence .

Ouyang, for example, has lost his true love in life by choosing his career over her, by not making a declaration of love when that was the one thing she needed to make it possible for her to wait for him during his long absences from home. She, in turn, also made decisions which she continues to regret to her dying day: frustrated that Ouyang would not utter the words that would make good her existence and render her waiting worthwhile, she decided to regain the upper hand in the game of courtship by marrying Ouyang's brother. Deeply hurt, Ouyang implored her to elope with him on her wedding night. She refused; he left the very next day—a decision which, from that moment onwards, he has felt powerless to retract, a decision which has been weighing on him like fate. They never see or speak to each other again, not even at her deathbed.

Various characters in the movie—a kind of symbolic cross-section of humanity—are consumed by wrong decisions of this kind, each of which leads to a series of wrong turns in their lives. The majority of people, however, do not realize that “the unspeakable pain, the wail of humanity, the triumph of evil, the mocking mastery of chance” (Schopenhauer, 1958: 326) originate from the wilful pursuit of illusions and self-inflicted pain. The common response to disappointment and to this pain is fantasy, which is anything but a Buddhist awakening to the vanity of human passion and aspiration. Most people would not grant that all is illusion, choosing instead to re-narrativize the impossibility of plenitude as a temporary inaccessibility of paradise. Above all, they choose to believe that this temporary inaccessibility can be overcome by increasing human efforts. “Humankind cannot face too much reality,” as T. S. Eliot describes of humanity in “Burnt Norton.” Only a saint or a psychotic can confront directly the *objet a* behind the rent veil.<sup>7</sup> The rest of humanity would choose to believe that they by mistake missed the first *kairós*, and assiduously prepare themselves for a Second Coming—the “True Apocalypse” which would “redeem” their former mistake.

In between the *kairós* that never was, and the *kairós* that never will be, humanity engages in an (in-)activity known as waiting—waiting in distress, waiting in anguish. *Ashes of Time* is populated by characters who consume their whole existence in futile waiting—lured on by a veiled *objet a* which gives out phantasmatic promises. *Waiting is desire*: such (in-)activity is called into being by a promise that what is unobtainable under present circumstances will be accomplished given the *propitious* time and place. A promise can be made by oneself or by another. But a “promise” can also be a mere one-sided expectation projected onto the other—a promise that is “implied” or “hinted at,” but never really given. At best, such a “promise” can only be called “the promise of a promise.” The promise might never even have existed, and yet the self chooses to project it onto the other, driven as the subject is by his/her will to externalize itself—that is, by the subject's desire to impose his/her will on the world and to force it to materialize in external

reality.

Such is the case with Murong Yin/Yang—the jilted princess who, in order to escape from her wounded pride, splits her identity into two—a sister and a brother whose love is held in contempt by the beloved sister. Another of the princess’s strategies of self-delusion is to imagine that Huang Yaoshi, the man she fantasizes, really loved her above all women at one point—and that her misfortune is merely a result of his recent change of heart—when deep down, she knows, and despairs from the knowledge, that he has never loved her. Occasionally, she would burst into fits of fantasies that some jealous party is trying to kill her because she is “the most beloved by Huang.” In a most heart-wrenching scene, Murong emotionally hijacks Ouyang and makes him assume the identity of Huang Yaoshi, so that she can carry out a wronged lover’s dialogue with the man in her fantasy. She half-confesses, and half pleads with, an imaginary “Huang” in the following manner:

Murong:

. . . You told me you could not love two women at the same time, and that the woman you loved was Murong Yin. So how come you are in love with someone else now? . . . I used to ask myself: am I the woman you love the best? But I no longer want to know the answer. If one day I could not hold back from asking you the question, please do not tell me the truth. However much it may go against your will, please do not tell me that I am not the one you love the most!

In her address to the imaginary Huang, Murong Yin also laments that “For one promise of yours, I have been waiting until today. You said you would take me away, but you didn’t do so.” Murong knows, but chooses not to know, that Huang’s promise of marriage was made when he was drunk. Being a Don Juan type, Huang could never have been serious anyway. Yet despite the fact that Huang did not even bother to show up for their important “date” to honor his pledge of marriage—a breach of promise that devastated Murong—she continues to wait for the day when he will make good his words and her existence.

Condemning herself to a futile passion for a man who does not love her, has never loved her, and will never love her, Murong traps herself in a constant game of love-hate between her two different identities. She also projects or even imposes false identities on other people and makes them means for channelling her frustrated passion. (The most poignant example is when she caresses Ouyang while imagining him to be Huang, thereby “consummating” her passion.) The *a* in Murong’s case is hence the imaginary *a* “coupled with the ego, in a relationship which is always reflexive, interchangeable” in Lacan’s *Seminar II* (1988: 321), not the object cause of desire as Lacan thinks of the *a* roughly from 1963 onwards. Murong’s wish to turn the outside world (including Huang and Ouyang) into a mere mirror image of her own will—her wish to make them accord with her fantasy—is shattered by external reality. Frustrated, her will turns against

itself (as in Murong Yin's desire to torture, and even to kill, her other identity Murong Yang), taking itself as the object of its own aggressive energy, thereby resulting in a most tortured will constantly at war with itself.<sup>8</sup> The Buddhist origin of such a Schopenhauerian diagnosis is obvious: for both Buddhism and Schopenhauer, the source of evil is "the Will to [L]ive, manifesting itself in egoism, self-assertion, hatred, and conflict" (Coplestone, 1968: 281). In kindred spirit, Lacan from the very early stages of his career sees the ego as the cause of various forms of human malady.

Where Schopenhauer and Buddhism differ from Lacan, however, is in their respective positions on the *objet a* and desire. The *objet a* and desire are part of what Buddhism and Schopenhauer call "the Will-to-Live"—as manifested in humanity's tendency to get caught up in the world with its passions and strivings.<sup>9</sup> Unlike Lacan, ultimate wisdom for Schopenhauer and Buddhism resides in transcending not only the ego but also desire. No doubt, this has to do with the fact that for Buddhism and Schopenhauer, there is only one Will in the universe. As such, desire for the other is ultimately also a desire for oneself—a self-deception of the ego which projects itself as the other and as the cause of one's love or hatred.<sup>10</sup> This perspective throws light on why Murong is not the only one with a tormented soul, writhing in agony as she measures out her existence in futile waiting. All the other characters in the movie—who are not narcissistic like Murong, and who are more open to alterity—suffer variations of Murong's pain. Peach Blossom, for example, is a married woman who also falls for Huang. Desperate, her husband goes out to fight a suicidal battle—more against his own pain than his opponents. His last words are: "If I don't return, please give Huang the following message: someone in my native village [that is, my wife] is waiting for him." It is also in the painful (in-)activity of waiting that Ouyang's beloved pines away. She sends Huang to see Ouyang every spring for news about her lover, with special instruction that Ouyang should not be allowed to know her whereabouts and her involvement in Huang's inquiries. She secretly wishes the contrary, however—hoping that Huang would read her real desire between and beyond her language. Huang, meanwhile, knows that she desperately wants to see her lover again, but chooses to ignore it.<sup>11</sup>

To choose to desire is to choose self-deception and self-inflicted pain. Almost all characters in the movie, as desiring subjects, suffer the destiny of waiting for someone in the dark, who never answers, though they cry out in pain.<sup>12</sup> Yet "destiny" is not something externally imposed. Rather, character is destiny.<sup>13</sup> If one chooses to wait, it means that one chooses to believe in a certain promise—a promise about the future. And to *choose* to believe in a promise is to *choose* suffering: because to believe is a terrible infatuation—an infatuation with a "Savior" (in Lacanian terms, a big Other) who might never care, might never answer, and who might not even exist. The big Other is perhaps, after all, the mere product of the Will's

desperate attempt to assert itself, and to assert an entity that would guarantee the existence and consistency of a “self,” not realizing that the “self” is, after all, a mere phantom without reality. Desire, in short, creates a series of nightmares from which Buddhism and Schopenhauer hope to awaken humanity.

### Waiting . . . , and Desire

Huang and the woman beloved by Ouyang (as well as by Huang)<sup>14</sup> provide good examples of how human beings actively will upon themselves their destiny as suffering subjects by choosing desire as the core of their existence. Huang confesses, in his concluding narrative that, if there is such a thing as winning or losing in matters of love, despite all his “conquests,” he has been on the losing side since the very beginning. Yet it is a defeat he actively chooses for himself: he is a loser, because he cannot have the woman whom he loves the most (who happens to be Ouyang’s beloved). He cannot have her, not because he has any scruples about his “friendship” with Ouyang—the fact that Huang has already seduced the wife of his best friend (a blind warrior) rules out this possibility. This is to say that for Huang, prohibition (as constitutive of desire) does not originate from the outside. Rather, it is self-imposed. Huang cannot have his dream woman—in fact, he cannot even communicate to her his tender feelings—because, for him, only the unattainable is desirable. *In order to retain his desire, in order to preserve his fantasy, he chooses to suffer the fate of a loser*—of someone who will never have what he desires. Interestingly enough, his conclusion about his “defeat” is the male counterpart of a similar confession by the woman he fancies—the woman who is also Ouyang’s only love.<sup>15</sup> Despite the fact that she is most beloved by two men, she finds out toward the end of her life that she has also “lost the game.” Misguided in her youth by the illusion that only the unobtainable is the desirable, she refused to give up her position as Ouyang’s object of fantasy by marrying his brother rather than offering herself to him. By so doing, she condemned herself to a life consumed by the regret that “even my best years could not be spent with the person I love by my side.”

In other words, both Huang and the woman choose to condemn themselves to a life of waiting, of unfulfillment, just so that they could either keep desiring or being desired by the other. They literally desire the desire of the other, rather than desiring the other *per se*. And *desire is waiting, desire is unfulfillment, desire is self-torture*. From a Buddhist point of view, unenlightened humanity is thus a blind will ignorant of its illusions, caught in cycles of endless striving, eternal becoming, and perpetual self-objectification.

The movie is precisely the story of unenlightened humanity: of people’s endless waiting and wasted desire. It is a story of human existence as a life of tragedy, of want, of pain and suffering, until all is reduced to the ashes of time.

If waiting crystallizes the human endeavor to plan for the right place and the right time, the futility of waiting is underscored by the fact that “the right place” and “the right time” always evade human calculation. One can never prepare for the arrival of *kairós*. As Ouyang reflects at one point: “Flowers bloom according to seasons. But it’s totally unpredictable as regards when the horse thieves will arrive.” Likewise, no matter how much one prepares for the arrival of love, or the arrival of any critical moment in life, when that moment finally arrives, it does so in a manner that takes one absolutely by surprise and renders all preparations vain. Its arrival, as usual, mocks the ineffectuality of human agency and proves human beings to be mere toys of fate.

In fact, far from being rewarded with fulfillment and plenitude, the human will to exercise its agency by waiting for the “right time” to consummate its wishes only ends with the self witnessing its own deterioration into ashes of time. The passage of time brings about further decay rather than redemption. One good example is Murong’s wait for Huang: not only that did he never grow to love her, he even went from insincere flirtation with Murong to abandoning her in favor of another woman. Ouyang’s sister-in-law too, finds herself waiting in worse pain and agony for her lover after her marriage. Each year she waits for Huang to bring back news from Ouyang, secretly hoping that Ouyang will find out her whereabouts and come to see her. The futility of this waiting is finally sealed in her death—in absolute loneliness: neither her best years nor her death take place with her beloved by her side.

### “New Beginning” . . .

Before Ouyang’s sister-in-law passes away, she sums up the regrets of her life in one wish: “If only time could be reversed!” Those who realize that the past is irretrievable and that the “what might have been” can only fill oneself with futile regret may think that happiness can be obtained by escaping into the present. If it is impossible to return to the past and begin it anew—if the “what might have been” remains only an empty speculation—one can at least make the present into a new beginning by severing its ties from the past. This is the “solution” that Huang tries to adopt when he helps himself to a drink of the Wine of Forgetfulness. For him, forgetfulness makes possible “every day a new beginning.” However, as the movie repeatedly shows, the idea of a “new beginning” carries with it a false promise, in that every new start is already doomed before it can ever begin.<sup>16</sup> Every beginning is a bad beginning: something inevitably goes astray, the promise becomes perverted, and from then on everything spirals downward. One good example is a new promise that the drunk Huang made to his new acquaintance Murong Yin/Yang. During their first conversation, they immediately fell for each other. Interestingly enough, their first meeting took

place on the fourth of the first lunar month. It was spring and, according to the Yellow Calendar, “the east breeze is breaking the winter chill.” The time, in other words, was ripe for a new beginning: spring time coupled with a new friendship.

Yet the human will was not satisfied with a new friendship; it strived for closer intimacy.<sup>17</sup> The new friends were obviously infatuated with each other. Murong Yin at the time was disguised as a man (Murong Yang). She knew that Huang saw through the disguise—obviously, he was flirting with her on purpose. Being drunk, he started caressing her face, declaring that if Murong had a sister, he would definitely marry her. Murong promised “his sister” to Huang on the spot, threatening Huang with death if he were to break his promise. As it turns out, Huang never does deliver his “promise,” nor has he ever intended to do so. Murong is thus abandoned to pain, anger, loneliness, and despair. The “new beginning” for the two is but an illusion—it turns out to be yet another detour to unfulfilled passion, emptiness, and human isolation.<sup>18</sup>

Abandoning oneself to “new beginnings,” in other words, leads to nothing further than chasing after “what might have been.” In a way, no matter how one begins, one always ends up in similar situation of frustrated desire and futile passion. For example, even though Huang began his relationship with Murong by telling her that he loved her (that is, according to Murong’s narrative), they never got married. Ouyang, by contrast, never made an open declaration of love. But the couple never consummated their relationship either. Thus, as Ouyang’s sister-in-law realizes toward the end of her life, she has attributed too much importance to the declaration of love in her youth:

The Woman:

I used to think that such a declaration is of utmost importance, that this kind of words once uttered form an eternal bond. But looking back, *it wouldn't have made much difference*, because people change.” (my italics)

As much as she now regrets having spurned Ouyang, ironically, the reason she gave for refusing to elope with him was in fact an accurate assessment of what would most likely happen if she had chosen otherwise:

The Woman:

No, I won't elope with you. You think I'll find happiness if I run away with you?!”

Unbeknownst to herself, Ouyang’s beloved correctly predicted what might have been her future if she “had chosen otherwise”: she was unhappy for not having run away with him; but even if she did, she would not have found happiness. Whatever choice one makes, it seems to lead inevitably to the same unhappy ending. Even if one could start the past all over again and make decisions anew, it would make little difference: however it determines itself,

the Will-to-Live is bound to get itself caught up in illusions and futile passion.

### Condemned to Loneliness

Aeschylus observes that “To act is to suffer.” From the Buddhist viewpoint, any exercise of the Will-to-Live brings about suffering. Existence itself is suffering:<sup>19</sup> to be in love is to be lonely, to hate is to be lonely, to suffer is to be lonely. To be in love is to be lonely, because in love, one is attracted to an *objet a* which no one else can share and understand. It is this object cause of desire that makes the object of desire appear so radically singular and so absolutely irreplaceable. Likewise with hatred. Waiting—be it waiting to consummate one’s love or one’s passion for revenge—is an extremely lonely undertaking. S/he who is waiting is held captive by a promise that is to be fulfilled “sometime in the future.” S/he is like the chosen and the Elect in the Biblical tradition, seized by a mission and purposefulness which no one else can comprehend, and which even the subject himself/herself may not understand (see Levinas). Such is the case, for example, with the young girl who vainly seeks the help of Ouyang to avenge the death of her brother. Unable to pay the required fees, she sits outside Ouyang’s inn, *waiting* for someone to undertake the deed out of sympathy for her cause. Her single-mindedness causes Ouyang to ponder how, while it is only human to will, any act of willing condemns one to a loneliness which no outsider can fathom:

I don’t know whether she’s really that concerned about avenging her brother’s death, or that she simply has nothing better to do. Every human being seems to be captive to some form of *obsession*—something that looks like a waste of time to others, but is of paramount importance from his/her own point of view. (my italics)

The “obsession” alluded to here is a manifestation of the power of the *objet a*. The *a* traps each desiring subject inside his/her own lonely anguish, in a kind of agony which looks trivial or even absurd to the outside. This lonely anguish finds an “objective correlative” in the bird cage which repeatedly intrudes into our attention throughout the movie. The bird cage is a powerful image of humanity’s imprisonment by illusions and futile passion, and of human isolation as symbolized by the non-communication between the inside and the outside of the cage. It is because of the omnipresence of this *leitmotif* that Huang, after having abandoned himself to oblivion under the effect of the Wine of Forgetfulness, still fails to rid himself of some inkling of “familiarity” with the bird cage: like most characters in the movie, he is all too familiar with the feeling of loneliness.

The irony is, even though there is an absolute non-communication between those inside and those outside, they actually share the same unhappiness, the same loneliness, the same imprisonment. For this reason, even though Huang is a “free-spirit,” and has won the hearts of many, he declares himself to have always already lost the game of love. Even though in some sense, Huang

appears to be outside while Ouyang inside the cage, in reality, Huang is no less imprisoned by loneliness, since the one woman Huang truly loves can never return—in fact, can never even know—his secret passion.<sup>20</sup>

Each human being, blinded by his/her own partial vision, persists in desiring one course of events rather than another, not knowing that all situations are equally devoid of happiness. Those outside the cage might boast of their freedom denied to those inside, and those inside might brag about their shelter denied to those outside. Neither party knows that “inside” and “outside” constitute a false dichotomy, that the two are actually joined by the openings between the bars on the bird cage. No matter which side one is on, one is equally condemned to imprisonment by freedom and loneliness.

The different characters’ lack of awareness that they actually share the same humanity and similar pain is conveyed by the narrative structure of the movie: *Ashes of Time* consists primarily of the main characters’ interior monologues that reflect how each character finds himself/herself imprisoned inside his/her own unspeakable story. These monologues often reveal conflicts of interests among different characters—as, for example, how two men are in love with the same woman. The film thus resembles a battlefield of human wills at war with each other, with little chance for any of them to reach beyond himself/herself for genuine friendship and love. This sense of human isolation is further strengthened by the absence of any real “dialogue.” “Conversations” are filmed in such a way that we never witness two faces interacting with each other. Instead, we see one person talking—to either an invisible interlocutor, or to an addressee with his/her back turned on the audience. For example, when Ouyang is supposedly addressing the villagers about the horse thieves, he talks directly into the camera—with the villagers entirely out of sight. The movie thus gives a sense that every dialogue is always already condemned to being a monologue.

This portrayal of human isolation is even more intense when we see characters unable to speak directly to their intended addressee—the intended addressee being unavailable, the addressor addresses instead a substitute. This is precisely the case when Murong Yin coerces Ouyang into playing the role of Huang. Assuming the identity of Huang—thus ridding of the existentialist burden of speaking in his own behalf—Ouyang can assure Murong that she is the woman he [Huang] loves the most.<sup>21</sup> Unable to face the fact that her love is unrequited, Murong even goes so far as to playact with herself by inventing an additional identity within herself—“Murong Yang.”

The movie thus gives the feeling that only in playacting—only in the imaginary register—does it seem possible for one to find any escape from loneliness. Murong splits herself into two identities which can be understood as the *a* and the *a'* in Lacan’s L-schema. She takes over the role of the other who is at her own beck and call, but she cannot face the real Other. In short, the film is saturated by what Lacan calls “empty” rather than “full speech.”<sup>22</sup>

Speeches in the movie are often addressed to the wrong person or carry the wrong kind of content—a content alienated from its true message and hence devoid of meaning. We have already seen how declarations of love in the movie are always made to the “wrong person”—to substitutes who, despite their pretension to respond in the place of the Other, can only speak as an imaginary other, and hence what they say has no performative dimension.<sup>23</sup> In other cases, love vows and promises are made when the characters are drunk—as in Huang’s promise of marriage to Murong. Being drunk, one is no longer responsible for one’s own speech. What bears further emphasis is that one’s desire under such conditions cannot be assumed by one’s speech, and hence the saying carries no meaning. As Ouyang points out to Murong, “Words uttered when drunk cannot be taken so seriously.”

Like the speeches, the actions in *Ashes of Time* are often “empty” rather than “full.” Actions are often directed at the wrong person, or their performance is alienated from their true purposes. Repeatedly, the characters find themselves doing what they do not want to do; and what they really want to do, they cannot. Thus, Murong finally “consummates” her passion for Huang, but only by imagining Ouyang as her lover in dreams. In one scene highly charged with pathos, Murong in a semi-hypnotized state reaches out her hands to caress Ouyang. The camera cuts back and forth between her caressing Ouyang and a projection of her solitary silhouette on the curtains that shows her hands searching the empty air—searching but failing to find an object for her caresses. In that silhouette, a desperate attempt at reaching out, caressing, and searching are all blended into one. Murong’s caresses of Ouyang reveal an attempt to reach out to the heart and soul of Huang. The alternating scenes between Murong’s one-night encounter with Ouyang and her lone silhouette are soon replaced by another juxtaposition—this one cutting abruptly between Murong’s hands searching for something in an empty cave and her lovemaking with Ouyang.

Murong is not the only party carrying out an “empty act” in this one-night affair. Ouyang does not reject Murong’s pleading hands, because he too is secretly “consummating” his love for his sister-in-law by imagining himself being touched by his beloved. On both sides, passion can be consummated only when each imagines the other to be what s/he is not. The development of the movie seems to imply this to be the general logic of most relationships. Ouyang’s sister-in-law, for example, seeks to preserve herself as Ouyang’s object of desire by making herself unavailable to him. She chooses to marry his brother—a metonymic substitute for Ouyang, a “stand-in” for her to imaginarily gratify her desire for the man she truly loves. Huang has many lovers, but each is a poor substitute for the woman he really desires. As regards the one true love in his heart, he has to satisfy himself with living among objects associated with her (that is, peach blossoms), rather than actually being with her.

Existence, in other words,

equals loneliness. In Lacanian terms, there is no sexual relationship. Take, for instance, the blind warrior who can only find consolation in the thought of seeing peach blossoms because his wife, named Peach Blossom, now loves another. Ironically, Peach Blossom has been seduced by Huang who loves peach blossoms not because of her, but because of another woman whose name is unknown but whose presence is associated with the flower.<sup>24</sup> The blind warrior, Peach Blossom, Huang, Ouyang, and his sister-in-law all live their days in wasted passion. They are but various manifestations of a single human condition: loneliness, known in Lacanian psychoanalysis as the impossibility of sexual relationship. In one highly emotionally charged scene, the blind warrior, lonely for his wife, seizes a woman and forces a kiss on her before he goes out to fight his suicidal battle. As he walks toward his enemies, we get to hear the voice from his heart:

As I leave to face the horse thieves,  
*that woman's* tears slowly dry on my face. Will *that woman* weep for me? (my italics)

As the signifier “that woman” appears a second time in his interior monologue,<sup>25</sup> the screen cuts abruptly from the woman he just kissed to his wife. Like all other main characters in the story, the blind warrior lives, as much as he dies, alone—loving the wrong person, forcing his love on a pale substitute, and remaining unloved in return.

Loneliness is at the heart of the human condition, and the *objet a* is constitutive of that condition. “True love” is unobtainable because the true cause of human desire is the unobtainable *objet a* rather than the spurious *objects* and phony substitutes that stand in for it. Confronted by the brutal reality that the desired object is unobtainable, human beings have devised two basic responses. Some find consolation in reversing “the desirable is unobtainable” into “that which is unobtainable is desirable,” thereby disguising the impossible object (the impossibility of sexual relationship) as something which one chooses to keep at bay. Others keep chasing after particular *objects* in which they try to find their *objet a*. But then, once an object comes within their possession, they become immediately disillusioned and move on to another object. For this reason, the main characters in this movie either never get married, or if they do, they find out that the person they marry is not the one they love. This is the case with Peach Blossom, who finds out that the person she really loves is her husband’s best friend. It is also the case with Ouyang’s sister-in-law (whom Huang associates with peach blossoms), who loves her husband’s brother. Marriages thus become another form of “empty speech.”

Lacan’s idea that “there is no sexual relationship” finds ample illustrations in *Ashes of Time*. The characters either refrain from consummating their desire with the person they think they truly love in order to continue to desire that which is unobtainable, or else they drift in vain from one object to another in search of that one “true love” who can

“make them whole.” They always end up embracing lesser substitutes, and thus find themselves eternally frustrated, and eternally lonely. Unenlightened humanity does not understand that both the desiring subject and the desired object are as imaginary, illusory, and void of substance as “flowers in the mirror, and the moon in the water.” As if in sympathy with this Buddhist sentiment, T. S. Eliot also writes on the un-reality of both the lover and the beloved::

Can we only love  
 Something created by our own imagination?  
 Are we all in fact unloving and unlovable?  
 Then one *is* alone, and if one is alone  
 Then lover and beloved are equally unreal  
 And the dreamer is no more real than his dreams.

(*The Cocktail Party*, 362)

Indeed, *Ashes of Time* shows us a rather loveless world in which the impossibility of sexual relationship reveals its more primordial existentialist basis—that there is no *human* relationship. Not only that there is no sexual relationship in the strictest sense; there is no friendship either, nor even familial love . . . —witness Huang’s seduction of his best friend’s wife, and Ouyang’s attempt to run away with his sister-in-law. Being an orphan, Ouyang’s brother is his only family and perhaps his only human connection. Yet Ouyang was as ready to betray his brother as Huang was to betray his best friend. As for the wives, they are also prepared to turn their backs on their husbands and abandon their families. This was the case with Peach Blossom and the other woman Huang associated with peach blossoms . . .

“All (existence) is suffering,” says the first of the Four Noble Truths. It isn’t just that to act is to suffer (Aeschylus)—to love is also to suffer, to will is also to suffer . . . This is the human condition that Wong Kar-wai powerfully dramatizes in *Ashes of Time*.

### Endnotes

- 1 The Chinese title of Wong Kar-wai’s movie is *Dongxie Xidu* (*The Perverse East and the Malicious West*.) It was renamed *Ashes of Time* when it was exported outside the Chinese speaking world.
- 2 One should note, however, that Eliot’s expression “not . . . desirable” would not be used by Buddhism, since Buddhism avoids generating cycles of thesis and antithesis, actions and reactions—especially when they revolve around desire.
- 3 Buddhism associates the self with desire and desire with time. This is why for Buddhism, existence *is* time and the self *is* time. To be means to be one’s time (see, for example, *Shōbōgenzō* by Dōgen Kigen, a 13th-century Japanese Zen Buddhism teacher). Existence and time being so intimately connected, it is not surprising that Buddhism which deems time to be an illusion should also consider “the self” an illusion.

4 Historically, Buddhism influenced Schopenhauer, who in turn influenced Freud, and Lacan characterizes his project as a “return to Freud.” It is thus not surprising to find common themes among them: for example, all three are concerned with human suffering originating from the *psyche* (soul), and all three trace the origin of human pain to the ego. Continuities can also be found between the Buddhist idea of *karma* (adopted by Schopenhauer) and Freud’s notion of the repetition compulsion (developed by Lacan).

These connections explain why Lacan believes that “in the history of the avatars of Buddhism, one can find a great many things which, legitimately or not, can be made to illustrate Freud’s theory” (*Seminar VII*, 175-176). Due to the lack of space, I cannot elaborate in this essay the historical and thematic continuities among Buddhism, Schopenhauer, and Lacan. I will concentrate instead on their differences as they pertain to my analysis of *Ashes of Time*. For more detail on this subject, please see my article “Comparative Philosophies of Tragedy,” forthcoming in *MLN* 123 (Dec. 2008).

5 According to Liddel and Scott’s *Greek-English Lexicon*, one of the meanings of *kairós* is “due measure, proportion, fitness.” In terms of place, *kairós* designates “a vital part of the body”—especially in the case of a mortal wound.

6 The object of desire—the imaginary part-object—is different from the object *cause* of desire. In 1957, Lacan tends to associate the *objet a* with the object of desire. Starting 1963, however, the *objet a* increasingly stands for the object cause of desire, in which case the *a* stands for the object which can never be obtained.

7 The veil is as important for Lacan’s discussion of desire as it is for Schopenhauer, who adopts from Hinduism—the view that ordinary consciousness is enmeshed in illusions. In both cases, the veil suggests illusion and fantasy.

8 It is not difficult to detect in this Schopenhauerian reading some of the germinal ideas for Nietzsche’s notion of *ressentiment*—a notion which is to evolve into Freud’s theory of the superego.

9 Although “the Will-to-Live” is the cause of human suffering, Buddhism and Schopenhauer are far from advocating suicide. As Schopenhauer points out, suicide expresses a surrender to the Will rather than a renunciation of it. Suicide may be driven by the desire or will for death, which paradoxically can also be the expression of a concealed Will-to-Live. Commenting on Schopenhauer, Fredrick Coplestone reasons as follows:

For the man who commits suicide does so to escape certain evils. And if he could escape from them without killing himself, he would do so. Hence suicide is, paradoxically, the expression of a concealed will to live. (1965: 282)

What Buddhism and Schopenhauer recommend is not suicide but a renunciation of the Will-to-Live—a renunciation which would lead to a

- peaceful state of freedom in which one is liberated from the will's demands.
- 10 By contrast, for Lacan, there is a real difference between desiring the Other, associated with the symbolic order (and ultimately with the real), in contrast to the imaginary register associated with the mirror stage.
- 11 Huang takes the instructions of Ouyang's beloved at face value and deliberately ignores that language cannot say it all (Lacan's "*pas-tout*"). He would not listen to her desire and give Ouyang her secret message that she is still in love with him, because Huang himself is very much in love with her.
- 12 This is a line appropriated from Ingmar Bergman's *The Seventh Seal*.
- 13 Ouyang Feng is a case in point. By virtue of his own decisions and actions in life, he has chosen for himself his own destiny despite his constant references to "what is written" in the Yellow Calendar—the book on cosmic forces. Ouyang mentions toward the end of the movie how it is written in the Book of Destiny that he is doomed to celibacy. In reality his fate of celibacy is accurately predicted, rather than imposed, by the Book of Destiny. The prediction is actually a correct inference drawn on the basis of his character: character is destiny. His eventual return to the White Camel Mountain, despite his belief that Fate will not permit it, underscores how it is he, after all, who designs and decides his destiny.
- 14 This woman—the object of desire for the two main male protagonists—almost assumes the status of an object *cause* of desire. She is never named in the movie. In this respect, she reminds us of the *objet a*: unnameable, unknowable, and enigmatic.
- 15 This subject can be further developed by bringing in Lacan's theory of sexual difference—a project which, regretfully, I cannot pursue here due to space constraints.
- 16 In "The Dry Salvages," T. S. Eliot gives powerful expression to this tragic sense of life as already doomed before it can even begin:
- I sometimes wonder if that is what Krishna meant—  
 Among other things—or one way of putting the same thing:  
 That the future is a faded song, a Royal Rose or lavender spray  
 Of wistful regret for those who are not yet here to regret,  
 Pressed between yellow leaves of a book that has never been opened.
- 17 Interestingly enough, it is the human will to push for more intimacy that brings human beings further isolation. Had it not been for this will, Huang and Murong might have remained good friends.
- 18 The impossibility of a new beginning is also conveyed powerfully by the performative aspect of the movie itself. The movie repeatedly tries to establish a new beginning: every camera shot attempts to establish a new scene that could become an anchoring point for a coherent narrative. But every attempt fails: the narrative of the movie starts, stumbles, falls, then starts, stumbles, and falls again. Every attempt by the movie to make a new start inevitably miscarries.

- 19 “All is suffering” is the first of the Four Noble Truths.
- 20 This ironical similarity between Huang and Ouyang is further underscored by the fact that the two men share the same futile passion for the same woman.
- 21 Thus Ouyang’s interior monologue continues: “Having taken on Huang’s identity, it’s not so difficult to say ‘I love you.’ Another woman had wanted those few words from me before, but I failed to respond.”
- 22 According to Lacan, speech provides the only access to the truth about desire: “speech alone is the key to that truth” (*Écrits* [English], 1977: 172). Full speech is also known as “true speech,” because it is closer to the truth of the subject’s desire: “Full speech is speech which aims at, which forms, the truth such as it becomes established in the recognition of one person by another.” (*Seminar I*, 107). “Full speech, in effect, is defined by its identity with that which it speaks about” (*Écrits* [French], 381; Evans 191). Empty speech, by contrast, is marked by the alienation of the subject from his desire. In empty speech “the subject seems to be talking in vain about someone who . . . can never become one with the assumption of his desire” (*Écrits* [English], 45). In contrast to the symbolic dimension of full speech, “empty speech articulates the imaginary dimension of language, the speech from the ego to the counterpart” (Evans 191). As Lacan himself puts it, “Full speech is a speech full of meaning [*sens*]. Empty speech is a speech which has only signification” (*Ornicar?* 11).
- 23 Full speech is an act. It makes something happen. Lacan is close to speech act theory when he stresses the performative dimension of the speech act: “Full speech is speech which performs [*qui fait acte*]” (*Seminar I*, 107).
- 24 The irony becomes more acute if one considers how the blind warrior and Huang who stole his wife share a similar sentiment about peach blossoms. Both the injuring and the injured parties, that is, share the same unrequited passion.
- 25 The English subtitle fails to render the deliberate repetition of this signifier.

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