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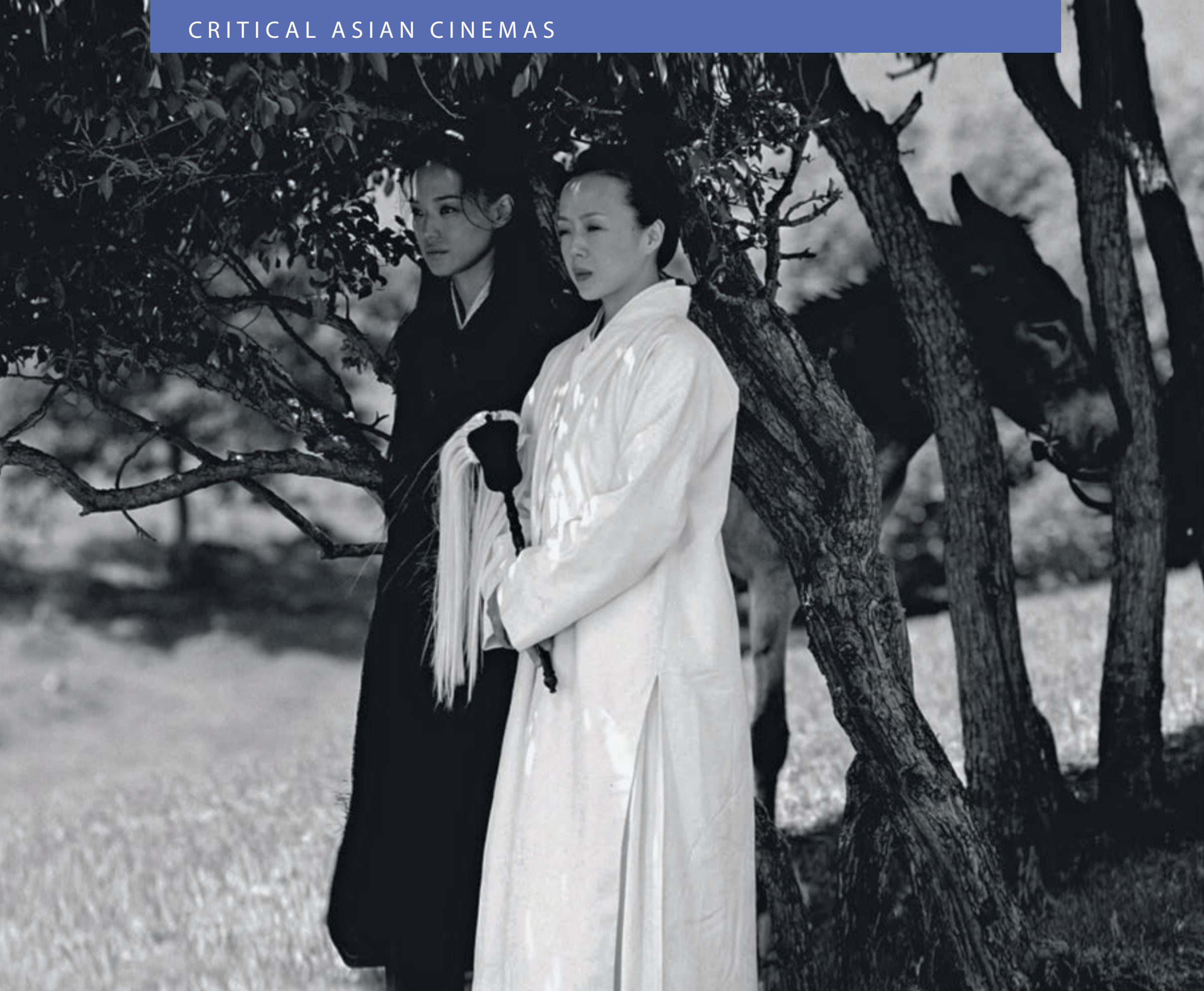

Pao-chen Tang

The Animist Imagination in East Asian Cinema

Amsterdam
University
Press

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Critical Asian Cinemas

Critical Asian Cinemas features book-length manuscripts that engage with films produced in Asia and by Asian auteurs. "Asia" refers here to the geographic and discursive sites located in East and Central Asia, as well as South and Southeast Asia. The books in this series emphasize the capacity of film to interrogate the cultures, politics, aesthetics, and histories of Asia by thinking cinema as an art capable of critique. Open to a wide variety of approaches and methods, the series features studies that utilize novel theoretical models toward the analysis of all genres and styles of Asian moving image practices, encompassing experimental film and video, the moving image in contemporary art, documentary, as well as popular genre cinemas. We welcome rigorous, original analyses from scholars working in any discipline.

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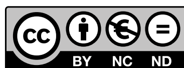

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Introduction: Cinematic Animism and Its Shamans

Abstract: This introduction identifies the animist imagination as an emerging mode of filmmaking and delineates its fundamental features, the logic of its worldview, and the elicited spectatorship. Particular focus is placed on its central narrative figures, described as shamanic. I then specify the historical backdrop of the animist imagination by contextualizing it within two interrelated discourses: the revival of animism within contemporary ecocriticism and the incorporation of *anima* into the theorization of cinema from its inception. I further explain why East Asian cinema serves as my chosen site to examine the animist imagination, arguing that this mode of filmmaking delineates the potentials and limitations of an area-based approach to ecocinema.

Keywords: animism; ecocriticism; posthumanist humanism; film criticism; East Asian cinema

Daily we use unmeasured energies as if in our sleep. What we do and think is filled with the being of our fathers and ancestors.
– Walter Benjamin, "The Metaphysics of Youth"

A cut to an aged sorcerer, tearing a thick sheet of paper into a human figure, disrupts a celebratory banquet in *The Assassin*, Hou Hsiao-hsien's 2015 film set in the Tang dynasty. Seated alone in a dim chamber, the sorcerer dips the tip of his left middle finger into two inks—one black and one red—and swiftly dots the paper figure's head, chest, and limbs. He tosses the figure into a basin filled with water and whispers some indistinct words, which magically dissolve the paper. A meandering rill simultaneously emerges from a capped well in the courtyard outside the mansion where the banquet is held. As if hunting a target, it trickles briefly before seeping underground.

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Upon reappearing, the animated water has morphed into a billowing vapor, rising from the mansion's elevated foundation into a luminous corridor. Through this precise spot a group of jubilant dancers strolls, around one of whom the infiltrating substance slowly wraps. In discomfort she slows down, covers her nose, and pantingly pulls herself toward a nearby pillar for support. The fellow dancers scream and flee from the eerie scene, with the vapor now transforming into a rapidly swirling vortex, crushing the girl against the pillar. At this critical moment, an expert swordswoman, Nie Yinniang, comes to her aid. As she jabs the girl in the back, the vapor instantly dissipates. The girl falls into a dead faint. Nie gently lowers her to the floor.

Although the genre of martial arts cinema, to which *The Assassin* arguably belongs, has never excluded fantastical elements, this enigmatic sequence stands out in a film in which all human and nonhuman entities otherwise adhere to the real-life laws of physics as we know them. The ostentatious portrayal of malicious spellcasting has presented an interpretive conundrum for film critics, who struggle to reconcile it with a reductive but unfortunately common understanding of realism—the artistic depiction of an objective, everyday reality in a faithful manner—through which Hou's oeuvre has been routinely discussed and praised as one of its cinematic epitomes. Such a "touch of black magic," one reviewer emphasizes, is "balanced by a more down-to-earth realism."[1] Another critic, praising how the director "straps 'The Assassin' firmly to the ground—and to the mixed, real-world emotions of his protagonists," stresses that "Hou Hsiao-Hsien strives for realism, not magic. That's why he took the Cannes Best Director prize this year."[2]

Rather than treating the sequence as an imbalanced, ungrounded oddball hindering a holistic understanding of *The Assassin* or even its prestige, I suggest that the operational logic of its magic establishes a definitive framework for film criticism. The sequence opens up an approach to both the entirety of the film and an emerging mode of filmmaking in contemporary cinema. Behind the mystery of the seeming incongruity lies an animist worldview, which constitutes this book's titular heuristic: the animist imagination. While the term "imagination" might convey an impression of fantasy, the heuristic's foundation is not rooted in any perceived dichotomy between fiction and authenticity or between magic and reality. Demonstrated through the dynamics among the sorcerer, the dancer, and

1 Kermode, "*The Assassin* Review—Martial Arts to Die For."

2 Lattanzio, "5 Questions for Hou Hsiao-Hsien About Filmmaking and 'The Assassin.'"

the swordswoman—relationally connected by the enchanted substance in solid, liquid, and vaporous states across ritualistic and secular sites—the animist imagination emerges as a structural component of narrative cinema: the traffic between human characters and nonhuman entities.

In contrast to an extractive relationship with matter and resources, the animist imagination envisions cinematic methods through which humans engage with the nonhuman as animate beings. This distinct form of animation hinges upon the transformation of an ordinary character into what I call a “shamanic figure”: an operative type uniquely equipped to showcase, in spectacular demonstrations or quiet contemplations, an ecological awareness through concrete actions or thought experiments that posit a post-anthropocentric relationality. In a film driven by the animist imagination, the shamanic figure wields an exclusive mediation between human and nonhuman realms, with the latter sealed off from the film’s other characters. The film structures the foundational conditions of its diegesis on ontological, historical, or technical specificities that mark the qualitative distinctiveness of the shamanic figure. The sequence from *The Assassin* exemplifies this process of differentiation, as the sorcerer and the swordswoman can be grouped together based on their shared knowledge of the techniques of magic, spanning from its initiation to its termination. The dancers’ horror-stricken reaction to the curse—not unlike the puzzled film critics’ circumvention of it in their reviews—accentuates the exclusivity of this command, rare and strange even in a fictionalized mid-imperial China.

The worlding of the shamanic figure on screen commonly weaves the tensions between the human and the nonhuman with those between Western modernity and premodern, precolonial epistemologies, notably the challenges posed to autochthonous textual traditions and systems of belief by such globalized notions as modern science, technology, and capitalist instrumentalism. My coinage of the shamanic figure intentionally evokes associations with the principal agent of animism across Indigenous societies: the shaman, the supreme intermediary between the human and the more-than-human. Although the shamanic figure is not necessarily the shaman per se, holding a position of social leadership in precolonial pasts—and continuing to do in several communities, mostly marginalized, today—it nevertheless gains prominence by operating within the realm of cinema, the emblematic form of modern mass media, as its new ritualistic ground. Playing a role in the cinematic construction of intertwined mediations that redraw the line between the human and the nonhuman, the shamanic figure’s persistence in enacting animation onscreen indicates the survival,

if not revival, of animism through the moving image—a system of wonder that persists despite modernity's widespread disenchantment.[3]

As the central narrative motor in the fashioning of an animist sphere, the shamanic figure facilitates an ecological inquiry into the changes and shifts of the nonhuman's ontological status by guiding the viewer in rethinking diegetic elements and actions that might initially appear anthropocentric or deviate from scientific laws. This is made possible as the film's thematic aspects cohere to characterize the shamanic figure. Consider again the black magic sequence in *The Assassin*. The sorcerer's practice awakens the latent vitality of several inert objects, transforming them into malevolent forces through a set of ritualized procedures. While it would be absurd to claim that the primary objective of the sequence is a tutorial on malicious incantation, the process nevertheless provides a step-by-step visualization of the two basic rules of sympathetic magic, which, according to Marcel Mauss, characterize the logic of animism: the law of similarity and the law of contiguity. The law of similarity explains a mimetic identification between distinct entities—like produces like; like acts upon like.[4] The external similarity between two entities creates an affiliation between them, as observed in the inferential relation of the paper figure to the cursed dancer. The law of contiguity represents a part-whole identification, emphasizing the indivisible nature of such invisible entities as spirit and vitality, which are nevertheless present in all of a person's bodily parts, the objects she has been in close contact with, and the elements in her surrounding milieu.[5] To exert influence on the dancer thus requires a transference of impact down the sympathetic chain: from one object to another until it physically approximates or directly touches the target of the spell. It is not coincidental that the sequence concludes with the head of the mansion's security discovering, beside the pillar, the dotted paper resolidified into its original concrete form.

Beyond revealing the abstract principles of sympathetic magic, the sequence further highlights the underlying materiality and production processes through which they are rendered. The symbolically loaded objects

3 The posthumanism that this book explores thus differs from Missy Molloy, Pansy Duncan, and Claire Henry's understanding of the posthuman as a transformation of the human through such technologies as "pharmaceutical cognitive enhancement and assisted reproductive technology." Instead, the animist imagination attunes us to the alternative potentialities of the human to overcome the capitalist instrumentality that undergirds modern technological worldviews. Molloy, Duncan, and Henry, *Screening the Posthuman*, 39–40.

4 Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, 84.

5 Mauss, *A General Theory of Magic*, 80.

positioned in the sorcerer's chamber, along with the trajectories of the rill and vapor across the courtyard, demonstrate the film's orchestration of an animist scenography through editing, mise-en-scène, and cinematography. Complexities within the interior and exterior spaces are gradually revealed, with the overall spatial orientations mapped out, as the camera constantly reframes to track the movements of the malevolent substance across shots. Particularly, the two one-minute shots that follow the rill and vapor reaffirm the relation between Hou's signature aesthetics—a dynamic use of long shot and long take combined—and a broader conceptualization of the nonhuman in his oeuvre (examined in chapter 1 and 2). The visual effects team's deployment of particle systems for digitally visualizing the vapor cannot be more apposite, as the invention of this CGI technique in the 1980s was, itself, guided by the principles of animation and *anima* (discussed in chapter 4). The animation in the sequence thus turns on careful consideration of a tight unity between content and visual style: where to place characters and objects in the frame, the shaping of the spaces through the objects' movements, the precise duration of each shot, and a vigorous interplay between the movement in the frame and the camera's movement itself.

In outlining a scheme of animist laws in theory and vitalizing filmmaking devices to portray animated entities in practice, the sequence furnishes an animist view of cinema that this book studies: a character's mediation of more-than-human forces through formal, technical, and material means. Downplaying the significance of the sequence thus ignores how the film's mastery of cinematic language suggests a way of looking elicited by the animist imagination more generally: a transformation in our understanding not only of the nonhuman within the film but also of film style and production technique from an animist perspective. When the shamanic figure exercises its mediation, the viewer's attention is directed toward both plot events and the infrastructures of filmmaking that enable the cinematic construction of animism. Not merely one element among many within the animist imagination, then, the shamanic figure serves as its chief agent, shaping its overall configuration. As the animist imagination triggers an awareness of the imagist and medial thickness by internalizing the process of wonder from production to reception, a portal is fashioned, into which we follow the shamanic figure's lead to catch a glimpse of the animist order on- and offscreen.

Such pedagogical, transformative potentiality of the animist imagination indicates cinema's role in contemplating the heightened state of ecological insecurity in recent decades. Commencing in the 1970s, alongside the rise of proto-theoretical discussions of posthumanism, numerous art projects

characterized by a robust ecological consciousness have underscored the instability of an ontologically unified human subjectivity. At the core of the vitality of ecocriticism, the rise of cli-fi literature, and the environmental focus within visual culture (inclusive of the subdiscipline of film studies known as ecocinema) lies a shared sense of uncertainty, which emerges as humanity endeavors to acknowledge and comprehend a multitude of nonhuman entities whose pervasive presence—ranging from mutating viruses to forest-engulfing fires—is deeply felt, even if not always perceptible. As this ecological commitment has grown to gain further momentum and broaden in scope across media, it prompts us to reassess the defining boundaries of humanness and the ideology of anthropocentrism, which was formerly the predominant cultural order of modern society and has persisted as the guiding principle of today's globalized capitalist world. Given that humans can only thrive in a world where nonhumans supply virtually all the necessary conditions—often referred to as "ecosystem services" by environmentalists—the concept of "the human" should address the presence of nonhuman entities, however inanimate or quietly animate they may appear. It is the responsibility of humans, after all, to ultimately conduct the environmental transformations our planet requires.

Within this historical context, the animist worldview has emerged as a valuable framework for reevaluating the nonhuman—evident in numerous ecological theories of late, such as new materialism, object-oriented ontology, affect theory, thing theory, speculative realism, and actor-network theory. One of the key factors driving the resurgence of animism is its generosity in attributing personhood and, consequently, sociality to nonhumans. While non-anthropologists might have the misgiving that the language of personhood, often delivered through the rhetorical device of personification, renders animism anthropocentric, the human and the nonhuman are both persons in essence, with the only privilege of the former being, according to Philippe Descola, "the ascription to nonhumans of institutions that are similar to their own so as to establish with them relations based on shared norms of behavior." "Animism is therefore better defined as anthropogenic," as Descola proposes, "in that it contents itself with deriving from humans only what is necessary in order for nonhumans to be treated like humans."[6] In practical terms, the qualification of a person has become a contested issue today, not least because personhood, in contrast to property, has come to denote a vested interest in legal matters, encompassing factors from the protection under law to the right to initiate lawsuits.

6 Descola, "Beyond Nature and Culture," 87.

As an integral component of contemporary eco-media, the animist imagination reveals the vicissitudes, limitations, and ironies inherent in our pursuit of togetherness with nonhuman entities in an ever-changing environment. It achieves this by delineating a utopian placeholder that overcomes the gap between the human and nonhuman spheres. The on-screen utopia does not spontaneously emerge but is sketched, composed, and rendered through the cinematic medium's diverse array of technical and stylistic devices, meaning that it can ever redefine and expand itself in terms of peculiarity, incoherence, and stochasticity. The plasticity of the animist imagination, stemming from the plasticity of cinema, thus aligns with Frances Ferguson's reflection on the aesthetics prompted by the advent of climate change: "the benefit of the kind of shift registered in the sublime—when we know more than we understand."[7] As conventional understandings of the human and the nonhuman undergo defamiliarization, the book unfolds the distinct contours of emerging models of humanism articulated in the animist imagination.

I submit the recent films of Hou Hsiao-hsien, Kore-eda Hirokazu, Wong Kar-wai, and Kawase Naomi—four directors at the forefront of contemporary East Asian cinema—as exemplary cases of the animist imagination. In a time when an evolving understanding of personhood has increasingly granted nonhuman entities an alternative status, they respond to environmentalists' collective quest for novel ways to comprehend the nonhuman world as a relational mesh formed by agential entities. While these directors' films are certainly not the only ones devoted to this concern, my grouping is prompted by their shared emphasis on the human's role in the pursuit of what lies beyond humanity. Crucially, while the book acknowledges the cultural specificity of these East Asian filmmakers' treatments of animism, it seeks to transcend the commonplace tendency to exoticize or oversimplify Indigeneity by grounding premodern systems of knowledge solely in the nonwestern past. The shamanic figure's capacity, instead, conjures up a figural site where the tensions of human-nonhuman relationality are negotiated across cultural and regional differences.

To illustrate how the shamanic figure bridges the fissure between the universal and the particular, I present a four-part taxonomy of its form, which is, in principle, not exclusive to East Asian cultures: children, individuals on the autism spectrum, martial artists, and Hansen's disease patients. While these character types, at the level of representation, might appear to be everyday figures whose presence in popular media generates little surprise,

7 Ferguson, "Climate Change and Us," 38.

in the animist imagination they serve as special operative categories, each delineating a kind of mediation that allows us to see the nonhuman in new lights. The book traces their relation to the animist worldview according to various processes of characterization behind the four filmmaker's works. The transformation of these character types into the shamanic figures entails unique conceptualizations of human subjects' modes of being and living in the world, based on which the methods of their mediation and the nonhuman entities with which they connect are defined. By distilling this taxonomy, seemingly irrelevant to locality, from a select group of East Asian films, the book at once theorizes a culturally specific mode of filmmaking and challenges an essentialist interpretation of nonwestern cinema. The aim is to use East Asian cinema as a catalyst for inquiries with broader applicability, not least how transnational cinema studies might contribute to ecocriticism and, conversely, how the latter might inspire new approaches to the demarcation of areas within the former.

To delve into the manifold permutations of my heuristic, this book closely examines a host of films, including *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007), *Air Doll* (2009), *Café Lumière* (2003), *I Wish* (2011), *The Assassin*, *The Grandmaster* (2013), and *Sweet Bean* (2015). In addition to their collective shaping of the shamanic figure, I read them as intertexts based on such factors as personal collaborations between the filmmakers, documented exchanges, shared thematic and generic concerns, anxieties of influence related to film stylistics, and collective reflections on regional cultures in connection to transregional inquiries into the more-than-human. While I will frequently refer to a wealth of works by other filmmakers or from different historical periods with which my selected films engage, my study does not purport to be exhaustive. This limitation is not solely due to the scalar disparity between a cycle of films and what one monograph can achieve in terms of coverage. I consciously concentrate on a small corpus to demonstrate the full potential of the animist imagination, anchored in the close reading of the four types of shamanic figures. I will shortly comment on the significance of close reading in my practice of film criticism. For now, let me just say that, despite not encompassing the full breadth, this book strives, at the very least, to be representative.

Before I elaborate on the shamanic figures and the order in which they are presented across the chapters, an account of how the language of animism has been employed in various discourses and debates is in need. The contextualization will facilitate our understanding of the historical, theoretical, and medial implications of the animist imagination: What necessitates the development of this mode of filmmaking? To what problematics of

posthumanism does it respond? How is it specific, if at all, to the cinematic medium? The subsequent discussion entails an examination of the pivotal role of animism within vitalist philosophy, contemporary ecocriticism, and film theory. It is at their intersection that the animist imagination emerges.

Animism Reanimated

Originally a concept advanced by Georg Ernst Stahl in the early eighteenth century, animism (*animismus*) regards the living body as an organism brought to life by a vital force, contrasting with the mechanistic perspective that reduces life activities to physical phenomena and chemical processes. The concept laid the groundwork for the development of vitalism as a discursive pursuit in the realms of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century biology, natural philosophy, and medicine. However, it eventually waned in popularity during the early twentieth century as physicalism and mechanism rose to prominence in these fields.[8] Expanding and adapting Stahl's concept, vitalist scientists formulated a theory of life that attributed the source and manifestations of vitality to a mysterious life force. This perspective diverged from the mainstream view grounded in causal mechanisms and physics, which gained widespread acceptance after the seventeenth-century scientific revolution conceptualized nature as a functioning machine. Animism can thus be seen as the conceptual precursor to vitalism, marking the early stage of vitalist discourse.[9] It is worth clarifying that, although both animism and vitalism share an opposition to mechanism in their approach to life science, they differ in their understandings of the source of life. While the soul serves as the ontological basis for animism, vitalism recognizes several hyper-mechanical material and immaterial forces as potential sources of life, including bodily fluids and mental powers.[10] Viewed broadly, vitalism encompasses animism, as the soul can be regarded as one of those hyper-mechanical forces; viewed narrowly, vitalism differs from animism

8 De Ceglia, "Matter Is Not Enough: Georg Ernst Stahl, Friedrich Hoffmann, and the Issue of Animism," 502–527.

9 Stollberg, "Vitalism and Vital Force in Life Sciences—The Demise and Life of a Scientific Conception," 1–6.

10 According to Jerome Carroll, "the ontological indeterminacy of this 'vital force' [in vitalism] suggests that its main function is heuristic, which is to say that it is a theoretical construct which makes possible a synthesis of separable parts, the exact nature of whose interconnection was not fully understood, but understood to be real." Carroll, "Eighteenth-Century Departures from Dualism: From Mechanism and Animism to Vitalism and Anthropology," 440.

as it acknowledges a vital force that is independent from, or unrelated to, the soul. In this book dedicated to the exploration of the animist worldview, my utilization of terms linked to the vitalist discourse, such as "vital force" or "vitality," adheres to the broader definition.

Setting aside the impact of Stahl's term in the scientific realm, animism found adoption in the field of religious anthropology during the Victorian era, most notably Edward Tylor in *Primitive Culture* (1871) and James George Frazer in *The Golden Bough* (1890). While Stahl's original conceptualization, influenced by Aristotle, placed the vital force of the soul within the Christian tradition—the infusion of the soul into the human body as God's creation—the anthropologists retained Stahl's core concept but placed it in a distinct textual tradition. Their writings provide the circulating definition of animism today: a prevalent system of thought that, despite regional variations, is characterized by belief in spirits that move, akin to the wind, in and out of not only human bodies but potentially everything—the Latin etymological root of animism, *anima*, is derived from the Greek *anemos*, meaning none other than wind or air. As these ethereal spirits traverse and dwell within one entity after another, the boundary between the animate and the inanimate becomes hard to delineate, and so does the identification and definition of a given animate being: Is a tree considered a person when it houses one's ancestral spirit?[11] This worldview therefore enables premodern, precolonial societies to conceptualize and navigate a physical realm where nonempirical phenomena, untestable or irreproducible through modern scientific observation and experimentation, are nonetheless encountered, experienced, and felt. In functional terms, both religion and science operated as epistemological tools through which humans engaged with the world. They were incompatible, however, to the extent that the latter viewed religious explanations of the world as not simply outdated but outright false. As the grand narrative relates, with the dominant understanding of the world gradually transitioning from one grounded in religious faith to one that is science-based, a paradigm shift took place, fundamentally altering human-nonhuman relationality from cosmic correlation to physical isolation.

11 This is not to deny the strong interdependence of body and soul in some cultures, such as various Indigenous communities in Australia. According to Emile Durkheim, "Just as there is something of the body in the soul, since it sometimes reproduces the body's form, so there is something of the soul in body. Certain religions and products of the body are thought to have a special affinity with the soul: the heart, the breath, the placenta, the blood, the shadow, the liver, the fat of the liver, and the kidneys, and so forth. These various physical substrates are not mere lodgings for the soul; they are soul itself viewed from outside." See Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 245–246.

It is now widely acknowledged that the teleology of science replacing religion does not accurately capture the intricacies of lived reality, where echoes of Bruno Latour's influential claim that "we have never been modern" are abundant.[12] Binary pairs such as science and (a host of textual traditions commonly known as) religion, the modern and the archaic, technology and magic—all of these fail to hold up amid the complexity of the everyday. In many ways, animism crystallizes these interwoven concepts—a discursive site that resists complete disenchantment and, as a result, experiences revitalization today to aid environmentalists in their pursuit of alternative models for planetary sustainability. The valorized state of animism is most succinctly encapsulated in Timothy Morton's proposition: "In an age of ecology without Nature, we would treat many more beings as people while deconstructing our ideas about what counts as people. … Ancient animisms treat being as people, without a concept of Nature. Perhaps I'm aiming for an upgraded version of animism."[13]

But what renders "Nature" with a capital N so problematic? Which facets of the "ancient animisms" fall short in the current condition, necessitating the need for an upgrade? How does the upgrade differentiate itself from its premodern counterpart? One of the answers pertains to the politics of cultural appropriation and the representation of others. The incorporation of animism in contemporary ecocriticism, while tackling sundry dimensions of animism as an Indigenous system of belief, often strategically diverges from them to extract a posthumanist ethical standpoint that regards all life forms as other-than-human persons. Moving from a metaphysical understanding of animism to a more secularized approach, the upgraded animism has been described as a materialist heuristic, which, in Donna J. Haraway's words, functions not as "a New Age wish nor a neocolonial fantasy, but a powerful proposition for rethinking relationality, perspective, process, and reality without the dubious comforts of the oppositional categories of modern/traditional or religious/secular."[14] If animism is to be taken seriously, its contemporary upgrade suggests that the removal of its enchanting aspects—often evoking associations with the past, metaphysics,

12 Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*.

13 Morton, *The Ecological Thought*, 8.

14 Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble*, 2, 165. This tendency is also reflected in Graham Harvey's proposal for a revised animism, which resists "the notion of 'the supernatural', a domain that appears to transcend everyday reality and thereby dialectically to form another domain called 'nature'. Neither 'nature' nor 'supernature' are necessary in the thinking of animists who understand that many and various persons co-exist and are jointly responsible for the ways the world will evolve next." Harvey, *Animism*, 185–186.

and a pure nature untouched by culture—is, somewhat paradoxically, a necessary condition.

While disenchantment might allow animism to attain a degree of universal applicability, this move carries several political, ethical, and aesthetic implications. I would like to highlight two of them which films operating in the mode of the animist imagination address: the role of the human and the function of artistic criticism. To begin with, as ecocriticism rejects the projection of "neocolonial fantasies" by refraining from speaking for any (subaltern) subject, it curiously finds greater comfort in speculating about the agency, intentionality, and voice of the nonhuman. While the updated animism emphasizes the connections formed collectively by both humans and nonhumans, an unfortunate, albeit not uncommon, consequence is that the collective category of "the human" remains indistinct, if not wholly overshadowed, within the more-than-human network. Consider how this shift of emphasis is presented in Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter*, a flagship text of new materialism, which openly declares the affinities of its proposed political philosophy with "several nonmodern (and often discredited) modes of thought, including animism."[15] Despite its attempt to conduct a humanistic analysis less rigid than structurally allowed in terms of subject-object binarism, Bennett's project elides the question of human subjectivity, including "the nature of human interiority, or the question of what really distinguishes the human from the animal, plant, and thing," for fear that these conventional inquiries of humanism will hijack critical attention away from the objects themselves, again "down the anthropocentric garden path."[16]

In other words, the establishment of an ontological contrast between the human and the nonhuman, the inhuman, or the more-than-human comes at the expense of the nuances within the human as a category. As internal variations of the human are bracketed, one is reminded of Jacques Derrida's term "animot," a word (*mot*) that underscores how all animals cannot be homogenized into a single animality. Similarly, shouldn't the concept of the human likewise reject the illusion that the dynamic connections and dissonances among all humans can be unified under a single banner? The stakes of this question are high, insofar as postcolonialism and various strands of identity politics have convincingly demonstrated the operative power of cultural hegemonies that determine—within the category of the human itself—which groups of subjects are marked or unmarked.

15 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, xvii–xviii.

16 Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 120.

Contra this tendency, the animist imagination reintroduces the human into the theoretical vista of animism, advancing what I see as a posthumanist humanism by situating the shamanic figure at an indispensable node within the more-than-human network. To reiterate, the book explores four types of shamanic figures: children, individuals on the autism spectrum, martial artists, and Hansen's disease patients. Each figure's mode of living presents a unique set of tactics for viewing the filmic world as an animist sphere. As these shamanic figures traverse their distinct environments, the animation of various entities such as cityscapes, transportation infrastructures, nonhuman animals, natural landscapes, and our daily bread transpires. Because of the shamanic figure's intermediary role between the human and the nonhuman, the animist imagination centers on exceptional cases of the former, acknowledging internal differences within the human as an overarching ontological rubric. My concept, therefore, both reintegrates the human into the cosmic collective as multiple persons and sidesteps the potential pitfall of homogenizing and flattening the diversity of human subjectivities. Such a position of posthumanist humanism fosters a dialogue between ecocriticism and various academic fields related to human subjectivity and identity, including childhood studies, disability studies, and the history of medicine. Although the number of character types that could be transformed into diegetic agents of animation is, in theory, infinite depending on how one defines a character type and delineates the conditions that undergird it, I assemble this four-part taxonomy to outline a wide spectrum of forms that the shamanic figure assumes on screen. Together, these four types cover various stages of human development, diverse channels through which animist capacities are obtained, and distinctive attitudes toward the animist connection with the nonhuman. As my selected shamanic figures—particularly the neurodivergent and the ill—make clear, one of the chief agendas of the animist imagination is to explore how marginalized subjects challenge normative constructions of human agency that rely on ableist narratives.[17]

The shared rejection of animism's nonempirical, supernatural aspects, moreover, indicates that the contemporary upgrade, while advocating for the nonhuman, aims for what it considers a reality devoid of fantasy and its

17 My heuristic resonates with Rebecca Zorach's insight that "in discussions around new materialism, the term 'agency' stands in for 'rights', but similar risks emerge, a risk that the call to relinquish destructive human agency might become a call to relinquish struggle itself in the face of danger. And this would be a particularly dangerous risk to Indigenous people, Third World people, people of color." Zorach, "'Welcome to my Volcano': New Materialism, Art History, and Their Others," 164.

oft-perceived escapist connotations. In response to the concerns of political ecology, Latour has emphasized the presence of scientifically established facts and the need for a clean-cut demarcation between them and everything else: "Every time we seek to mix scientific facts with aesthetic, political, economic, and moral values, we find ourselves in a quandary. … If we concede too much to values, all of nature tilts into the uncertainty of myth, into poetry or romanticism; everything becomes soul and spirit."[18] According to this view, fantasy diminishes the credibility and authenticity of the upgraded animism. Given the undeniable persistence of anthropocentrism, as well as the numerous ecological catastrophes it has caused, the conceptual compromise of animism might act as a pragmatic step to some extent—perhaps even one of the most effective strategies—in grassroots activism.

However, the exclusion of "poetry or romanticism" from the discourse of animism, and political ecology more broadly, raises questions concerning the study of artistic creation in the era of ecological crisis. The insistence on the factual and the scientific as qualitatively distinct from the rhetorical and the fantastical has led to a kind of surface reading of art. Within the framework of speculative realism, nonhuman personhood is regarded as a legitimate subject of critical investigation due to its so-called authenticity, rather than being interpreted as a rhetorical device of personification. As anthropomorphism has come to be viewed as a problematic ideology due to its frequent reflection of an anthropocentric understanding of the nonhuman, metaphorical, symbolic, or allegorical readings of the nonhuman have likewise been questioned on the basis that they may restrain the agency of the actual nonhuman—the nonhuman as such. Consequently, while various artworks across media have envisioned fluid, sometimes entirely imaginary, human-nonhuman relations and inspired the development of novel concepts and theories, there is a general tendency to conflate text and reality in interpreting these artworks from an ecocritical perspective. The principles governing the former have particularly been applied to describe how human and nonhuman entities might relate to each other in the latter, relegating aesthetic inquiry to a secondary role even in disciplines traditionally devoted to it.[19]

Contrary to the prevailing methodological shift influenced by object-oriented inquiry, the book does not inherently endorse an ecopolitics that

18 Latour, *Politics of Nature*, 4.

19 Not to mention Hal Foster's reminder that art criticism should exercise caution when drawing from core ideas of political ecologies originally arisen from "disciplines (e.g., science studies, political theory, anthropology) at a remove from artistic practice." Foster, *Bad News Day*, 120.

conclusively classifies the nonhuman as either a mere textual construct or a deeper reality. With the belief that these nuanced viewpoints resist generalization into a unified political stance, I hope to highlight the essential role of film criticism in this ontological debate—a position that identifies a broader trend in contemporary cinema while accentuating the unique characteristics of individual films within. The centrality of critical mediation for outlining the animist view of an artwork cannot be overstated. For while it is undeniable that a dominant trend in contemporary art and art writing personifies the nonhuman, not least the image itself, the personification frequently serves the logic of commodification within the context of late capitalism. In the formulation of nonhuman ontology in speculative realism, for instance, there exists, as per Alexander R. Galloway, "a coincidence between the structure of ontological systems and the structure of the most highly evolved technologies of post-Fordist capitalism."[20] It is as if the former has emulated the latter's object-oriented computer languages, which not only "structure business but also influence the logic of identifying, capturing, and mediating bodies and objects more generally" in their algorithmic construction of the postindustrial infrastructure in service of the informational economy.[21] To engage in a materialist exploration of the more-than-human world without merely reinforcing capitalist principles, one must bring materialism down from the abstract, speculative realm into the tangible domain of history. Political intervention and ideological critique become feasible once more, Galloway argues, when the materiality in question is rooted in "the material history of mankind."[22]

In a similar vein, to speculate about the power of the nonhuman in an artwork—or an artwork that claims to be, itself, a manifestation of this power—without overlooking the entanglement of market forces with matters of commodification, aesthetic inquiry must closely align with posthumanist theory to locate the artwork's ecopolitics on an extensive ideological spectrum. Adherents of the capitalist ethos may celebrate the technological optimism embraced by tech giants and art dealers/investors alike, which underpins virtual spheres like the metaverse as innovative conduits where users/avatars articulate their artistic visions, irrespective of individual markers of identity or national boundaries. Conversely, one can advocate for the romantic anti-capitalist potentiality of a counter-object that subverts the system from within. Regardless of the ecopolitical stance a work of art

20 Galloway, "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism," 347.

21 Galloway, "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism," 352.

22 Galloway, "The Poverty of Philosophy: Realism and Post-Fordism," 366.

might reflect, the animist imagination serves as an analytical framework through which film critics can navigate the diverse discourses surrounding the nonhuman or the posthuman in contemporary cinema—just as a genre does not inherently endorse or reject a specific political stance. Naturally, this does not imply that the animist imagination is the only framework. One could even make a case for an outside to its frame, where a radical stance against humanism rejects the purpose of artistic creation altogether—not to mention that of a human character (like the shamanic figure) within. Nevertheless, films driven by the animist imagination, as this book aims to demonstrate, acknowledge their border with this outside by self-reflexively thematizing their own limitation in envisioning the shamanic figure's mediating capacity.

Ultimately, viewing a film through the lens of the animist imagination involves following its shamanic figure, dissecting how its style, materiality, and (trans)medial foundation collectively mold its ecopolitical implications and guide spectatorial responses across receptive contexts. This process calls for a revival of criticism, which has been increasingly set aside in a time where skepticism about the elitist connotations of interpretation and ideological depth gives rise to a post-critical practice prioritizing descriptions of affects over argument-driven readings, and fragmented experiences over tentative structures that nevertheless serve as common grounds for intersubjective communication. On this note, I concur with Hal Foster's assertion that "defetishization should not be conflated with demystification, which does target the fictive." While the realm of aesthetics has been scrutinized by critical theory and postmodernism for serving as a space where reactionary ideologies, such as commodity fetishism, disguise themselves, it is vital to acknowledge that spectators have also become "more alert to the dialectical connections between the aesthetic and the anti-aesthetic" and "more attuned to the critical dimension in aesthetic experience and vice versa."[23] Herein lies the necessity of once again taking criticism seriously when studying artistic imaginaries of human-nonhuman relationality today.

In response to these intertwined challenges underlying the contemporary upgrade of animism, how can film viewers interested in the nonhuman redraw its boundaries without neglecting the conventional question of human subjectivity? As we explore the dynamics between humans and nonhumans in any given film, how can we simultaneously engage in the traditional practice of critiquing the aesthetics and politics that shape these

23 Foster, *Bad News Day*, 122.

dynamics? In the current academic landscape, where everything from dirt to clouds can be textualized as an inter-medium of everything else, resulting in a wealth of alternative models of object-based media archaeology and historiography, the animist imagination tackles these questions by examining the interaction between two ostensibly old mediums within new media studies: cinema and its human characters.

The Animism of and in Cinema

Discourses surrounding modern technologies have been spiritually charged from the symbiosis between photography and Spiritualism onwards.[24] However, while a host of modern technologies—from telegraph to wireless communication to radio; from network broadcasting to television to computer—have been described as metaphysically preoccupied with soulful, if not ghostly, presence,[25] the power of animism finds its fullest expression in cinema. Indeed, an inquiry into the affinity between cinema and animism generates special tautologies. Despite being visually perceptible, cinema depends on the intangible energy of electric light for its existence or, more precisely, for its emergence as "not life but its shadow," following Maxim Gorky's renowned description.[26] The fact that the moving image is perceived as alive can be understood beyond the conventional notion that motion indicates vitality. Rather, life is inscribed in the form of motion as an invisible energy funneled into the image and then projected onto the screen. As Tom Gunning suggests, "If movement endows the image with the appearance of life, projected light gives it vibrant energy. The light beam piercing darkness made the cinema image glow with intensity and constituted one of its chief means of viewer fascination."[27] In (literally) this light, cinema captures life in motion and further transmits its vital energy into the world through motion. Perhaps a more predatory interpretation that reverses the vector stands as well: cinema actively derives vital energy from the world and consumes it as a source of sustenance. This notion is most wonderfully materialized in

24 According to John Durham Peters, "Spiritualism was one of the chief sites at which the cultural and metaphysical implications of new forms of communication were worked out. … it is also the source for much of our vocabulary today (medium, channel, and communication)." Peters, *Speaking into the Air*, 100.

25 Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 1–20.

26 Gorky, "Review of Lumière Programme," 408.

27 Gunning, "Animating the Nineteenth Century: Bringing Pictures to Life (or Life to Pictures?)," 464.

Jean Epstein's *The Fall of the House of Usher* (1928), when the painter absorbs the sitter's energy, resulting not in a static portrait but a projection of her face in motion—cinema as a vampire of vitality.

Whether attributed to the apparatus or drawn from the world, cinema's wellspring of vitality has fueled a century-long fascination to theorize its ontological status.[28] Most relevant to the animist imagination is the advent of digital technologies in the 1990s, insofar as it profoundly transforms the foundation of filmmaking and affirms, as Lev Manovich famously declares, cinema's nature as a subset of animation.[29] Contemporary cinema's connection with animism, therefore, warrants additional clarification, not least as the inquiry into the nonhuman has been redefined in the context of animation. In response to new perspectives on the cinematic medium after the digital turn, in fact, studies of animation have leveraged many of the same concepts and concerns as the materialist upgrade of animism, emerging in the 1990s as well.[30] But like the animist worldview, which creates the impression of imparting human agency to all matter, entities in animation are still often charged as projections of anthropomorphism. Perhaps akin to the contemporary upgrade of animism, which strategically sidelines human subjectivity to uphold the legitimacy of nonhuman personhood, studies of animation strive to discern how the animated nonhuman can be conceptualized as distinct from the mere visualization of an anthropocentric fantasy. Thomas Lamarre's proposal, by way of revisiting Sergei Eisenstein's account of Disney animation, is an "animic mode of personation," which centers on "the *genesis of persons* (human and nonhuman) in the specific context of the animism of animation."[31] In this view, animation establishes personhood through particular stylistic and narrative devices, such as the rebounding contour line, the thematic care for animated beings, and an epistemological shift in the mind-body relation from Cartesian

28 Rachel Moore and Sarah Cooper both highlight a continuous thread in Western film theory, originating and evolving within a discursive framework marked by the interplay between modernity and magic. Inga Pollmann has also challenged the commonplace belief that cinema embodies the paradigm of mechanism due to its affinities with industrialization, scientific advancement, and technological progress, unpacking the associations between cinema and vitalist philosophy in early film theory and records of spectatorship. Moore, *Savage* Theory; Sarah Cooper, *The Soul of Film Theory*; Pollmann, *Cinematic Vitalism*.

29 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 295.

30 Based on the theorization of film as a motor of the illusion of life, transforming the inanimate into the animate, Alan Cholodenko also proposes that "not only is animation a form of film but film is a form of animation." Cholodenko, introduction to *The Illusion of Life*, 22.

31 Lamarre, "Animation and Animism," 291–292.

dualism to animist relationality that proposes a collective mind shared by multiple different bodies.[32]

Engaging with the central problematics of Lamarre's project on the genesis of personhood, this book nevertheless does not deal with animated films. This is not simply because of the varied formal and stylistic tools between animation and live-action modes of filmmaking. A key distinction between the figural animation of the human in live-action and in animation must be acknowledged, despite their frequently shared ontological status as pixels on screen today. On the ethico-political front, the substantial impact of digital technologies on contemporary imaging production poses the risk of reducing human subjectivity and corporeality, both on and off the camera, to mere data legible only to computers. Consider how the physical labor of below-the-line performers in the visual effects industry, especially motion capture artists, is often uncredited and abstracted into motion data, which can be stored, dissected, reassembled, and repeatedly reused for the animation of new virtual figures.[33] The (live-action) films examined in this book reject, at least discursively, such dissolution of humanness in the apparatus, even if some feature evident digital effects that might make parts of them look like animation. Across stages of filmmaking—from characterization in pre-production through profilmic performance to post-production processes—they emphasize the shamanic figure's presence, perceptions, and actions to push back on the leveling of not only human and nonhuman entities but, more importantly, the internal variations of the human on the same undifferentiated plane. To reverse the vector of Eisenstein's renowned notion of nature as the origin of artistic pathos, the objective of the animist imagination is the construction of a "nondifferent human."

By positioning the shamanic figure as central to the animist approach to cinema, this book adds to the ongoing discussion of the ways live-action films construct an animist universe.[34] The representation of animist activities, the proposal of laws of animism, the portrayal of elusive spirits haunting cinema through a constellation of image-making devices, and the animation of still objects or the reanimation of the deceased—while these elements might help us redescribe or requalify films previously categorized under such aesthetic or generic rubrics as magical realism, surrealism, horror,

32 Lamarre, "Animation and Animism," 293.

33 Allison, "Blackface, Happy Feet: The Politics of Race in Motion Capture and Animation," 116.

34 Some fine works of late include Cox-Stanton, "'*Cat People* as Meshwork': Animism, Déjà-viewing, and Cine-magic"; Galt, *Alluring Monsters*; Stern, "'Once I've devoured your soul we are neither human nor animal': The Cinema as an Animist Universe."

or the uncanny as animistic, they do not form the necessary condition of the animist imagination. To describe a film as driven by the animist imagination entails a deliberate act of criticism: scrutinizing its human characters, unraveling how its style and narrative collaborate or conflict for characterization, and discerning the distinct ideology that underpins its human-nonhuman relation.[35] Cinematic animism is not rooted in spirit, mystification, or abstraction but in the formal, material, and medial conditions of film production, which, in turn, shape and elicit special spectatorial reactions.

As the animist imagination critically reflects on human-centrism, it does not shy away from examining the intermediary encounters between humans and nonhumans—a quasi-humanist project with one foot in the nonhuman realm. Straddling worlds, the shamanic figure articulates the presence, process, and intimacy of this exchange, serving as an artistic trope to envision how certain groups of people, in spite of all, persist in enchantment and communication with the nonhuman. As the actions of each shamanic figure unfold, so they transform its milieus into one animist circle after another, encompassing physical places and the concrete objects within, the adopted stylistic devices and generic idioms for wonders to take place on screen, and even the public space of the theater and beyond. A reading of the shamanic figure is therefore a reading of cinema as an imagistic portal to the animist regime. My interpretation of the film posits how the shamanic figure deciphers and explicates its filmic world, one full of clues and signatures left by the nonhuman—otherwise undeclared and unrecognized.

From the East

Before I turn to the specificities of the shamanic figures, the fact that my chosen films fall into the constructed category of "East Asian cinema" needs to be addressed. Can the shamanic figure's animist capacity mediate cultural differences the same way that it mediates the human and nonhuman realms? What significance does the cultural context hold for a book dedicated to the intersection of film aesthetics and ecological thoughts that purportedly transcend locality? Tackling these questions sheds light on the

35 My project thus echoes Weihong Bao's examination of the shaman's medial quality, mobilized in subcultures of Chinese independent documentary, to "explore a medium's plural dimensions as techniques of space, time, and environment, as well as human and nonhuman consciousness." Bao, "Archaeology of a Medium: The (Agri)Cultural Techniques of a Paddy Film Farm," 28.

implications of adopting an area-based approach to ecocinema, particularly in a time when environmental calamities unfold on a vast scale, affecting all regions to varying degrees—with less privileged ones often bearing more consequences. The binding of the world into a planetary community, albeit in a negative sense, prompts a rethinking of the methodological parameters and objectives of regional film studies to account for such interconnectedness.

Intuitively, one might not be surprised by the book's focus on East Asian cinema, given that the Orient has routinely served as the locus for Western modernity's other, including animism. A recent discourse in ecopolitics has indeed dwelled on the instrumental value of cultural traditions across Asia, positing them as alternative, better models for planetary sustainability that Western modernity has failed to deliver.[36] There is no doubt that culturally specific perspectives on the nonhuman can serve as inspirational reservoirs for everyone confronted with the planetary ecological crisis. If a common goal of scholarly inquiries into the nonhuman is to unleash its potentialities for the collective flourishing of the world, there is every reason to explore the wealth of profound insights that all corners of human civilization have collaboratively generated. That said, the structural challenges of selecting which cultural traditions get to be invoked and which social actors and institutions wield the authority to narrate such traditions—often a process of retroactive reconstruction shaped by contemporary concerns—rarely come to the forefront. Recalling Haraway's caution against the reduction of animism to "a New Age wish [or] a neocolonial fantasy" in its contemporary upgrade, site-specificity seems to be what materialist animism hopes to sidestep. The post-Orientalist theoretical vista of ecocriticism thus sees a difficulty in engaging with planetary ecology without resurrecting the conventional dilemmas of Orientalism, not least the romanticization of the non-West: to avoid imposing culturally, historically specific notions as purportedly timeless wisdom, disguised as transhistorical solutions to present-day challenges. Here arises a conceptual impasse that has haunted ecopolitical discourses surrounding the notion of place against the backdrop of late globalization, as scholars debate whether resistance should be located in cosmopolitan communities (as preferable alternatives to nation-based identities) or the realities of local and regional modes of belonging.[37]

Not merely a subject of heated debate in the remapping of the world, the dialectics between cultural contextualization and the nonhuman

36 See, for instance, Duara, *The Crisis of Global Modernity*; Miller, *China's Green Religion*; and the articles collected in Yang, *Chinese Environmental Ethics: Religions, Ontologies, and Practices*.
37 Heise, *Sense of Place and Sense of Planet*, 6–8.

turn—the latter oftentimes regarded as transcending human subjectivity and regional borders by extension—has situated ecocinema studies in a unique position to rework both regional and transregional film studies. Exploring the ecopolitics of a film has the potential of bringing that film out of the overarching geopolitical frame, such as national or regional cinema, where it has been conventionally placed. However, this impetus also presents challenges for film interpretation, especially when scholars approach works not from their regions of research specialization. To give a couple of recent examples: Chelsea Birks, while analyzing the nonhuman in Apichatpong Weerasethakul's films through the philosophical lens of Georges Bataille, apologetically acknowledges the concern of "applying my admittedly Eurocentric methodology to non-Western cinemas."[38] Similarly, Sean Cubitt's examination of the Anthropocene science in Tsui Hark's *The Taking of Tiger Mountain* (2014) leaves "for Sinologists the challenge of discovering whether the Cultural Revolution ideals" support or challenge the remobilization of socialist rhetoric for the consolidation of state power in present-day China.[39] On the one hand, these moves of modesty in their brilliant scholarship, which delineate the boundaries of the authors' own contextual knowledge and linguistic capacities, reflect an increasingly nuanced division of labor within academia today, attributed to various factors such as a heightened awareness of cultural appropriation. On the other hand, they point to a methodological conundrum in the diversification and globalization of ecocinema studies: the so-called mismatch between universalizing theory and locality within a comparativist framework, the inadequacies of which have been challenged by postcolonial and area studies over the past few decades.

This book proposes that the shamanic figure's mediating power constitutes an approach to such differences between disciplinary and critical frameworks. Just as the animist imagination serves as a heuristic for film critics rather than a top-down ecopolitics of representation, it does not tie aesthetics with geopolitics by inherently promoting or critiquing the mobilization of East Asian (or any regional) culture. The animist imagination, as a method of viewing, instead acknowledges the *singularity* of each film and how the interwoven discourses of ecopolitics and geopolitics are negotiated through the portrayal of each shamanic figure. As we trace the shamanic figure's journey to discern the precise nonhuman world

38 Birks, *Limit Cinema*, 177.

39 Cubitt, "Imagining *Taking Tiger Mountain* (by Strategy): Two Landscapes of the Anthropocene, 1970 and 2014," 48.

with which it interacts, our attention is directed to the culturo-historical particularities that afford this interaction. A common ground shared by all the films at the core of this book, for instance, is the tension between an animist worldview and a disenchanted one, achieved by unveiling multiple times or timescales that coexist within a specific locale. But the way in which this temporal consciousness manifests itself differs in each film. Some carve out a distinct layer of animist temporality within an urban landscape dominated by sleepless, twenty-four-seven consumption and production (chapter 1 and 2). Others tackle present-day crises by exploring comparable instances through period drama set in dynastic and republican China (chapter 3 and 4). Still others embrace the consequences of the inevitable collision of temporalities when, under specific circumstances in metropolitan Tokyo, they can no longer be segregated (chapter 5). The ways in which these temporal orientations and pluralities operate—in hierarchy, opposition, synchronicity, or other forms—simply defy generalization. They must be established case-by-case through our critical engagements.

My methodological insistence does not simply concern the empiricism of contextualizing a film's message or significance: Birks's apologetic note on reading Apichatpong through Bataille inadvertently denies the possibility of the Thai filmmaker's intellectual engagement with the French philosopher, despite the former being well-acquainted with the European historical avant-garde and having received higher education in the United States. More importantly, animism as an analytical framework complicates the absorption of an entity into any locality, insofar as the wind-like soul traveling from elsewhere is frequently assigned to a local context, all while the ancestral memories of previous lives that it carries estrange the cozy familiarity of a given site. The freedom of this wandering, as Allen S. Weiss puts it, ensures that "all locality, all regionality, all nationality, is composed not only of what is common, but also of what is strange, foreign, other."[40] In some cases, the ethnocentric or area-based territorialization of animist epistemologies generates insights into regional historicity, as demonstrated by May Adadol Ingawanij's analysis of the Cold War state terror negotiated within the animist forests in Apichatpong's films, or of the hierarchical animism which gives rise to "a regional sense of time to which Southeast Asian artists' moving-image practices respond."[41] In other cases, as this

40 Weiss, *The Wind and the Source*, 68.

41 Ingawanij, "Animism and the Performative Realist Cinema of Apichatpong Weerasethakul," 94; Ingawanij, "Cinematic Animism and Contemporary Southeast Asian Artists' Moving-image Practices," 552. I have also explored how traditional Chinese funerary beliefs inform the animist

book seeks to perform, the analysis of each shamanic figure in its own diegetic spacetime traces how it weaves unexpected genealogies, traversing a multitude of diachronic practices—cinematic, art historical, ethnographic, technological, and others—that undertake resonant inquiries beyond its East Asian ground. The relationality between humans and nonhumans contains hints of geographical and historical interconnectivity that challenge a secure home base, whether it is the concrete soil of a region or a more ethereal notion of regionality.

Such a critical stance acknowledges the enduring power of cinema, which has consistently transcended rigid geopolitical divisions externally imposed by various ideological agents and factors, including postwar and Cold War film historiographies, the artistic paradigm of global modernism, the hegemony of European film festivals in shaping the reception of Global South cinemas, and their inter-influence on one another in this network. The contemporary film industry, marked by varied models of transregional co-production, collaborations among international filmmakers, the convenience brought by digital technologies, and the collective pursuit of profit on the global film market (commercial and art films alike), has only amplified the communicative potential of the moving image—for better or for worse. The hope of this book is to illustrate how the select films spin and bind idiosyncratic drifts in webs through their shared aesthetic project founded on the animist worldview, which has been revived and re-membered into our contemporaneity as an artistic mode cum ecopolitical stance.

By consciously placing East Asia, a constructed marker of regional identities, into conversation with an ecological imaginary that supposedly transcends regional boundaries, my intention is not to throw the baby out with the bathwater by outright rejecting the area studies model. Engaging with a small corpus of films from a specific region while remaining open to the possibility that the films might themselves destabilize a prefabricated area framework delivers a critical reflection on the fundamental intricacies, plasmaticities, and uncertainties of such determining labels as Chinese, Hong Kong, Taiwanese, or Japanese cinema. Admittedly, there are inherent values in studies that tackle the exclusion of underrepresented works—such as the Chinese- and Japanese-language films that this book focuses on—from the field of ecocinema. It is also undeniable that few writings in film studies to date have systematically explored what we might term an ecopolitical unconscious onscreen outside the modern West. Yet, if we acknowledge that

imagination in *A Tale of the Wind* (1988); see Tang, “Cinema Wears the Mask: The Metaphysics of Animism in *Une histoire de vent*.”

ecology is an urgent concern shaping and transforming our engagement with the world, including film production and reception, there should be a way to conduct film criticism ecocritically. Even if a film may originate from a specific site, it is crucial to recognize its ability to foster a philosophical appreciation of more abstract questions that both articulate and complicate cultural specificities. This, I believe, is one of the greatest payoffs of an ecocritical approach to transnational film studies.

Ultimately, the films I study occupy a central position in the book not because they represent contextualist exclusivity or illustrate existing theories of the nonhuman. Rather, they are meaningful and necessary to my theorization of the animist imagination, which finds formal and conceptual reverberations across the broader landscape of contemporary cinema. One might similarly consider such art films as Jean-Pierre Jeunet's *Amélie* (2001), Lars von Trier's *Melancholia* (2011), Ciro Guerra's *Embrace of the Serpent* (2015), Kurosawa Kiyoshi's *Journey to the Shore* (2015), Apichatpong's *Cemetery of Splendor* (2015), Olivier Assayas's *Personal Shopper* (2016), Ildikó Enyedi's *On Body and Soul* (2017), Alice Rohrwacher's *Happy as Lazzaro* (2018) and *La Chimera* (2023), Truong Minh Quy's *The Tree House* (2019), Fradique's *Air Conditioner* (2020), Julia Ducournau's *Titane* (2021), Pema Tseden's *Snow Leopard* (2023), and Lkhagvadulam Purev-Ochir's *City of Wind* (2023), just to name a few, as well as global blockbusters—from the superhero genre to the *Harry Potter* series to folk horrors—where shamanism, or magic more generally, plays a key role. My desire is to mobilize the chosen films for modeling a methodological intervention for film critics to valorize area studies that does not consider it as the sole endpoint but one context among many possibilities. The disciplines of Chinese, Japanese, and East Asian studies instead function as an interlocutor with broadscale ecological themes and philosophical inquiries through the cinematic medium.

Itineraries

The five chapters of the book are organized to present a narrative arc, tracing animist capacities from childhood to adulthood, and from old age to death. I initiate this critical exploration by delving into one of the so-called beginning states of human subjectivity: childhood. Chapter 1 examines how Hou's *Flight of the Red Balloon* and Kore-eda's *Air Doll* thematize an animist capacity that is said to be universal in the curious phase of childhood, itself a contested psychological scheme of human development that emerged against the backdrop of early twentieth-century modernity. The two films

transform alienating modern cityscapes (Paris and Tokyo, respectively) through their portrayal of children and childlike figures. In doing so, they illustrate how the sphere of childhood allows the animist worldview to persist, even in highly modernized urban settings where possibilities of wonder may appear to have receded along with traces of nature. Rather than presenting animism's persistence in a celebratory fashion, however, the two films dialectically probe the limitations of the animist worldview by imagining several obstacles it might encounter, if not disasters it could generate. The chapter thus explores the valence, feasibility, and ethico-political boundaries of a thorough reenchantment of the modern world based on animist principles, not least the broad attribution of personhood that simultaneously runs the risk of leveling everything to the same degree of (in)animation. In this way, the chapter sets the tone for the rest of the book, which explores other shamanic perceptions of more specific kinds of nonhumans.

Chapter 2 continues to focus on the child but suggests that Hou's *Café Lumière* and Kore-eda's *I Wish* offer a different positioning and function of this shamanic figure. Rather than being a general agent of animism that sees potentially everything as equally animate, the child now specifically serves as a key to the animist perception of a canonical object in film history: the train. Revisiting the renowned founding myth of cinema—that spectators reacted in horror to, and scattered away from, a train that appeared to be rushing toward them—the films propose a revival of such gullible, indeed childlike, spectatorship. In the contemporary era, when every child has been exposed to sundry apparatuses of moving image production from birth, the films' creation of sophisticated city children who nevertheless believe in the fantasy of a living train and marvel at its vitality posits an idealized form of encounter with the world. It is not a coincidence that both films are set in Japanese urban environments characterized by dense railway networks, a high level of technological progress, the ethos of globalized capitalism, and many individuals' blasé attitude toward social life due to the overdevelopment and overstimulation of the material world. In contrast to the perspective presented in chapter 1, the view of the child in this context reveals a distinct take on its ecopolitics—even in films by the same directors known for their respective auteurist touches. When read together, the two chapters underscore the essential role of film criticism in identifying and accentuating the specificities and differences inherent in each film driven by the animist imagination.

After the first two chapters on the child's animist capacity, the rest of the book turns to adult shamanic figures. Chapter 3 follows the protagonist

of *The Assassin*, Nie Yinniang, whose characterization the director and screenwriters shape as that of a person on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum. Taking a cue from the overlap between the film's preproduction stage and the filmmakers' involvement in animal welfare movements in Taiwan, I explore how *The Assassin* renders a premodern China where the relation of humans and animals is bound up with the film's elaborate mise-en-scène. As indicated by the filmmakers in several paratextual documents, the character, set up on the autism spectrum, possesses the ability to communicate with nonhuman animals, and this capacity is closely linked to her exceptional action skills. Through a critical examination of this characterization within the ongoing dialogue between disability studies and animal studies, I demonstrate how these skills and their underlying animality, performed by the actress Shu Qi, were guided by Hou to adopt Robert Bresson's renowned conception of the actor as a model deprived of affective expressivity. Assessing this paradigm of screen performance in connection with modern ethology, I propose that Shu's performance materializes and models for the viewer a posthumanist perception of the world.

While the first three chapters explore the inherent animist capacities of shamanic figures—such as the universality of young age and the largely congenital factors contributing to the pathogenesis of autism—the remainder of the book turns to those capacities that are acquired, whether by will or by force. Chapter 4 expands on the discussion of Nie's identity as an assassin, considering the practitioner of martial arts in general as a shamanic figure characterized by the control of routine exchanges of vital energies across the interior and exterior of the body. *The Grandmaster* illustrates such control with its idiosyncratic use of digital effects. Through a frame-by-frame scrutiny of selected sequences in which characters interact with the ubiquitous falling snow created by particle systems, I detail how the film's visual effects render the invisible flow of natural energy in traditions of Chinese visual culture, medicine, and martial arts—all prominent motifs in the film's sociohistorical setting of early to mid-twentieth-century China. This energy is endowed with *anima* because of the very medium of particle systems, the discourse surrounding which is closely related to the animist worldview and its cinematic offspring, animation. Growing out of the film's use of digital effects and the animist concept behind its technology, the chapter submits a relational perspective for contemporary studies of visual effects to conceptualize the interaction between profilmic martial arts movements and post-production digital effects. A study of this interaction is particularly

significant in contemporary digital culture, where the foundation of screen animation has been overtaken by computer-generated animated graphics.

Passing through childhood and adulthood, the shamanic figure's life cycle continues to unfold. However, as the book comes to an end, so does the shamanic figure's journey culminate in its demise. Just as in the martial artist's animist worlding previously explored, chapter 5 also focuses on an attained animist capacity, but one decidedly more agonizing for the bearer, both physically and psychologically: Hansen's disease. The film analyzed in this chapter is Kawase's *Sweet Bean*, which follows Tokue, a former Hansen's disease patient and supreme pâtissière, as she tries, at the dusk of her life, to reconnect with and adjust to Tokyo's urban sensorium outside the leprosarium where she has been forced to dwell since childhood. A causal connection is drawn between her culinary skill and her contraction of the disease: Hansen's disease allows her to adopt a unique mode of being open to and communicative with nonhumans, including the titular ingredient of which her confection is made. The film suggests that her medical and bodily condition carries an animist weight relevant to the same pressing questions that contemporary Japanese society faces, particularly those related to the post-Fukushima food security crisis. Fundamental to this chapter are the ethico-political conundrums that arise as Hansen's disease sufferers in Japan have been legally allowed to exit the leper colonies' confines since the repeal of the country's Leprosy Prevention Law in 1996. In what ways can the "decolonization" of their bodies and mobility be conducted? How does the label of "Hansen's disease patient" still define their identity? How should they make sense of their return to the thick of the everyday outside the leper colonies? In addressing these questions, this chapter mirrors chapter 3 in terms of their shared reflection on how discourses of disability and disease are mobilized to reflect on relations between humans and nature.

A note on transliteration and translation: all Chinese names, locations, and textual titles are romanized according to the conventions of the regions where they are from. Transliteration of Japanese follows the modified Hepburn style, with macrons avoided in commonly known Japanese words. I preserve the typical order of Chinese and Japanese names, with the surname preceding the given name. English translations of film subtitles and other written texts follow the circulating versions whenever available. Where no English translation has been published or when I feel the need to modify existing translations for clarity and accuracy, all translations of Chinese and Japanese into English are mine.

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1. The Child and the Balloon

Abstract: This chapter examines how *Flight of the Red Balloon* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2007) and *Air Doll* (Kore-eda Hirozaku, 2009) thematize an animist capacity said to be inherent in everyone during childhood. Both films propose that the condition of childhood allows the animist worldview to persist, even in highly modernized urban environments where the sense of wonder and connection to nature may appear diminished. However, rather than portraying the persistence of animism in a celebratory manner, the films dialectically examine the limitations of this worldview by imagining obstacles it might face or disasters it could generate. They thus delineate the ethical and political boundaries of a comprehensive reenchantment of the modern world based on animist principles.

Keywords: childhood in cinema; materiality of the balloon; urban alienation; de-animation; futurity

The dying Cosimo, at the second when the anchor rope passed near him, gave one of those leaps that he so often used to do in his youth, gripped the rope, with his feet on the anchor and his body in a hunch, and so we saw him fly away, taken by the wind, braking the course of the balloon, and vanish out to sea …

– Italo Calvino, *The Baron in the Trees*

In an early scene of Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007), a Route 76 bus of Régie Autonome des Transports Parisiens arrives at a street stop. Alighting from the vehicle is Song (Song Fang), a Chinese film production student and newly hired nanny for Simon (Simon Iteanu), Suzanne's (Juliette Binoche) grade-school-age son. The camera, from across the street, continually reframes to trace Song's meandering walk in front of a variety shop as she locates and orients herself. After consulting her mobile phone and a piece of paper, Song arrives at the marionette theater where Suzanne works as a voice performer.

Tang, Pao-chen. *The Animist Imagination in East Asian Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2025.
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Before the narrative unfolds following the encounter between Song and Suzanne, the Route 76 bus itself beckons. Framed at the center of the shot but obscured momentarily by other vehicles on the bustling street, it does not arouse the spectator's curiosity until the camera moves right to trace its movement and finally halts in synchrony with the bus. In this moment, all other elements in the scene concede the spotlight to the seemingly unremarkable object. The left side of the bus, facing the direction of its journey, dominates the static frame, holding the viewer's gaze for a good thirty-five seconds (figure 1.1). During this ample screen duration, as our eyes traverse the glossy surface of the vehicle, a face familiar to those acquainted with contemporary Western cinema stands out. In the lower-left quadrant of the frame, the furrowed countenance of British actor Clive Owen pierces through, two-thirds of it encapsulated within a sizable circular glass crack, casting an intense gaze into the camera. Adjacent to this visage, a concise cast list—Owen, Julianne Moore, Michael Caine—accompanied by a legible line of text ("Les Fils de l'homme") in magnified font, signifies that this image is a promotional visual for Alfonso Cuarón's *Children of Men* (2006).

Whether prearranged or contingent, the cameo of Owen's foreboding presence complicates what would otherwise be an unassuming snapshot of the mundane. Within Cuarón's gripping thriller, set in a near-future marred by prolonged human infertility and the ominous specter of complete childlessness, Homo sapiens teeters on the precipice of extinction. Lives have thus been forfeited or sacrificed to ensure the survival of the first known pregnant woman on Earth in eighteen years. This dystopian undercurrent, briefly thrust upon the viewer through Owen's penetrating gaze, starkly contrasts with the opening scene of *Flight of the Red Balloon*, which exuberantly celebrates the animist power of Simon, bathed in the glow of a splendid, sunny day. Carefree and unburdened, he implores a reluctant cerise orb to trail his descent into the Art Nouveau entrance of the Bastille Métro station. In this spacetime, Simon effortlessly embodies what this book describes as the shamanic figure in the animist imagination. Naturally animist, naturally affirmative regarding an expanded definition of personhood that considers both the human and the nonhuman as potentially personal, Simon emerges as a human agent of animism. He keenly recognizes and actively engages in the vitality of the nonhuman, epitomized by his anthropomorphic, or perhaps zoomorphic, helium-filled companion.

It is this mystic aptitude, seemingly intrinsic to the child's worlding, that Hou's film intimates as the fundamental lack in Cuarón's tumultuous world, stripped of the presence of newborns. Crafted as a homage to Albert Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon* (1956) and commissioned by the Musée

Fig. 1.1. *Children of Men* on the bus in *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007). Courtesy of Les Films du Lendemain.

d'Orsay, Hou's work not only self-reflexively acknowledges the geographical interweaving defining transnational cinema today but also embarks on a temporal inquiry, unfolding from Lamorisse's postwar animist classic, adorned with cobblestone alleyways and peeling plaster buildings in Ménilmontant, to Hou's reinterpretation set in a metropolitan Paris. The contemporary rendition is characterized by the dynamic pulse of mass transit, the ebb and flow of international students and workers, and the myriad images they both produce and transmit. Across the two films, the child's animist capacity endures, yet something about its (Parisian) ground has undergone a metamorphosis. Nestled between Lamorisse's bygone wonderland and the impending dystopia portrayed in *Children of Men*, the opening of Hou's film outlines a globalized urban condition, in which the shamanic figure of the child persists—though it confronts the prospect of a potentially somber future. As it bridges the realms of nostalgia and apocalypse, the film invites contemplation on the shifting foundations where the enchantment of childhood meets the complex currents of a decidedly modern world.

This chapter posits that the discursive alliance between childhood and animism functions as a heuristic device to explore the futurity of humanity in films that thematize child's ability to perceive the world as a sphere imbued with animist qualities. This affinity dramatizes a familiar discourse within modern Western culture—one that conceptualizes childhood as a distinctive category of human subjectivity. Within this discourse, childhood emerges as an ambiguous ontological position straddling the human and the

nonhuman—in fact, frequently closer to the latter, particularly animals. This portrayal aligns with French historian Philippe Ariès's influential account of the "discovery of childhood," which delineates childhood as a socially constructed stage of human life in Western society, gaining prominence from the seventeenth century onwards.[1] Building upon Ariès's work, scholars in childhood studies have proposed diverse perspectives on mapping the categorical function of childhood in relation to socioeconomic changes in modern life, especially the notion of family. It is commonly held that the invention of childhood as a distinct developmental phase bespeaks those (grown) modern subjects' desires to delineate their own contour on cultural, political, and philosophical fronts. A key implication of being modern is the progression beyond the nebulous phase that childhood signifies—a period of uncertainty characterized by biological personhood yet lacking full social recognition—through education and discipline. Indeed, a sustained argument in Western political philosophy, as Heather Keenleyside points out, sees childhood and adulthood as "primarily political categories, and only secondarily biological or psychological stages. To make the child a man is thus to make him the kind of being that social contract theorists like Locke envision: an independent being whose political status is secured by speech."[2] Because childhood is persistently situated as a pre-stage to sovereignty, even in developed countries today, children, along with prisoners and people with developmental disability, continue to be "denied access to politics as a practice devoted by definition to making the future"—despite the fact that various liberation movements have granted other minority groups the role of political actors.[3] Children remain in a state of immaturity across all spheres spanning from biological development to political conceptualization.

In the context of the (adult) subject's self-differentiation and self-fashioning, early twentieth-century developmental psychology appropriated the lexicon of animism from Victorian anthropological treatises on the purportedly primitive worldview to elucidate children's conceptualization of nonhuman entities. When Jean Piaget famously coined the term "animism" to characterize the nascent stages of the human psyche, he interlinked children's ascription of consciousness to nonhuman entities with anthropological investigations delving into "those beliefs according to which primitive people endow nature with 'souls,' 'spirits,' etc., in order to explain

1 The quoted phrase come from the title of chapter 2 in Ariès, *Centuries of Childhood*.

2 Keenleyside, *Animals and Other People*, 176.

3 Devji, "The Childhood of Politics," 221.

psychical phenomena."[4] All human individuals traverse a developmental stage analogous to the animist worldview, a characteristic feature of early human civilization. This stage eventually wanes as individuals navigate the intricate interplay between their subjective selves and the objective reality surrounding them. It is noteworthy that the relationship between anthropological animism and Piaget's concept of child animism does not adhere to a part-whole logic. In contrast to the former, which functions as a comprehensive term encompassing various culturally specific belief systems, the latter asserts a universality wherein the precise process of a child's animistic worldview can be empirically observed, documented, and further refined into more nuanced categories. In accordance with Piaget's framework, child animism develops through four sequential stages. In the initial stage, all entities hold the potential for being perceived as animate. Progressing to the second stage, children attribute consciousness exclusively to mobile entities, distinguishing them from stationary counterparts. The third stage introduces a nuanced categorization of moving objects, discerning between those with self-originating movements, deemed alive, and those subjected to external forces. Finally, in the fourth stage, children refine their perspective, recognizing consciousness exclusively in animals rather than attributing it universally to all nonhuman entities.[5]

Despite its influence, Piaget's concept faces challenges from two distinct perspectives. Some anthropological writings seek to denaturalize the presumed connection between childhood and animism by emphasizing that children's animist concepts are social constructs, acquired through either educational processes or experiences in real-life contexts. Graham Harvey, for instance, has argued against Piaget by suggesting that "childhood animism is (a) inculcated by comforting adults and (b) is quite different to the animism of those adults among whom it is considered and practised."[6] The second form of critique scrutinizes the presumed colonial and hierarchical teleology inherent in Piaget's concept, specifically the idea that modernity necessarily supersedes and displaces primitiveness. If the latter continually resurfaces as the repressed or persistently influences aspects of both the physical and conceptual realms that the hegemony of Western modernity cannot sublate, a parallel question emerges about the temporal relationship between adulthood and childhood. To echo Bruno Latour's well-known

4 Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, 169–170.
5 Piaget, *The Child's Conception of the World*, 173.
6 Harvey, *Animism*, 14.

assertion that "we have never been modern," one might ponder in what respects we may have never grown up either.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, the realm of aesthetics becomes a focal point for the second type of critique to negotiate both psychology and anthropology, with Sigmund Freud's "The Uncanny" standing as a quintessential text. Expanding upon Ernst Jentsch's interpretation of E. T. A. Hoffmann's works, Freud articulates the titular aesthetic effect in connection with the castration complex defining childhood experiences. Additionally, Freud links this aesthetic phenomenon to a phase in individual development that mirrors an early stage in the progression of human civilization, which "did not pass without leaving behind in us residual traces that can still make themselves felt, and that everything we now find 'uncanny' meets the criterion that it is linked with these remnants of animistic mental activity and prompts them to express themselves."[7] During the least anticipated moments, the uncanny gives rise to a chilling transgression of the categorical boundary between the living and the dead within an otherwise mundane setting. Considering that the resurgence of animism can only evoke a defamiliarizing and disconcerting experience in a spacetime governed by non-animist beliefs, the emergence of the uncanny is rooted in a distinctively modern anxiety—an obscure and irrational facet of modernity.[8]

By ascribing the origin of the uncanny to the menace of the castration complex, Freud provides a psychoanalytic framework for navigating and understanding this unsettling experience. According to Stanley Cavell, however, Freud's move is based on his erroneous reading of Hoffmann's "The Sandman," which symptomatically reflects his own "repeated dissociation of psychoanalysis from philosophy." One could speculate that Freud's diagnosis, grounded in his potentially misremembered interpretation of "The Sandman," whether authentic or not, exposes fundamental paradoxes in his endeavor to construct a theoretical framework, including the rationalist uncovering the irrational underpinnings of thought, the progressivist recognizing the value of the primitive, and the idea that structures within the unconscious might be overcome or even replaced. However, my objective here is neither to engage in a Freudian analysis of Freud himself, nor to assess whether the developmental trajectories of both an individual and human collectives should be described as teleological or cyclical. Setting aside the psychoanalytic cause and solution to the uncanny, this chapter delves into the aesthetic dimensions of this effect. It explores how a given

7 Freud, "The Uncanny," 147.

8 Masschelein, *The Unconcept*, 68–69, 130–31.

text establishes the necessary conditions that render both the characters within the narrative and the readers susceptible to the uncanny.[9] While it is safe to say that *Flight of the Red Balloon* does not follow the Freudian path in accentuating the uncanniness of its titular object—it would be quite a stretch to categorize the film under the horror genre—it nevertheless engages with questions of animism in connection to both modernity and childhood. The film accomplishes this by exploring the potential of animism within urban institutions and built environments—spaces where 55 percent of the global population resided as of 2018, a figure anticipated to rise to 68 percent by 2050.[10]

I pair my examination of Hou's film with Kore-eda Hirokazu's *Air Doll* (2009), a choice that complements the former in surprising ways. In both films, childhood is not merely a temporal phase confined between specific ages but, rather, as a heuristic lens through which subtle traces of animism clandestinely reveal themselves in the shadows of the disenchanted paradigm of urban modernity. When conceptualized in this manner, childhood transcends the representation of a child as a character; instead, something inherent in these films allows childhood to permeate beyond individual characters, seeping into a broader milieu and affixing itself to diverse nonhuman entities. In doing so, these entities undergo a transformation, becoming agents of animism as well. The states and behaviors of these personified figures can be best described as childlike—as if childhood serves as a semiotic tag that readily attaches itself to or detaches itself from any entity. As children or childlike entities navigate their urban surroundings, unique processes of worlding unfold, which showcase to the viewer how an animist way of being and living could have manifested in a cityscape otherwise devoid of magic and wonder. The specific questions that this chapter tackles include: How does the shamanic figure of the child contemplate, perceive, enchant the world? In the absence of the child in the narrative, how can such an exceptional case of human subjectivity be sustained or reimagined, irrespective of age constraints? In what ways can viewers of these sophisticated films, undoubtedly not tailored for children as their primary audience, cultivate a childlike perspective through the act of viewing?

Ultimately, this chapter studies the formal ramifications of screen childhood, addressing such issues as the re-enchantment of modernity and the

9 Cavell, "The Uncanniness of the Ordinary," 87.

10 United Nations, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, Population Division, *World Urbanization Prospects*, 1.

collective future for both the human and the nonhuman. While animism serves as the primary worldview for the shamanic figure of the child as it engages with the world, the two films test the boundaries of whether and how animism can also operate as a method of world-making for children or childlike entities within the narrative, as well as for viewers who adopt a childlike perspective before the screen. Each film explores the extent to which the animism associated with the child—as an active figure or an emblem—can be extended. But regardless of the specific form of childhood and its function in Hou's and Kore-eda's films, these animist imaginations, in essence, recognize childhood animism as valuable. On one hand, both films advocate against the barbarism of human extinction depicted in *Children of Men*, despite the numerous issues stemming from human civilization and modernity, by testing out the potential forms of human-nonhuman co-flourishing, with the child serving as a mediator for the viewer. On the other hand, these films consistently portray the animist worldview as something endangered, if not already obsolete. A palpable sense of nostalgia pervades them, propelling narratives that focus on the restoration of the state of childhood, the re-education of adults in rediscovering how to be childlike, and the success or failure of these attempts to re-enchant.

Devices of Animism

Before delving into the films, I would like to elucidate my decision to group the works of Hou and Kore-eda. A commonplace for attentive followers of contemporary art cinema, the reciprocally acknowledged influence between the two filmmakers manifests itself on multiple fronts. Biographically, scenes shot on location in southern Kaohsiung in Hou's *The Time to Live and the Time to Die* (1985) visualized for and virtually channeled Kore-eda into the childhood memories narrated by his father, who was born in the same city during Taiwan's colonial rule under Japan. In terms of personal and technical collaborations, composer Chen Ming-chang, who contributed to Hou's *Dust in the Wind* (1986) and *The Puppetmaster* (1993), was introduced to Kore-eda by Hou himself to work on the score for *Maborosi* (1995). Cinematographer Mark Lee Ping-bing, a long-term collaborator of Hou since the mid-1980s, also handled the camera for *Air Doll*. On stylistic fronts, Kore-eda has openly acknowledged that Hou's work plays a pivotal role in shaping his approach to filmmaking: the gradual abandonment of storyboards (after *Maborosi*) during the pre-visualization process, the use of non-professional actors, the preference for location shooting and natural lighting, the incorporation of

long-take aesthetics, and the experimentation with a mobile long shot that dynamically follows the actor's improvised movements.[11] For the purpose of my inquiry into the cinematic aesthetics of the nonhuman, I will further elaborate on two resonant aspects of their filmmaking and introduce a specific device that serves as a conduit for the child's animist capacity to articulate itself in their respective screen worlds: the pneumatic.

From the inception of both Hou's and Kore-eda's careers, the centrality of childhood for comprehending human-nonhuman relations has been a recurring theme. Consider a group of elementary school children's involvement in an activist campaign against illegal electrofishing in Hou's *The Green, Green Grass of Home* (1982); or, Kore-eda's documentary *Lessons from a Calf* (1991), which chronicles a two-year educational experiment in a Japanese elementary school: a program that asks students to collectively raise a calf, affectionately named Laura. Second, such thematic concerns have invariably informed the two filmmakers' aesthetic choices. Worthy to highlight here is Kore-eda's acute observation on his preferred stylistic combination of long take and long shot, frequently associated with Hou's work too—in fact, a formal feature that has acquired a broader geopolitical connotation, given its privileged position in the works of other Asian auteurs such as Jia Zhangke, Tsai Ming-liang, Apichatpong Weerasethakul, and Hong Sangsoo. In a 2014 interview, Kore-eda rejects what he considers to be the prevailing yet insipid framework of realism through which such an aesthetic has habitually been described as an attempt to stage a so-called neutral or objective view of the world.[12] Kore-eda's preferred modifier, instead, is "non-anthropocentric," which he attributes to some cultural factors specific to East Asian societies. When asked about the reason behind the centrality of this aesthetics to contemporary East Asian art cinemas, Kore-eda speculates, "it is likely because of the drastic difference between Asian and Western worldviews. Asian societies do not place 'the human' at its center, and the Asian long shot/long take aesthetic subconsciously reflects the understanding that humans are only part of this world. … Western civilization typically regards nature as a target to conquer, and places itself exterior to nature."

While Kore-eda's reference to a transcultural Asian collective aligns with his longstanding critique of understanding contemporary cinema solely through a national framework, a broader set of oppositions between West and East takes precedence over individual regional labels, such as

11 For more on the last point, see Kore-eda and Wu, "Zhangjingtou yu feirenzhongxin zhuyi: fang shizhi yuhe," 154–156.

12 Kore-eda and Wu, "Zhangjingtou yu feirenzhongxin zhuyi: fang shizhi yuhe," 156.

Japan, China, or South Korea. Instead of exercising another critique of the cultural essentialism inherent in this alternative yet still clichéd binarism, however, my focus lies more on Kore-eda's integration of a set of cinematic devices with a philosophical reflection on human-centered ideologies. This is symptomatic not so much of the authenticity of cultural differences as of the present-day ecological reality. The significance of refraining from immediately resorting to our poststructuralist and postcolonial theoretical toolkit is twofold: first, it concerns the specific intersection of planetary ecology and area-based film studies; second, it pertains to the role of realist aesthetics in film studies.

To begin with, Kore-eda's perspective provides a refreshing approach to examining his and Hou's films from an ecological standpoint. Although he discursively employs certain dichotomies between the West and the East and between the human's suppression of and harmony with nature, he considers them problematic challenges for his own creative endeavors. Specifically, Kore-eda grapples with the possibility of artistic production within the theoretical framework of the Anthropocene, a period wherein nature and culture have become so intricately entwined that, in line with Timothy Morton's influential proposal, ecopolitics should jettison the concept of a transcendental nature for effectiveness.[13] Within this paradigm, how might Kore-eda's dichotomies still function as heuristic tools for a filmmaker like him, who has positioned himself in a constructed tradition that privileges the supremacy of the (Eastern) natural over the (Western) cultural?

Moreover, Kore-eda's take on realism reopens an unexhausted promise of posthumanism within conventional approaches to film aesthetics. This is particularly evident in relation to André Bazin's discussion of the long take/long shot stylistics in his seminal "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," which considers, not incidentally, Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon* as an exemplar of not only the kind of realism he favors but also a critical take on anthropomorphism. When the titular balloon of Lamorisse's film, sans the interruption of montage, "actually does go through the movements in front of the camera that we see on the screen," the film maintains the unity of space and thus the objective continuity within said space. In moments like this, *The Red Balloon* at once acquires a documentarian value and discloses "the relation of man to things and to the surrounding world."[14] Praising the film as a piece of children's fiction "a little on the intellectual side" due to its enlightening potential for adults, Bazin rightly indicates that the most ingenious visions in

13 Morton, *Ecology without Nature*.

14 Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," 45–46, 52.

this genre are "privileged to remain on the dream wavelength of childhood."[15] Such is the wavelength on which Hou's and Kore-eda's films likewise dream, insofar as they recognize the pivotal role of childhood in the pursuit of the form and site of nonhuman personhood. Each of their portrayals of childhood in reciprocity with the animist worldview contributes to the spherical conceptualization—in all its directions—of an animist childhood.

Bazin's insight prompts a materialist reflection on the balloon, the very object through which his favored stylistic treatments manifest. An orb that readily lends itself to comparisons with the human head; a smooth surface where projections of the human visage conveniently adhere; fluid but unpredictable movements that give off the impression of autonomy; and an attached thin string that enables discreet manipulations from the offscreen—these constituent elements of a typical balloon proclaim its role as a device conducive to the animist imagination. Because of these qualities, when the red balloon travels across profilmic spaces, the ideal spectatorial response that it elicits is not the analytical pleasure that contributes to what Neil Harris terms the "operational aesthetic," namely, the pleasure in discovering and explaining how the visual effects work.[16] The how-to question that leads to the exposure of trickery simply misses the point here, as Bazin also posits.[17] To be "on the dream wavelength of childhood," rather, the more relevant question to ask when viewing the balloon is a childish but decidedly animist one: can we play together? Hou and Kore-eda both dwell on this inquiry: *Flight of the Red Balloon* introduces Simon to a helium-filled playmate, while *Air Doll* follows an animated blow-up sex doll on a journey to befriend others.

But perhaps the most compelling connection between animism and the balloon resides in the latter's dynamic and flexible relationship with the air, a concept rooted in the meaning of the Greek word *anemos*, which, in turn, forms the basis for animism's Latin etymological root, *anima*. Containing and yet enwrapped by the air, the balloon gives shape to what is an otherwise invisible, immaterial substance without creating a definite fissure between itself and its surroundings. In Derek P. McCormack's analysis of the balloon's material shaping, this quality enacts a condition of "envelopment," which describes a "process by which entities emerge within a milieu from which they differ without becoming discontinuous, in the same way that a cloud is a process of differentiation within an atmosphere without

15 Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," 42.

16 See chapter 3 of Harris, *Humbug*.

17 Bazin, "The Virtues and Limitations of Montage," 45.

necessarily being discontinuous with it."[18] When conceptualized as a device of animism on screen, the elusive nature of the balloon, defying clean-cut ontological boundaries, reflects the ambiguous position and relevance of the animist worldview in the modern world. It is also this characteristic of the balloon that distinguishes it from the doll—another favored animistic device with strong ties to childhood. Unlike the doll, whose likeness to the living, especially when combined with movement, has made it prone to anthropomorphism throughout film history, the vitality of the balloon is not exclusively tied to its physical appearance. The balloon navigates a unique uncanny valley, with the curve of its slope being more abstract and irregular. As a result, both the effect and affect it generates are harder to categorize—at least in ways that warmly nostalgic toys in the *Toy Story* series or the numerous killer dolls that populate the horror genre are not.

I highlight the material conditions of the balloon and compare them with those of the doll because both Hou and Kore-eda have grappled with the varied and sometimes conflicting possibilities that these objects offer for the construction of their respective animist imaginations. *Flight of the Red Balloon* thematizes these devices and associates them with characters at different stages of their lives to outline the distinct contours of animism and the limitations imposed upon them in an alienating Paris. *Air Doll* takes inspiration from the object lessons of Hou's film and responds to its exploration of animism's modern context—this time in Tokyo—by creating a very specific kind of balloon, a female blow-up sex doll, itself an intriguing composite of the balloon and the doll. By attributing an airy, soulful substance (rather than anthropomorphic resemblance) as the source of vitality for the animate air doll, Kore-eda's film portrays the process by which the doll gains and loses life. Its reflection on how animist energies may or may not flourish is set against the backdrop of a metropolis defined in relation to the ethos of global capitalism and regressive neoliberalism. To an extent, then, both films serve as an urban survival guide for animism, demonstrating to the viewer a dialectical tension between enchantment and modernity, mediated in the childhood fantasies opened up by their privileged devices of animism.

A Neglectful Nanny

Much has been discussed about the intertextual complexity between Lamorisse's *The Red Balloon* and Hou's *Flight of the Red Balloon*. Often

18 McCormack, *Atmospheric Things*, 5.

mentioned briefly, however, is Adam Gopnik's *Paris to the Moon*, a book through which Hou initially learned about Lamorisse's classic. Gopnik's intertext, providing personal observations of Parisian life, deserves our attention, especially as it leads to hermeneutically uncharted territory in understanding Hou's film. A crucial event in the development of the film was Hou's discovery of the book through his long-term collaborator, novelist and scenarist Chu Tien-wen. Although Chu was not officially listed as a co-writer of the screenplay alongside Hou and French producer François Margolin, Hou emphasized in several interviews her significant involvement in the pre-production stage. Chu was not credited simply because she did not care about it, while Margolin was nominally listed due to the requirement for funds supporting this Taiwanese-French collaborative project, which mandated the involvement of a certain ratio of French staff—a fact that puts pressure on the enterprise of the so-called transnational co-production in the contemporary film industry. To speculate on what initially piqued Chu's and Hou's curiosity, one cannot overlook the role of Gopnik's text in shaping the original script of the film.

A short essay by Chu, titled "Hongqiqiu zai erlinglingliu nian" (The red balloon in 2006), offers some clues, especially a block quote of Gopnik's depiction of *The Red Balloon*, his self-proclaimed first impression of Paris at around the age of eight. A section of it relates:

> Curiously, it was neither a cozy nor a charming landscape. The Parisian grown-ups all treated Pascal, the boy, with a severity bordering on outright cruelty: His mother tosses the balloon right out of the Haussmannian apartment; the bus conductor shakes his head and finger and refuses to allow the balloon on the bus; the principal of the school locks him in a shed for bringing the balloon to class. The only genuine pleasure I recall that he finds in this unsmiling and rainy universe is when he leaves the balloon outside a tempting-looking bakery and goes in to buy a cake.[19]

Intrigued by this cloudy account of the city, Chu watched Lamorisse's film. Her impression of it, however, could not differ more from Gopnik's:

> A first grader got out of school. No one picked him up. Like all first graders of that era, he walked a long way home either alone or accompanied—long, because he constantly detoured and wandered. Unbounded

19 The Chinese translation of this passage appears in Chu, *Hongqiqiu de luxing*, 114–115. The English passage quoted here comes from Gopnik, *Paris to the Moon*, 5.

> by extracurricular activity or cram school; unconcerned about getting kidnapped or hit by urban mishaps, Pascal's meander always slipped through the all-encompassing mesh called life. At the end of a steep slope he patted a sitting cat; after descending the stairs he saw a red balloon hanging above the grillwork. Only in that world with a low skyline decorated by a cathedral spire and, therefore, what seems to be a limitless sky does the melancholic friendship between Pascal and the red balloon transpire.[20]

Vulnerability versus breeziness; depressive restriction versus anything-goes latitude; a rainy day versus an open sky—one might think that Gopnik and Chu had, in fact, watched two distinct films. Their respective descriptions of the grownups' regulation of the child protagonist and the degree of connectedness between the human and the nonhuman define the general atmosphere of Lamorisse's Paris. In a tranquil milieu where the unguarded Pascal freely attends to various forms of nonhuman life, including the animate balloon, his companionship with the airborne entity becomes possible. On the contrary, imposed distantiation from the adults leads to Pascal's abandonment of the balloon in pursuit of a commodity.

A useful interpretive framework for understanding the marked distinction between the two passages is Pamela Robertson Wojcik's sociohistorical account of the shifting views of childhood and parenting policy in twentieth-century American literature and cinema. In those fictional works set in urban environments that Wojcik terms "the fantasy of neglect," neglect from parents and other authoritative figures allows for the child's mobility, adventures, and unexpected encounters with others. The spatiality of urban childhood is mapped out as the neglected child navigates assorted public spaces in ways that deviate from the safe routes and areas sanctioned by adults. Depending on the given text, the unmoored drift could result in a fantasy or a catastrophe. However, regardless of the final outcome, Wojcik suggests that neglect itself creates a "room for play" in the same way that, following Miriam Hansen's proposal, cinema allows the viewer to experience and reconfigure the effects of modernity.[21] In the mode of play, neglected children on screen (and, by extension, their viewers turned childlike) negotiate the still-oscillating trajectory of temporality, the borders of space and the body, and their relations to the world. Returning to the two writers' distinctive takes on *The Red Balloon*, while the neglect of Pascal produces

20 Chu, *Hongqiqiu de luxing*, 115.
21 Wojcik, *Fantasies of Neglect*, 30–31.

for Chu a fairy-tale playground characterized by non-anthropocentric friendship, Gopnik regards the discipline and punishment of the child as part and parcel of the Parisian urban geography. Not surprisingly, Wojcik herself categorizes Gopnik's book as a survival guide for city parenting, "as if being a parent in those places is an adventure akin to touring challenging or exotic foreign locales."[22]

Thinking with Chu's playful reading of *The Red Balloon* in relation to the dystopian implication of *Children of Men* that haunts *Flight of the Red Balloon* from the outset, I propose that Hou's film paints a nostalgic picture of childhood, which occupies a middle position on a timeline that generally aligns with the modern notion of teleological historicity: from an animist Paris in the past to a future where animism fades along with the increasing disappearance of the child figure. In reaction to this fatalistic trajectory, the act of filmmaking and the production of images more broadly serve as ways to archive the still-animist present. They might even, if fortunate, re-enchant those—children and adults alike—who are childlike no more by reviving or recreating the memory of childhood. Indeed, this recuperation is one of the narrative functions of Song, who, acting as Hou's surrogate in the diegesis, is in the process of shooting a short film in homage to Lamorisse's. Despite being hired as a nanny, Song facilitates the liberating neglect of Simon, whose presence throughout the film is otherwise associated with formal educational sites and activities. In contrast to Pascal in Chu's observation, Simon is twice picked up from school, receives a private piano lesson from a tutor, and attends a guided group visit to the Musée d'Orsay at the end of the film. Much of Simon's companionship with Song takes place outdoors as they roam the city, frequently pausing to play pinball or taking leisurely strolls in a park.

With a digital camera in hand, Song ceaselessly records Simon (the Pascal in her short) during their unhurried meanders. We catch glimpses of two shots from Song's ongoing production on her laptop screen. In the first shot, Simon carries a red balloon and exits the subway station. The camera pans right and tilts up to capture his ascent up the stairs. Before he reaches ground level, the video cuts to Simon walking down the street he habitually takes on his way home. This is the same street he has previously guided Song through in the sequence following their first encounter. (At the beginning of this earlier moment, Song shares with Simon her cinephilic passion for Lamorisse's film and her desire to make a video tribute. She suddenly pauses to film a mural on the side of a building, the top of which depicts a

22 Wojcik, *Fantasies of Neglect*, 15.

floating red balloon. The second shot of the video shown on the laptop thus retrospectively reveals this move as location-scouting.) Simon then stops in front of Chez Fernando, a café in the Latin Quarter; as he gazes into the window, he carelessly releases the balloon. The camera promptly pans right and tilts up at an angle of slightly more than ninety degrees to capture the balloon's flight until it exits the frame, before panning back to focus on the mural balloon. The camera's trajectory anticipates the balloon's successive return from screen left to momentarily "gaze" at its two-dimensional counterpart. The orb soon flies away again but remains hovering above the area within the camera's purview.

The two shots shown on Song's laptop acknowledge that the direct interactions between Simon and the anthropomorphic balloon throughout the film are the result of tricks. They speak to the above discussion of Bazinian realism and Kore-eda's rejection of the use of long shots/long takes as a naïve pursuit of documentation, into which Bazin's concern has frequently been translated. Both Hou and Kore-eda participate in developing an alternative genealogy of realism defined not by the creation of illusion per se but by the specific type of illusion that is created: the flight out of anthropocentrism. Like Bazin, who does not consider the use of tricks in *The Red Balloon* as a violation of the film's realism, *Flight of the Red Balloon* comfortably offers a meta-commentary on the apparatus behind its own illusion. This is not only because, at one point, Song explains to Suzanne that the person hired to physically control the balloon's movement in her video is dressed entirely in green to facilitate digital erasure in post-production. The same holds true in terms of narration. The display of Song's video on her laptop screen retroactively establishes the first five shots of the film, featuring Simon's aforementioned descent down the metro station and his later train ride followed by the balloon, as footage from Song's video-in-progress. In the chronological order of the story, these five opening shots precede the two shots shown on Song's laptop. Collectively, the seven shots present Simon's voyage from one metro station through another to Chez Fernando—the identical clothes and bookbag he wears across these two sequences further confirm their linkage. The five-shot flashforward that opens *Flight of the Red Balloon*, then, is a reflexive declaration of the imaginary, constructed nature of the animist imagination: the once animist world of *The Red Balloon* now only exists as a meticulously arranged scenography, triply framed by the window of the Mac DVD Player, the edges of Song's laptop, and the film screen (figure 1.2).

Such a layered image is but one moment that instantiates the crystallization of the peculiar combination of childhood and animism in Hou's film.

Fig. 1.2. Animism within a frame within a frame in *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007). Courtesy of Les Films du Lendemain.

Another example—also a film within the film—likewise juxtaposes a child and an act of animation. This takes place after Suzanne mentions that she has seen Song's previous work, befittingly titled *Origins*. It evokes memories of her own childhood, not least all sorts of sensory experiences: "Sounds, images. You know, that darkness that's sometimes there in your imagery. Your film touches on very deep feelings I'd almost forgotten." An ineffable sentiment has since surfaced and haunted Suzanne; she appears pensive and alone in the bathroom in the following sequence, at once absentmindedly applying eyeliner and humoring her tenant's attempt to chitchat from the living room. Prompted by an urge to fathom these "deep feelings," Suzanne embarks on her own pursuit of images. She commissions Song to convert some old 8mm films to a DVD; the resultant transfer is said film within a film, a family video which she shows Simon on a Necvox monitor installed in her car. On this small screen, an old man whom Simon cannot recognize but Suzanne identifies as her grandfather demonstrates the control of a rod puppet—Pulcinella, judging from its aquiline nose—to Louise (Louise Margolin), Suzanne's daughter who now lives with her ex-husband in Brussels. This literal act of animation is further animated when Suzanne dubs the silent video—the kind of animating work she has chosen as her profession. One wonders if Suzanne used to be immersed in the world of (marionette) animation too when she was little. Did it motivate her to become a voice performer who aurally animates the puppets onstage? Could this past affinity with animation be one of those sediments of memory stirred up after viewing *Origins*?

So much about Suzanne's childhood connection with animism remains speculative, though the film upholds its existence by interposing the marionette as an essential mediating object. When Suzanne communicates with Ah Zhong, a Taiwanese palmar drama master, through Song's French-Mandarin interpretation on a train to Paris, she gives him a timeworn postcard as a token of her appreciation of his work. Itself a memory-object, the postcard hints at a parallelism between Suzanne and Song: it was when the former was likewise an au pair in London during her adolescence that she found this postcard, which she has kept all these years—one cannot help but wonder, again, whether Suzanne once facilitated the neglect of another child in London as well. Here, the motifs of puppet and puppeteer invite an intuitive reading of intertextuality that points to Hou's incorporation of some familiar elements from his *The Puppetmaster* (1993). Thinking through their meanings to Suzanne and their associations with animation, though, the reversal of this vector might be more apposite: *Flight of the Red Balloon* retroactively endows the marionette's animist significance in *The Puppetmaster*. The significance of the puppet thus qualitatively changes from a professional tool used by the autobiographical subject of *The Puppetmaster* to one of the thematized devices of the animist imagination. What the puppet—controlled either by hand or rod—once meant to Suzanne reverberates with what the balloon now means to Simon. Both function as key animist objects associated with their childhood, which Song's filmmaking directly constructs or indirectly summons. (As explored in chapter 3, Hou further exhausts the animist potential of the marionette in his 2015 *The Assassin*.)

These two films within a film belong to a larger project of *Flight of the Red Balloon*, devoted to the creation and collection of images within images—as if the more it does the more fleeting memories it preserves. Ian Jones notices the film's "frequent recourse to images shot through windows, often with a myriad of layers of reflections blocking any clear view," which, by his calculation, "constitute 24 percent of all the shots in the film, translating to 14 percent of the film's total running time."[23] He isolates these shots to demonstrate that the film has staged "a muddied dialectic of visual penetrability and impenetrability." But if we think *superficially* about the function of these filtered shots as the recording of reflections in general, the 24 percent of the total shots amount but to some fragments of the film's ubiquitous registration of the world's imprints upon a wide range of reflective surfaces. The red balloon; the yellow plastic seats in the subway

23 Jones, "*Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007, France)."

Fig. 1.3. The reflection of a memory-image in *Flight of the Red Balloon* (2007). Courtesy of Les Films du Lendemain.

station; the windows of the subway train; the windows of the 76 bus; the red glass walls that flank the entrance of the puppet theater; car windows; windows of various buildings and rooms; the windows of the train on which Suzanne and Ah Zhong chat thorough Song's translation; the screen of a jukebox that appears in a flashback of Simon and Louise's wandering; the glass protection of Félix Vallotton's oil painting *Le ballon*—the list goes on. Boundaries between bodies and matter, between the animate and the inanimate, dissolve in these moments when floating images occupy the city. As faces and bodies attach themselves to material surfaces, a symbolic unity of the world transpires, as if the film consciously evokes the child's phenomenology at the scale of an entire city. Reflections of the present conjure both an idealized past and an anticipated but never-realized continuation of this past—the could-have-been that undergirds the film's nostalgic romanticism. The representative instant of such a memory-image appears on a sunny day, when Simon draws with the aid of a camera lucida, the surface of which reflects a shadowy Louise, backlit by the sunshine cast in from a living room window (figure 1.3). He has just finished a drawing and is about to start a new one. But even with the aid of the optical device, Simon's playful endeavor to materialize his sister's here-and-now only produces a hazy silhouette that foreshadows their now-estranged relationship. The melancholic undertone of his attempt to hold onto as many images as possible—however distorted the results might be—is further amplified considering that the scene exists as part of Suzanne's remembrance of her once-holistic family.

Such a layered mummy complex, to borrow a renowned description from Bazin's ontological quest for the image, foregrounds the instability of temporality. That said, the practice of embalming the past in its totality is not as imperative as the act of staging a séance in the film. For images of the past regard the present from the other side; in between them stands an unbridgeable abyss. Like benevolent specters, they do not force themselves upon the characters. Memories, fantasies, and the unfulfilled promises of childhood constitute the elusive realms where they silently stay. Ghostly, indeed, is the impression that a visiting school kid holds of the two small figures who stand on the grass in the tenebrous background of *Le ballon*, Vallotton's 1899 oil and gouache painting hosted in the Musée d'Orsay, in the film's penultimate sequence. The two figures' relationship with a boy who runs in pursuit of the titular entity in the bright, sandy foreground of the painting appears ambiguous. A felt connection bonds the two groups of figures on the canvas, but the pictorial boundaries marked by the shadow of the tree and the grounds upon which they respectively stand—vibrant versus barren—demarcate, at the level of composition, an unmistakable distinction. Another school kid suggests that the two figures might as well be the boy's "parents," which seems equally plausible if the neglect allowed by such nearby but withdrawn parenting is truly indispensable to the formation of the boy's animist interactions with the balloon.

On the role of the two figures in *Le ballon*, the description that Hou himself would offer is perhaps neither ghost nor parent but "old soul," a term he has used to portray the titular object of his film in relation to that of Lamorisse's. "Visiting the present from fifty years ago," Hou explicates, "[the old soul] returns to be in touch with the children today, checking what they are like now. It understands that things have changed in the past fifty years, so it only observes from afar."[24] The characterization aptly depicts the balloon's presence when it does not serve as a carefully controlled prop in the animist world within Song's video. Throughout the film, the red balloon appears five times in total: twice in Song's video and thrice as an autonomous animate being, given that the flexible and far-reaching trajectory of its flight inarguably escapes the manipulation of any single technician that Song could afford to hire. In the latter three instances, the balloon traverses the Parisian cityscape to sneak about outside Suzanne's apartment. It lingers unobtrusively outside the windows and peeks in to check on Simon, shown either filming Song as she makes pancakes on the dining table or napping in his room. Contra Simon's awareness of and

24 Bai, *Zhuhai shiguang—Hou Hsiaohsien de guangying jiyi*, 267.

intimacy with the balloon in Song's video, here he does not notice it at all. Particularly in the sequence when Simon films Song making pancakes, he remains oblivious to the balloon right behind her, even if an intriguing shot seems to align with his point of view and clearly registers its existence for a good fourteen seconds.

So far, my reading of *Flight of the Red Balloon* has established two kinds of animism and their associated forms within the film: a phantom animism from the past that hides in plain sight and a staged animism, the sole site where enchantment transpires (such as the video displayed on Song's laptop screen). But just as one might think that the film presents a stable paradigm of representation that distinguishes them, the final sequence advances another possibility. The turning point takes place when Simon, sitting among fellow school kids in front of *Le ballon*, diverts his attention away from the ongoing discussion of the oil painting on the wall to the glass skylights of the gallery, above which the red balloon swimmingly glides. As the other kids offer impressive visual analyses of the painting's high-angle perspective and its potential reference to Lamorisse's film, Simon notices something else and raises his head. The next shot cuts to his point of view, looking through the skylight at the hovering balloon. This editing pattern, cutting between Simon and his point of view, repeats itself in the next three shots until the balloon relocates to the side of the building and glances in from another window. A second set of exchanged gazes follows as the film cuts back twice between the balloon and Simon, who has now adjusted his seated posture for a clearer view. In the last three shots of the film, the red balloon takes off, high into what Chu would have described as "a limitless sky" above a low panorama of the Parisian skyline. It is in these shots that crosscut between Simon and the balloon—amounting to only 106 seconds in this film of 115 minutes—that the former sees and experiences some sort of interaction with the latter for the first time outside of Song's video. Two unmistakable POV shots further testify to the authenticity of Simon's animist vision, one which he has mysteriously acquired after playing the role of Pascal in Song's video-homage.

Like *Origins*, which triggers Suzanne's recollection of a childhood replete with marionette animation, the making of Song's new film slowly but steadily turns Simon into an agent of animism. Song's arrival into Suzanne's family in the film parallels Hou's visit to Paris in reality: with their cameras, they recuperate the possibility of animist childhood in an environment from which animism has long been extracted—at least according to the setups of their respective artistic visions. Cultural outsiders to metropolitan Paris as they might be, they have developed a means of recuperation derived from

some of the cultural traditions of their temporary residence. Instead of opening this site of Western modernity par excellence up to a transhistorical construct imported from an exotic elsewhere (something that claims the cultural specificity of the East as implied in Kore-eda's reading of the ideological foundation of Hou's long shot/long take), the film thinks about animism in relation to what the city itself has to offer: the mediation of Lamorisse's film, Vallotton's painting, and the memory of the rod puppet that the film evokes by bringing in the comparable Taiwanese hand puppet. *Flight of the Red Balloon* therefore demonstrates how the animist imagination is by no means an outré fantasy of the other horizontally implanted in the soil of Paris as a solution to the detrimental anthropocentrism or urbanity; rather, it explores the possibility of Western culture—itself always already hybrid, as every culture invariably is—as a source of the animist worldview. The final flight of the balloon, in fact, provides a way out of Kore-eda's characterization of contemporary East Asian film aesthetics based on certain conceptual dichotomies associated with rigid locality. The largely optimistic tone of the final sequence derives at once from its promise of transcendence, embodied by the balloon's ascension into the heaven, and from a definitive sense of clarity and confidence that the animist imagination is not a fixed, irrevocable aesthetic-cum-geopolitical stance.

Simon's awakening concludes the old soul-balloon's spontaneous observation. However, an unstated but felt undercurrent beneath the levity of the balloon's self-release still distinguishes the ending of Hou's film from the triumphant final sequence of Lamorisse's, in which all the balloons across Paris gather for the sole purpose of elevating Pascal. One recalls McCormack's description that all releases of balloons are haunted by a lingering void: at some point somewhere the vaporous hope to which contained helium gives spherical form will disperse as the balloons deflate and fall back under gravity's control—not to mention their inevitable turn into plastic waste that pollutes the environment and threatens numerous lives. The coexistence of these contradictions at the material level conceivably informs the symbolic significance of the balloon release as a ritual, performed "in events of memorialization for all people of all ages. … [with] an especially strong affinity between balloon release and the death of children."[25] Given this association with death, the red balloon's ascension into its evanescent disappearance gives off an agreeable melancholy, a seeming contradiction characteristic of the pneumatic entity as a cinematic trope. Hou's film, on this note, pays tribute not only to Ozu Yasujiro's *Early Summer* (1951), in which a

25 McCormack, *Atmospheric Things*, 86–88.

character, upon sighting a floating balloon, comments that "A child must be crying somewhere," but also to another exchange in transnational cinema: the iconic final image of Yamanaka Sadao's *Humanity and Paper Balloons* (1937), in which a thin paper balloon delivers the weightiest message of death, itself a nod to a similar moment in Jacques Feyder's *Pension Mimosas* (1935).

Insofar as the affective sphere around the orb carries just as much loss and gloom as hope and delight, the ending of *Flight of the Red Balloon* does not promise a utopia. Indeed, doesn't all the care that the film has invested into fostering a cozy environment for animism to flourish already point to an underlying alleviation of a profound anxiety that animism likewise generates: the fear that an animated entity could stop being animate; the vulnerability of life that manifests itself when vitality unexpectedly dissipates? The sorrowful lyrics of Camille Dalmais's rhythmically peppy chanson, "Chin Chin," which accompanies the balloon's buoyant flight from the museum into the distant sky, amplifies such hermeneutic ambivalence that the film's conclusive note strikes. "In the blue of the evening," as the narrator mellifluously chants, she overwhelms herself with alcohol. Be it Pomerol or Pommard; La Veuve Panee or Saint-Amour, in momentary dizziness Dalmais coos: "flowers I've forgotten" and a former life "on the banks of the Loire where I lost hope." With no explanation of the cause of her loss, nightly she indulges herself in remembrance of sweet things past—"hot milk, cinnamon, clear water"—and drinks to her memory of the red balloon by the dim light at the bar, against an increasingly weighty sky.

Releasing the Air

The same unbearable lightness as Hou's airborne animism guides Kore-eda's *Air Doll*, where Lamorisse's red balloon drops by for a quick visit. In Cinema Circus, the DVD rental store where the protagonist Nozomi (Bae Doona) works, a poster of *The Red Balloon* hangs behind the counter. Placed adjacent to posters of other cinematic classics, such as *The 400 Blows*, *Girl Crazy*, *King Kong*, and *Singing in the Rain*, the lightly colored image shows a close-up of Pascal and the red balloon, with the former casting a sidelong glance at the store. Originally an inflatable sex doll owned by discontented waiter Hideo (Itao Itsuji), Nozomi has mysteriously come to life. She applies for a job at the video store because she has been smitten at first sight with store clerk Junichi (Iura Arata) on her first day alive. Unlike the old soul who maintains a respectful distance from the world throughout *Flight of the Red Balloon*, Lamorisse's balloon stays grounded in *Air Doll*. Not only

is it inches away from the Nozomi at the store, the hovering spirit, in fact, has reincarnated into the thick of the everyday by dwelling in or, more accurately, "possessing" a much larger plastic container that is Nozomi's body. Here, Diane Wei Lewis identifies the influence of Wim Wenders's *Wings of Desire* (1987): an angel's transformation into a human being and subsequent love affair with a trapeze artist, to which the name of the DVD rental store, Cinema Circus, likely refers.[26]

Reaffirming the affinity between childhood and animism, in the morning of Nozomi's enigmatic animation, she approaches the world with childlike curiosity. Still an unclothed plastic doll in appearance at this point, she walks from Hideo's bed to the window and exposes herself to the environment outside. Refreshing air and gentle sunlight bathe her; morning dew on the metal bar of the window drips and moistens her right hand. The elemental contact with air, light, and water finalizes her transformation. As the camera pans back from the window to her naked body following the retraction of her hand, in the precise location of the plastic doll now stands Bae, the South Korean actress, who utters, in an accented and thereby otherworldly Japanese pronunciation, "beau-ti-ful" in reaction both to the sight of the dew and the sensation it has left on her palm.

Nozomi cannot wait to explore the world, in which everything, including the Japanese language, seems novel. Recalling Wojcik's proposal that neglected children produce an alternative urban geography during their unguided adventures, Nozomi's first solo egress displays her playful interactions with the residents and objects in the neighborhood. The first shot of this sequence already sees her deviation from standard social codes when she walks out of Hideo's apartment in an erotic French maid costume that she selects from the closet—other peculiar clothing options she tries on include a men's polo shirt, a high school girl's sailor uniform, and an equally eroticized mermaid costume that hints at another intertext about becoming-human, Disney's 1989 *The Little Mermaid*. With a stiff mid-torso that barely swaggers, Nozomi proceeds like an unoiled robot. Her uncooperative body and clumsy movements are contrasted with those of a little girl, Moe, who dashes from the center of the background to the fore. Moe's father chases her to hand her a bag she has forgotten to bring; upon receiving the bag, Moe runs off from screen right while saying, "I'm off!" Five seconds later, Nozomi parrots the exact term with a tinge of hesitancy in her elocution, as if she is unsure of the precise usage of what she has just picked up. In reaction to her odd and abrupt behavior, the father who has just exited the frame

26 Lewis, "From Manga to Film: Gender, Precarity and the Textual Transformation of *Air Doll*," 111.

walks a few steps back into our view and appears baffled. He awkwardly nods out of politeness, nevertheless, before hastily scuttling off. This sense of confusion is promptly reflected on the stylistic front when the camera jumps the 180-degree line to show his hurried departure in the next shot.

When Nozomi walks down the sidewalk and squats to observe a pile of street-side trash, she acquires her first logic of categorization from a waste collector who comes to divide the pile into burnable and non-burnable subsets. Nozomi also receives a lesson in the etiquette of interpersonal interaction as she follows an elderly, kimono-clad woman who tours the neighborhood to salute several people. As Nozomi tails the woman, she similarly playacts by imitating her movement and gesture; consequently, of course, she attracts more baffled glances. The juxtaposition between the woman and Nozomi's respectively formal and frisky attires, as well as their mirroring behaviors, produce a comical effect until the woman drops by the police station to gossip with an officer about a recent murder case. Initially, Nozomi squats outside of the entrance to observe some potted plants on the ground. Intrigued by the details of the brutal murder motivated by a hindered love affair, she stands up and concentrates on the officer's narration. The camera gradually pans up and tracks in to capture her reaction to the novel concept of death. Although her expressionless face does not grant us a legible interiority, the slowness of the track-in and the extra beat that the camera takes on her externalize a subtle change in her inner state.

While Nozomi's first outing is a lighthearted encounter with the world, during which she familiarizes herself with societal norms through play, the journey has been shadowed by ominous signs. The logic of trash categorization and the murder case portend her later placement of the corpse of Junichi, whom she inadvertently kills, in a trash bag for pickup by the street among other burnable wastes. Her mimetic approach to learning is also put into question when, after walking away from the police station, she follows a group of little girls who hold one another's hands and sing on their way to school. The telling lyrics—"Don't copy me, Mr. Echo, Mr. Copycat"—is physically enacted as the girl in the rear refuses to grasp Nozomi's hand due to its coldness. Such a denial of interaction between the childlike Nozomi—herself a newborn, literally—and the child immediately recurs in the next two shots. The first shot captures, in a medium scale, Nozomi's carefree play in a sandbox in the park alongside several children. One by one, however, all the children are summoned back by their mothers. When Nozomi comes to realize her isolation within the square borders of the sandbox in the next shot, she stands as the sole figure in the foreground of this long shot, with everyone else walking into the back. Nozomi's sartorial

and behavioral eccentricity likely motivates the unexplained mass exodus; we retrospectively confirm this in a later sequence wherein Nozomi's attempt to play with an infant in a stroller is directly denied by its mother nearby.

Throughout Nozomi's first outing, then, the competing forces of integration and exclusion point to the film's attempt to map animism's potential trajectories in an urban environment. It serves as an audiovisual experiment that places, borrowing Ian Bogost's term, an "alien phenomenology" into an environment defined by its lack of the animist worldview.[27] Nozomi's status as a childlike creature from the outside becomes even clearer when we compare the film with the fourth installment of Gouda Yoshiie's manga *Kuki Ningyo* (the official translation being "The Pneumatic Figure of a Girl"), titled "Kuki ningyo" (Air doll), from which the film is adapted.[28] The first panel of the comic starts in medias res with a page-sized depiction of the homecoming of an ordinarily attired air doll named Jun. Rather than departing for adventures as Nozomi does at the beginning of the film, Jun returns to the familiar domesticity of her apartment and routinely inflates herself with an air pump. Three thought bubbles from the fourth to the sixth panel indicate her interior monologue: "Every day I inflate myself. Since the air would always gradually leak out, every day I inflate myself."[29] The same line that bookends the manga's opening statement firmly situates Jun in the cyclicality of the everyday, literally deflating. Her normal outfit, her daily routine, and her mastery over the know-how of self-sustainability for the troubling purpose of "fulfilling [her male master's] sexual desire" characterize Jun as the exact opposite of the childlike Nozomi.[30] Not just an old soul like the red balloon in Hou's film but a decidedly jaded one, Jun has accepted her given role in a sexually abusive and emotionally alienating society. Unlike Nozomi who faces an uncertain future in the beginning of *Air Doll*, for Jun futurity has been foreclosed from the outset. Without Nozomi's aesthetic appreciation of natural elements, her attentiveness to streetside wastes, or her attempt to befriend children, Jun is not associated with any key concerns of the animist imagination. Even though Jun is a mysteriously animated object as well, her narrative function is primarily a gendered critique of social alienation. On this note, "Kuki ningyo" hardly counts as an animist imagination, insofar as Jun does not occupy the mediating position of the shamanic figure in terms of human-nonhuman relations

27 Bogost, *Alien Phenomenology, or What It's Like to Be a Thing*.
28 Gouda, *Gōda tetsugakudō*, 47–66.
29 Gouda, *Gōda tetsugakudō*, 48–49.
30 Gouda, *Gōda tetsugakudō*, 49.

but, allegorically, women's oppressed position in a heteronormative society. In Lewis's words, "the air doll represents the plight of a society in which men are compelled to contain or dispose of their emotions, resulting in forms of emotional damage and blockage."[31] The manga downplays Jun's unique nature as an animated being most significantly in an epiphanic moment when, after surviving an accident at her workplace, she notices at least fifteen women around her on the street who are crying, suffering, or depressed. She identifies with them and shares, as well, the sources of all their negative emotions, which the manga implies to be men.

If, unlike Jun, Nozomi is structurally not so much a woman as a shaman in the beginning of the film, what might her narrative function be? Like Song's arrival, which somehow brings back the animist potentiality in Suzanne and Simon, Nozomi's unexplained advent carries, too, a pedagogy as she endeavors to make several people's lives meaningful. This is not an easy task, as virtually all other major and minor characters are lonely or self-alienating social misfits who have, in one way or another, failed to accomplish the heteronormative ideal of establishing a conventional nuclear family: Hideo names all his air dolls "Nozomi" after his ex-girlfriend; Junichi first sees Nozomi as a substitute for his former partner and later as a tool to fulfill his perverse desires; Moe turns out to be a child of divorce; the elderly woman obsessed with criminal activities develops a hallucination that she is responsible for one of the cases she learns about on late-night TV. Other such characters include Nozomi's middle-aged supervisor at work who, through blackmail, forces her to have sex with him in the supply room; an office concierge who feels diffident about her age and appearance, especially around a younger and more popular colleague; an unkempt and reclusive hoarder who swamps her tiny room with waste and feeds solely on instant noodles, alcohol, and apples; a young man who frequents Cinema Circus to take upskirt photos of Nozomi; and a retired old man who always sits alone on a park bench after the death of his dogs. In the old man's words: "These days, everybody is [empty], especially, everyone living in this kind of city."

Following her unique animist logic, Nozomi takes what the old man means by emptiness literally as a physical rather than emotional state: those who feel empty are, just like her, animated air dolls in essence. As Michelle Cho argues, Nozomi is human "only in failed identification, because Nozomi's intersubjective relations with others, including her projection onto others of her desire to identify, capture her in the reciprocal bind of (mis)

31 Lewis, "From Manga to Film," 100–01.

recognition."[32] Such a categorical confusion between the human and the nonhuman—are people air dolls or are things animate?—informs Nozomi's attempt to foster intersubjective bonds and build an alternative community with others. If Nozomi has previously established her "human" identity through imitation, from this point onwards her act of imitation acquires a different significance: a secret code she has devised that not only ensures a sense of solidarity among those whom she mistakes as her fellows but also fosters collective prosperity by satisfying their physical and emotional needs. In the sequence of Nozomi and Junichi's dinner date, Nozomi sees Moe, who sits nearby, discreetly toss a carrot onto the floor from her plate and pretend that she has eaten it in front of her father. Misrecognizing Moe as another animated doll who does not need to eat to survive, Nozomi repeats the sham with exaggerated movements. The little girl catches Nozomi's signal and the two of them exchange winks that confirm a mimetic connection, though what they respectively take as the nature of the mimesis obviously differs. In another sequence, Nozomi attempts to alleviate the concierge's social anxiety about her appearance. The solution she comes up with is a whitening foundation for covering the wrinkles on the concierge's face, in the same way that Nozomi has herself used it to cover the seams that hold together the surface of her plastic body. This gift, needless to say, is considered confusing and pointless, if not slightly insulting.

But if these acts of misrecognition and misidentification amount to innocuous slip-ups, the next instance of imitation takes the tone of the entire film on a hairpin turn: Nozomi's unintentional manslaughter of Junichi, caused by a well-meaning act of reciprocation when Nozomi attempts to "deflate" and "inflate" Junichi following what he has performed on her again and again. The incident begins when, earlier in Cinema Circus, a sharp edge of a bookshelf pricks through Nozomi and triggers her rapid deflation. Junichi comes to the rescue by sealing the cut with tape and performing a mouth-to-belly-button resuscitation through her air hole. This fort/da game of vitality somehow satisfies Junichi's sadist fantasy and god-playing desire. Having once told Nozomi that he, too, feels empty inside, Junichi asks Nozomi to do something for him that no one else can: let him release and refill her air. To please Junichi and reciprocate the absolute singularity with which he has endowed her through this act, Nozomi cuts him open with a pair of scissors while he is asleep. As Nozomi innocently asks Junichi, "Where is your plug?" and blows air into his mouth when she cannot locate it, Junichi painfully bleeds to death.

32 Michelle Cho, "A Disenchanted Fantastic: The Pathos of Objects in Hirokazu Kore-eda's *Air Doll*," 236.

In viewing *Air Doll* as a work of animist imagination, I read this tragic development of Nozomi and Junichi's relationship as part of the film's broader quest for the degree of animism that an alienating urban environment can sustain. When cross-referenced with symptomatic interpretations that see *Air Doll* as a reflection of gender dynamics or the broader self-other relationship in contemporary Japanese society, this reading generates a dialogue between ecocritical and feminist film criticism. From a gender studies perspective, Lewis has convincingly criticized this plot development as only tragic due to the film's "the failure to think beyond the reproductive family." Unlike the original manga, which "questions the rigid gender norms that underwrote [Japan's] high-economic growth," the emphasis in *Air Doll* on Nozomi's sentimental failure to find love typifies, instead, "a melancholic attachment to the heteronormative social organization that helped drive Japan's 'economic miracle.'"[33] Indeed, the film upholds heteronormative, conservative ideologies in its pursuit of collective, posthumanist flourishing. Here, though, the tension between the means and ends tests the extent to which the risks of an animist transformation of the world should overshadow its necessity. Insofar as Nozomi's characterization imbricates utopian and dystopian dimensions, one cannot overlook the intersectional complexity that undergirds the political implications of each shamanic figure—ones that may not be progressive on all fronts and thus require critical discernment. Suffice it to say that such politics sometimes indicate that a film's overall aspiration toward an animist world, in relation to identity politics, can be contradictory, conflictual, or at best unclear. However, there are also instances where resistance to normative narratives forms the very foundation of this aspiration. To this crucial aspect of the shamanic figure the book will repeatedly return, especially in chapter 3 and 5, where the figure's animist power is linked to discourses of disability and disease.

From an ecocritical perspective that recognizes the role of animism in the film's pursuit of happiness and futurity, Nozomi's given time in Tokyo, like a child's learning experience, constitutes a series of trial and error on the feasibility of animism in the contemporary condition. Forging a romantic relationship—heteronormative as it might be—constitutes a way through which she gauges animism's instrumental value in generating joy and perhaps even meaning. Unfortunately, Nozomi's exploration ends on an appalling note, but it effectively prompts a consideration as to whether the outcome alone reduces her attempt to a worthless waste. The air doll's journey thus reverberates with what McCormack identifies as the

33 Lewis, "From Manga to Film," 121.

balloon's appeal, which lies in its ontological vagueness as an entity always in the process of formation towards an impossible completion, hence itself exceeding "entity" as a category altogether. While the balloon encloses, gives shape, and makes tangible the atmosphere on both meteorological and affective fronts, the resultant fantasy of immediacy remains immersed within the atmosphere whose totality cannot be contained or fathomed by something in the depths of its plentitude. As such, the figure of the balloon befittingly serves, across a wide range of artistic creations, as a heuristic for "modulating and distributing geographies and experiences of grief, sadness, and terror" with regards to our ethico-political inquiry of "how to live in relation to the elemental energies of air and atmosphere, and in ways that balance the twin requirements of envelopment and exposure as necessary conditions for the flourishing of forms of life."[34] As Nozomi, a thoroughly anthropomorphized balloon, similarly tests out the conditions under which animate beings can flourish, does Junichi's death terminate the possibility of animism in the chronotope of *Air Doll*? Given that the cycle of animation, de-animation, and re-animation takes place exclusively in the nonhuman realm, is there any other way through which the human can still experience animism? Nozomi's reactions after the manslaughter gives us more to think with.

After depositing Junichi's bagged body in the burnable waste pile, Nozomi voluntarily sits in the unburnable one and accepts her return to the atmosphere as the airy spirit enclosed within her body gradually leaks out. Moe happens to walk by and stops at the sight of Nozomi's gleaming ring, which she removes from her finger in exchange for a talking doll in the form of a little girl. Pushed by more bags of trash lobbed in from screen right, Nozomi falls leftwards to the ground. A sharp hiss indicates that the covering tape on her wrist wound now completely peels; the fall also triggers a prerecorded audio of "mommy" from the talking doll that plays on a loop. This acoustic ensemble, comprising a sound of fading vitality and an uncanny call for familial union, reaffirms the weight of childhood in the film's animist imagination: a future without children as one wherein animism is severely hindered. With Moe's discarding of the mother-seeking doll in exchange for a shiny commodity, and with the suicide of the childlike air doll, the attempted resistance of Kore-eda's film against this fatalistic trend—much more corporeal and sexualized than the taciturn route taken by *Flight of the Red Balloon* in its brief reference to *Children of Men*—ends in the form of self-destruction. The only instance of what can remotely be

34 McCormack, *Atmospheric Things*, 9, 12.

considered a success story of heterosexual coupling comes at the end of the film when the old man and the elderly woman are shown, in the middle ground of a nine-second extreme long shot, chatting with each other. But even if any romance beyond friendship and companionship is to transpire between the two minor characters, biological fecundity is probably not something we would associate with the relationship between two seniors.

Such pessimism in *Air Doll* beckons if we, again, compare its ending with that of the original manga. In the concluding four panels of the latter, Jun, who has not killed anyone, likewise ends up as a waste because her owner has replaced her with a new model. But even as Jun is physically confined in a trash bag by the street, she looks up at the clear sky through her transparent plastic prison and believes, confidently, that her capacity to feel the beauty of the blue sky must indicate her "possession of a heart"—a conviction stated twice in the last two panels.[35] In contrast, the abject final state of Nozomi is not the result of force majeure but her voluntary submission to the emptiness of life. Rather than staying firmly on the ground as Jun does despite the condition under which she falls, Nozomi's spirit withdraws to the ethereal, leaving an empty vessel behind. Kore-eda himself has noticed this change of tone as the story relocates from page to screen. Inspired by the manga's hopefulness, his original vision for the film was a positive account of "void as potentiality": a relational fulfillment that occurs when air travels from the other to the self. But as he delved into the adaptation, especially with the addition of Nozomi's manslaughter, the positivity turns "dilute" and the film becomes much more ambivalent than initially conceived.[36]

As Nozomi's spirit disperses back to the air, it carries numerous dandelion seeds, each visiting a minor character, including Moe and her father, the police officer, the old man, the elderly woman, Nozomi's supervisor, the upskirt snapper (who now conveniently works in Cinema Circus), and Hideo, lying in bed with his new plastic playmate. Her last attempt to breathe a refreshing air into someone's life proves largely futile, as most of them do not notice or simply ignore the dandelion seed, except for the old man and elderly woman whom we see later chatting on his usual bench. A sense of hope nevertheless emerges as the film ends in the hoarder's shadowy and claustrophobic room. Even though she has no direct exposure to the airy spirit, she promptly wakes up from her sleep on the floor and walks to the window. After pulling back the curtain and opening the window, she exposes herself to the bright day. Paralleling Nozomi's encounter with the

35 Gouda, *Gōda tetsugakudō*, 66.

36 Kore-eda, *Eiga o torinagara kangaeta koto*, 231.

elemental milieu in the first morning of her awakening, the penultimate shot of the film sees the hoarder utter "beautiful," with a tinge of a smile on her face. The final shot cuts to her high-angle POV in which Nozomi lies close to the center of the frame, with her back against a mound of white trash bags. Variously colored glass bottles and apples that Nozomi has collected symmetrically surround her, marking the proper boundary of this burial site she has prepared for herself. Perhaps this is the only viable form that animism can take up in, recalling the old man's words, "this kind of city": a cluster of unalterably dead or decaying matter aestheticized from afar into a still image. If the final ascension of the titular object in *Flight of the Red Balloon* generates an overall sense of optimistic transcendence, hope in *Air Doll* remains down below, soon to be buried underground where what remains of Nozomi rests among other unburnable waste. What lies with Nozomi is the dialectical moment of the contemporary fable of animation: excessive vitality yields a corpse. The fulfilment of a child's wish that a balloon would come to life, ultimately, proves to be a nightmare for the animated balloon itself.

After the Balloon Departs

The endings of the two films, in distinct ways, respond to the ideological implication of the bus-carried cameo of *Children of Men* in *Flight of the Red Balloon*. But whether it is the more elusive awakening of Simon that marks the conclusion of the balloon's spontaneous observation, or the literal awakening of the hoarder that Nozomi manages to achieve in the last moment of her brief life, both films articulate, after all, a somewhat hopeful future of re-enchantment through creating a playful sphere of animist childhood. On this front, they respond to a specific critique of human futurity, negatively welded with what Lee Edelman terms "reproductive futurism": the process by which a political discourse of heteronormativity shields its prevailing hegemony through the denial of potential forms of queer resistances in the name of the child, the protection of whom results in a shared sense of futurity defined by the very discourse itself.[37]

Consider how Edelman criticizes the upfront equation of the flourishing of the child with the collective prosperity of mankind in none other than P. D. James's novel *The Children of Men*, from which Cuarón's film was adapted:

37 Edelman, *No Future*, 2–3.

> Given that the author of *The Children of Men*, like the parents of mankind's children, succumbs so completely to the narcissism—all-pervasive, self-congratulatory, and strategically misrecognized—that animates pronatalism, why should we be the least bit surprised when her narrator, facing his futureless future, laments, with what we must call a straight face, that "sex totally divorced from procreation has become almost meaninglessly acrobatic?" Which is, of course, to say no more than that sexual practice will continue to allegorize the vicissitudes of meaning so long as the specifically heterosexual alibi of reproductive necessity obscures the drive beyond meaning driving the machinery of sexual meaningfulness: so long, that is, as the biological fact of heterosexual procreation bestows the imprimatur of meaning-production on heterogenital relations.[38]

Like James's novel, Hou's and Kore-eda's films caution against a childless future. This does not imply, however, that they necessarily subscribe to the ideological mandate condemned by Edelman. By locating and fostering a playground where the animist childhood can achieve its fullest expression in either Paris or Tokyo, they explore alternative practices of family and community formation that do not conform, at least in any successful way, to heteronormative social orders. It comes as no surprise that both films feature divorced couples, single-parent families, or perpetual singletons. In other words, the two films decouple childhood from reproductive futurism, insofar as the genesis of the animist childhood derives from something much more complex and inexplicable—be it the red balloon's unexplained visit or Nozomi's mysterious acquisition of vitality.

That said, an unstated but palpable undercurrent of melancholy behind the red balloon's levity and Nozomi's final self-release of air still qualitatively distinguishes the two films' endings from the triumphant final sequence of Lamorisse's film, where all the balloons across Paris elevate Pascal to an ecstatic height, above all the earthly mishmashes on the ground. If, like the air, the source of animism willfully defies any concrete origin, such as a particular location or entity, the animist childhood it fashions and the futurity this childhood envisions are nothing but a chance encounter, which one might aspire to but cannot tangibly control. Pushed to an extreme, this dialectical view of the animist balloon turns the object itself into an emblematic reminder that, ultimately, animism exists in a metaphysical realm separate from the everyday, as other recent films thematizing the tension between modernity and the animist worldview have also explored.

38 Edelman, *No Future*, 13.

One finds, for instance, how the titular object of Pema Tseden's *Balloon* (2019) refers to a condom that a few Tibetan children unknowingly blow and play as a toy—an object that not only prevents pregnancy but also forecloses any chance of the ancestor's soulful reincarnation in the form of a newborn, according to the traditional Tibetan Buddhist belief. As if unwilling to give in to this limitation of their animist imaginations, Hou and Kore-eda have elsewhere complicated their configurations of the animist childhood set in urban environments. The next chapter explores how the shamanic figure of the child plays out in their other films, which identify a curious site where a more tangible, comfortable form of animism transpires in the city: the railway network.

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2. The Child and the Train

Abstract: This chapter argues that *Café Lumière* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2003) and *I Wish* (Kore-eda Hirokazu, 2011) reinterpret the founding myth of cinema—where childlike spectators reacted in horror to a train that appeared to be rushing toward them—as an animist encounter to propose a desirable form of human-nonhuman relationality. Both films situate the absence of this relationality in Japanese urban environments characterized by dense railway networks, a high level of technological progress, the ethos of globalized capitalism, and individuals' blasé attitude towards social life due to the overdevelopment and overstimulation of the material world. Yet the two films envision how even such an alienating chronotope can be re-enchanted through the lens of a childlike figure's animist perception.

Keywords: childhood animism; early cinema and the "train effect"; railway modernity; urban reenchantment; the changeling

He indicated that the System would solve this little problem without any help from harebrained professors who thought the whole subway trains could jump off into the fourth dimension.

– A. J. Deutsch, "A Subway Named Möbius"

In the final sequence of Kore-eda Hirokazu's *Still Walking* (2008), traces of animism imbue a site of mortality with a light air of (after)life. After Ryota (Abe Hiroshi) and his family pay respects to his deceased parents and brother at a cemetery, slowly but steadily they walk down a hill. A yellow butterfly catches their attention, and Ryota mentions to his daughter that yellow butterflies are white butterflies who have changed their colors after surviving the winter. Ryota claims that he has forgotten from whom he learned this folk belief, but viewers would recall an earlier moment in the film, when Ryota's mother sees a yellow butterfly at his brother's grave. When she again spots a yellow butterfly in the family's house that evening,

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she is convinced that the creature is the same one seen earlier: an insectile reincarnation of her late son following her home from the cemetery. Could the yellow butterfly in the final sequence be the same butterfly? Or is it another butterfly that now carries the soul of one of Ryota's parents, both of whom passed away between the two cemetery scenes?

As if mirroring the upward movement of the soulful butterfly, the last shot of *Still Walking* does not follow the downhill walk of Ryota's family; rather, the camera vertically ascends and hovers in midair. Accompanied by a cheerful, non-diegetic musical score, the closing credits appear against the background of this extreme long aerial shot of the film's main setting, a tranquil seaside town. As in a conventional final shot, not much happens as the credits roll. About ninety seconds in, however, a train proceeds from the screen left to right along a straight line slightly above the frame's central horizontal axis. As if emphasizing the train's presence, the non-diegetic score pauses for a good ten seconds so that the diegetic sound of the train's progression clearly registers, even if part of it has by now driven offscreen. When the musical score resumes after the train completely departs from our vision, *Still Walking* concludes on a note of holistic continuity, collectively formed by the movement of the butterfly followed sequentially by those of the camera and the train. If the characters' folk belief advances the possibility of an animist conceptualization of the yellow butterfly as the latest corporeal vehicle of the undying *anima* in the cycle of reincarnation, the final shot hints that the train might likewise function as a soulful carrier.

Between the flying butterfly and the grounded train, a tension regarding the material foundation of animism transpires, further inspiring the focal shift of my study from the previous chapter to the present one. If the pneumatic entities in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Flight of the Red Balloon* and Kore-eda's *Air Doll*, discussed in chapter 1, structure both the potential and limitation of an animist childhood in an alienating urban environment, the train serves elsewhere in their work as another privileged device of animism in relation to the shamanic figure of the child. To explore this alternative thematization, this chapter revisits Hou's and Kore-eda's films. While the two filmmakers use the balloon to highlight a pessimism of varied degree by hypothesizing a cityscape where animism always hovers and therefore cannot comprehensively take root, Hou's *Café Lumière* (2003) and Kore-eda's *I Wish* (2011) refuse to declare the detachment of animism from the modern world *tout court*. Rather, both films issue a conviction that, despite the condition of urban disenchantment, animism sneaks back through the seams and camouflages itself all the same. If Hou's and Kore-eda's engagement

with the balloon opens up a way to consider their cinematic aesthetics from a non-anthropocentric perspective, the thematic cornerstone, on which *Café Lumière* and *I Wish* envision a new form of animist childhood, delves back into the legendary origin of film history: the emblematic construct of modernity that is the train.

As chapter 1 demonstrates, Hou's and Kore-eda's films establish a naturalized affinity between the animist worldview and the state of childhood. This characterization of children and childlike figures indicates their potential to recognize the personhood of nonhuman entities—a potential they learn to master through others' benevolent guidance and their own trial and error. Such potentiality frames them as what I call shamanic figures, namely, agents of identification, revival, and execution of animism in an otherwise disenchanted sphere. By placing these figures in decidedly modernized environments, Hou and Kore-eda experiment with the re-enchantment of the urban milieus otherwise haunted by a sense of dystopian stagnation, given that the absence of animist childhood within these sites indicates the foreclosure of any human-nonhuman connectivity. When mediated through the device of the balloon, this view of childhood as an animist sphere of subjectivity foregrounds the ambivalence of such re-enchantment, if not in fact acknowledging its infeasibility. *Café Lumière* and *I Wish* reapproach the cinematic childhood in relation to the animist worldview and urban modernity, but this time the train replaces the balloon as a both physical and heuristic device, sharpening an edge through which some human characters and their actions might be construed as childlike and, therefore, interpreted according to the logic of animism. *Café Lumière* unearths from the massive Tokyo electric train system, metonymic of the railway, a veiled but fizzy source of animism at the chthonic core of the city, tellingly in the form of an infant. Following several primary school children's heartfelt longing and vision, *I Wish* similarly presents a fantastical depiction of the Japanese Shinkansen (bullet train) railway networks that renders accessible a magical spatio-temporal coordinate, thus fulfilling an otherwise impossible wish.

In their shared celebration of the animist association between the child and the train, the two films creatively respond to one of the founding myths of cinema: the spectators who react and scatter in horror to the train rushing toward them during the first screening of the Lumière brothers' *The Arrival of a Train* at the Salon Indien of the Grand Café. As the familiar story goes, the technologically mediated vehicle comes alive and penetrates the boundary of what Maxim Gorky famously calls "the kingdom of shadows" into the realm of worldly vitality, threatening to take lives as it proceeds into the

physical space occupied by the audience.[1] It is, admittedly, a curious if not dubious move for me to revive this stereotypical image of the naïve—indeed, childlike—spectator, not least after studies of early cinema have thoroughly complicated this myth of the medium's attraction. That said, my proposal is that there is a lesson on the relation between animism and modernity to be gained by rethinking the childlike spectator today. According to Tom Gunning's revisionist account, the thrilling shock that the train-image generates is "not only a mode of modern experience, but a strategy of a modern aesthetics of astonishment … Attractions are a response to an experience of alienation, and for Kracauer (as for Benjamin) cinema's value lay in exposing a fundamental loss of coherence and authenticity."[2] The sheer capacity to be excited by the image lays bare the emptiness of modernity and recognizes the illusory nature of the illusion that it promises. But in the contemporary era, when even children have literally been exposed from birth to the operation of sundry image-producing apparatuses, one wonders how the experience of astonishment that cracks open the fissure of modern life could still transpire, if it is possible at all. The most sophisticated city child who nevertheless believes in the fantasy of a living train and marvels at its movement and vitality—such is the shamanic figure that both Hou's and Kore-eda's animist imaginations idealize and seek to transform the viewer into.

The Network of Animism

Before I explore the intriguing ways in which the train functions in *Café Lumière* and *I Wish*, let me first dwell on the centrality of the train as a visual motif for the conscious creation of a childlike viewer from the outset of film history. Classical examples of this image of the viewer include the titular characters of Robert W. Paul's *The Countryman and the Cinematograph* (1901) and Edwin S. Porter's *Uncle Josh at the Moving Picture Show* (1902), both of whom are panic-stricken by the sight of a train running toward the camera. If the founding myth of cinema, which finds its way into the diegesis of these films as a recurring theme, establishes a distinctive ontology of the train-image (much more animated, forceful, and menacing than other onscreen entities), it is because the train's advent in the real world has itself structured an alternative chronotope within ordinary spacetime. Describing

1 Gorky, "Review of Lumière Programme," 407.
2 Gunning, "An Aesthetic of Astonishment: Early Film and the (In)Credulous Spectator," 128.

the modern institution of the railroad as a "*protocinematic* phenomenon," Lynne Kirby posits that "the cinema finds an apt metaphor in the train, in its framed, moving image, its construction of a journey as an optical experience, the radical juxtaposition of different places, the 'annihilation of space and time'. As a machine of vision and an instrument for conquering space and time, the train is a mechanical double for the cinema and for the transport of the spectator into fiction, fantasy, and dream."[3] The precise nature of this "annihilation" or "conquering" of space and time begs clarification. On the one hand, it fantasizes the kind of instant communication frequently found in fictional accounts of the magical ability of not only the train but also the telephone and the telegraph around the turn of the twentieth century. On the other hand, as Wolfgang Schivelbusch suggests, the specific thing that has been annihilated by the railway network "is the traditional space-time continuum which was characterized by the old transport technology. Organically embedded in nature as it was, that technology, in its mimetic relationship with the space traversed, permitted the traveler to perceive that space as a living entity."[4]

In decoupling an anthropocentric perception of a space from the space itself, one of the most fascinating experiences that the train generates is the transformation of an existing landscape characterized in relation to the human's lived experience, embodied movement, and physical trajectory. Unlike such older modes of transportation as coach wagon and rowboat, which are conditioned by the geographical fabric of a given site (the ridge of a mountain or the flow of a river), the train appears to powerfully "strike its way through it."[5] In this process, the railway network generates not simply new routes to previously inaccessible or unexplored terrains but novel conceptualizations of spatiality. The train, in this view, is analogous to an otherworldly being which transubstantiates the landscape with its own cryptic logic and autonomy. It comes as no surprise, then, that the train has been bound up with the supernatural across global literary and audiovisual cultures. In Britain, Rebecca Harrison has argued that Victorian ghost literature and train films, including those featuring phantom rides, participate in an "aesthetic of the inexplicable."[6] In Japan, according to Michael Dylan Foster, numerous tales stage a clash between the transformative train and its folklore counterpart: the shapeshifting animal trickster

3 Kirby, *Parallel Tracks*, 2.
4 Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 36.
5 Schivelbusch, *The Railway Journey*, 37.
6 Harrison, *From Steam to Screen*, 27–47.

spirit *tanuki*, conventionally portrayed as "a beast of the borders, ecologically skirting the line between culture and nature … simultaneously of this world and the other world."[7] The train's otherworldly quality has also been staged in a host of works throughout film history: from the aptly titled *The Ghost Train* (Frederick S. Armitage, 1903) to its citation in Francis Ford Coppola's *Bram Stoker's Dracula* (1992); from the eerie play with light and shadow in *Interior New York Subway, 14th Street to 42nd Street* (G. W. Blitzer, 1905) to its uncanny return in OpenEndedGroup's *Ulysses in the Subway* (2016); and who can forget Ken Jacobs's idiosyncratic reanimation of early train footage in *Disorient Express* (1995) and *The Georgetown Loop* (1995)? Something about the train's transformative power makes it a befitting subject in each of these experimental plays with the camera's reconfiguration of profilmic space, the materiality of the image, and the viewer's perception of modern life. Commenting on Blitzer's film, Petra Löffler has thus situated it in what he terms "a spectrology of cinematic spaces," which fashions an abode of phantoms "normally invisible to observers—the dark underworld of the subway's urban infrastructure."[8]

Crucial to note here is that the train, in either real life or the screen world, does not stand on its own as a single vehicle. Each individual train evokes the presence of a widespread and intricate network comprising several stops, nodes, routes, vehicles, and devices of communication that configure their interconnection. One recalls another canonical train film, D. W. Griffith's *The Lonedale Operator* (1911), that stages the complexity of the modern world by showcasing the immense scale of its infrastructural basis beyond the titular locale.[9] If the train enacts the estrangement of a familiar site into an alternative topography of spacetime, it does so by organizing and managing a system—as topographical attempts invariably do—that structures a new relation between private and public spheres, connected at once by physical railways and invisible flows of capital and information (via telephone, telegraph, and other means of telecommunication). Insofar as the train's affinity with cinema is concerned, the seed of a single vehicle's astonishment in Lumière consistently germinates into part of a larger whole in the rapidly changing modern world. Along with the advent of such a system, new forms of social relationality as well as categories of experience and identity emerge, such as the countryman and uncle Josh respectively ridiculed in Paul's and

7 Foster, "Haunting Modernity: *Tanuki*, Trains, and Transformation in Japan," 4.

8 Löffler, "Ghosts of the City: A Spectrology of Cinematic Spaces," 9.

9 Gunning, "Systematizing the Electric Message: Narrative Form, Gender, and Modernity in *The Lonedale Operator*," 27.

Porter's films or, more positively, the titular agent of *The Lonedale Operator*, a modern woman whose agency, bravery, resourcefulness, and mastery over sundry technologies in her immediate surroundings the film celebrates.

While studies of the parallel track between the train and cinema revolve around early cinema and its diverse sociocultural contexts during the turn of the century, their emphasis on the human-nonhuman assemblage mediated by the train system has continued to play a vital role in contemporary media theories, not least those that build their foundation upon the theorists' own navigation of the Tokyo railway system—a curious though unsurprising choice given the city's famously dense and complex train network. It is on an express train to Narita International Airport that Thomas Lamarre conceptualizes the speedily moving passengers' relation with the images outside their windows as a lived paradigm of the dynamism between viewers and moving images in contemporary Japan, routinely described as an exemplary realm of "the postmodern." Drawing on Schivelbusch's account of how the velocity of the train allows modern travelers to develop new modes of perception, however, Lamarre suggests that "the postmodern world of information technologies and media mix does not feel like a break with the modern. The postmodern feels like an intensification of potentials incipient in the modern, with Japanese animations making an appearance where these different interfaces intersect and diverge again."[10] Following Lamarre in revisiting the ways in which the train system (still) guides both the material aspects and immaterial logics of the Japanese urban landscape, Michael Fisch thinks with the Tokyo commuter train network to discern the larger co-constitution of the human and the nonhuman across assorted technical ensembles that have prearranged and regulated contemporary life. Such a collective becoming, as afforded by the train network, "denotes the openness the ensemble maintains internally to external information and thus is what allows it to incorporate the changes and contingencies of its environment into its pattern of operation."[11] The heterotopia of the train network therefore produces by no means a "temporality of clock time" as listed on the train schedule—the railway time that has standardized the global management of time and labor through Western industrialization, scientification, and colonialism—but a "lived tempo of the city and train network," from the fissure between which emerges "a dynamic quality that leads technicians and system operators to call it 'a living thing.'"[12]

10 Lamarre, *The Anime Machine*, xvi.

11 Fisch, *An Anthropology of the Machine*, 14.

12 Fisch, *An Anthropology of the Machine*, 5.

Echoing the view of the (Japanese) railway network as an animate entity rather than an inert part of the mechanistic built environment, my reading of *Café Lumière* and *I Wish* advances that this emblem of modernity, itself, holds the dialectical possibility of change and re-enchantment. In respectively staging the train-image, the two films identify such a possibility and, in revisiting the mythical figure of the childlike spectator, propose distinctive methods by which their identification might be formally reconstructed through the act of filmmaking. To emphasize the train not as a single vehicle but a portal leading to a greater network of materiality, relationality, and even magic, the films thematize a deceptively simple but effective visual motif: the instant when two or more trains pass each other, namely, a transitory moment of a few seconds when multiple trains' linkage and subsequent disconnection manifest the presence of a railway nexus and pinpoint one of its exact coordinates of intersection. Both films mark this broader network as the key to the train's animist worlding that reconfigures an alienating modern environment and, in this process, recognizes the privileged subjectivities within as ones that are best characterized as childlike. An occulted chronotope exists beneath the train's infrastructural network; access to one of its nodes awaits registration by the shamanic figure of the child.

While my discussion focuses on the train as a general cinematic trope, I would be remiss not to mention a cultural context specific to contemporary Japanese society, in which the two films' re-enchantment of modern technology must be grounded. The shock of the train-image indicates not simply the general thrill caused by cinema's enduring attraction as implied in the medium's founding myth. It also recalls a painful genealogy of collective trauma in recent Japanese annuals. One of its unforgettable manifestations took place in the morning of March 20, 1995, when members of the doomsday cult Aum Shinrikyō (meaning "supreme truth") launched toxic sarin gas during rush hour on five Tokyo subway trains across three metro lines surrounding the country's political center. The coordinated attack led to mass casualties, including the deaths of thirteen people and injuries to more than 5,800. Abused as a vehicle of criminality, the subway system functioned as an infrastructure of urban horror, a testimony to human-nonhuman assemblage gone astray. If the train network reconfigures any time and space as it has historically performed in modern time, in this particular context a sphere of death and nihilism is its ultimate construct.

Throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, behind the economic promises and technological benefits that have been used to justify the construction of the train network across Japan (including subway, railway, and high-speed rail system) is the inevitable push-pull between

the public sectors, major corporates, and local communities around and along the network's intended paths.[13] As Alisa Freedman points out, the rapid transformation of Japanese society, materially manifested in the expansion of a mass transportation network, has inspired numerous cultural creations that critically depict or imagine the ensuing new forms of social relationality in the thick of the everyday, especially in the emerging Tokyo metropolis.[14] A renowned literary response to the extension of the national train network that turns its supposed reliability and systematicity on their head is Matsumoto Seichō's 1957 detective novel *Point and Lines*, which features the meticulous plotting and camouflage of a murderous act, made possible due to the criminal's familiarity with the national train timetable—a repurposing of the rationality of railway time for homicidal turmoil, which portends the carefully coordinated Tokyo subway attack.

Against the backdrop of this social debris, symptomatic not only of a sole incident of domestic terrorism but a broader condition of the overwhelming power of modernity and its destructive side, how might any sense of meaning and purpose still be gained, let alone enjoyed? Following the 1995 incident, such an existential inquiry has motivated Japanese mass culture to explore topics regarding the traumatic railway incidents, the context of their origin, and their aftermath. Kore-eda himself participated in this collective reflection most evidently in *Distance* (2001), which follows a group of people's remembrances of their dead family members who all joined a quasi-religious cult, tellingly named Ark of Truth, and committed mass homicide by poisoning Tokyo's water supply. While *I Wish* does not allude to the Aum Shinrikyō incident as explicitly as *Distance* does, we might read the film as a continuation of Kore-eda's agenda, insofar as it reopens the motif of the train network and approaches it in a positive, even redemptive, light—a task he was commissioned to perform for the Japan Railways Group, in celebration of the opening of the Kyushu Shinkansen, which connects the northern Fukuoka prefecture to the southern Kagoshima prefecture on Kyushu Island.

Given this collective rethinking of the significance of the train, perhaps it is not merely a perceived stylistic similarity between Hou and Ozu Yasujiro that earned the former the chance to direct *Café Lumière* for Shochiku Studio in commemoration of the centenary of the latter's birth. Even though Hou's connection to the cultural and infrastructural history of Japanese railway modernity is not thematically shown in his previous films, his marked

13 Abel, *Dream Super-Express*, 20–63.

14 Freedman, *Tokyo in Transit*, 1–26.

fascination with the train system is undeniable, as seen in almost all his works from as early as his pre-Taiwan New Cinema romantic comedies. As one of the most prominent audiovisual motifs across Hou's oeuvre, the train structures not only the spatial setting of his screen world but also its temporality, recurringly providing a favorable portrait of the railway vehicle and system regardless of the eras in which his films are set, as if the specific socio-historical coordinate of each film's diegesis exerts little impact on the train's centrality. This transportational anarchism that undergirds Hou's insistence on the train-image is perceptively highlighted by Shigehiko Hasumi, who notices that the train guides the composition of Hou's moving images and, on the narrative front, provide his characters with a shelter wherein their interrelations comfortably develop. Something profound and inspirational always emerges in Hou's films when the camera turns to the moving vehicles and the larger network they constitute, even in the most ordinary and familiar scenarios. In Hasumi's words, "the constantly passing trains seem to have been transformed into something other than a mode of transportation."[15] The following section interrogates what this "something" entails in Hou's animist rendition of post-1995 Tokyo and how his signature depiction of the railway awakens the dormant vitality of Tokyo's commuter train system, imbuing the wounded city with the warmth of care and repair.

A Chthonic Infant

Trains in *Café Lumière* form a horizontally laid-out network that topographically organizes the Tokyo cityscape: the extensive and convoluted metro and electric train system, through which Yoko (Hitoto Yo), a freelance writer, navigates the city in her search for traces of the subject of her biographical research, Jiang Wen-Ye (1910–1983), a late composer born in Taiwan under Japan's colonial rule. From the first shot of the film, which shows the rightward traveling of an electric railcar, to the final shot, which records the magical encounter between five multi-car trains, about 70 minutes of this 108-minute film take place on trains—ground level, elevated, or subway—or in train stations and their surrounding areas.[16] Despite the

15 Hasumi, "The Eloquence of the Taciturn: An Essay on Hou Hsiao-Hsien," 193.

16 The use of the train in the film not only serves as an attraction per se but also depicts the train system's necessary role for a regular train commuter's daily navigation of the city. According to Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano, the film's fairly accurate mapping of the urban space through its train system "provides a correct sense of the spatial distance between the landmarks, confirming many viewers' spatial orientation and knowledge of Tokyo, which creates a kind of

ubiquitous railway network, the film's screen Tokyo intriguingly deviates from a by-now hackneyed depiction of the city as technologically advanced but dehumanizing: consider the familiar images of Japanese conductors stuffing passengers into commuter trains during rush hour. As Hasumi observes, "The Tokyo of this film, Hou's first foreign work, includes none of the bustle of government and business in the downtown areas, none of the city's skyscrapers, and none of the neon signs of the entertainment districts. Hou's view of the city is characterized rather by the fact that his camera ignores completely the expressways that have been the image of cities of the future ever since Andrei Tarkovsky's *Solaris* (1972)."[17] Once a privileged device that allows Hou's previous films set in Taiwan to introduce pleasant motions into the frame and explore interpersonal intimacy in changing times, the train makes a full-on comeback in *Café Lumière*. What might have motivated the reappearance of this dominant mise-en-scène element? Which aspects of modern Tokyo does Hou's atypical staging of its train system accentuate? *Café Lumière*, I suggest, reshapes the widespread railway network as a covert sphere that harbors the prospect of animism in an urban environment. While the "primitive" worldview of animism might have largely retreated from modern life, the film suggests that it hides in places closer than expected, occasionally returning to drop a reminder of its persistence. Through determined tracing and decryption of its sporadic clues, Yoko locates a connection with this animist realm—a process that mirrors her own recollection of forgotten childhood memories, all while she anticipates giving birth to a child herself.

As the film's second shot languorously fades in from black, a medium-long shot of Yoko's apartment shows her hanging some clothes in a small balcony. The bright sunlight that comes in from the window, the amplified sound effect of lively insect chirping, and the steady white noise from a spinning fan in the lower left corner of the frame indicate summertime. Yoko receives a call from her friend, Hajime (Asano Tadanobu), who owns a secondhand bookstore and, whenever free, roams about in the city with his recording equipment to capture soundscapes on trains and in train stations. He calls to notify Yoko that her order has arrived at the bookstore. As their conversation resumes after a brief interruption by the visit of Yoko's landlord, she mentions that she has had "another weird dream about an unhappy mother. She's sad because something happened to her baby. Its

déjà vu during their film-viewing experience." Wada-Marciano, "A Dialogue with 'Memory' in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003)," 65.

17 Hasumi, "The Eloquence of the Taciturn," 193.

Fig. 2.1. Maurice Sendak's *Outside Over There* in *Café Lumière* (2003).

face has changed, it's all wrinkly. It looks so old … but the face is made of ice … And suddenly it's all melting! Very scary … I can't remember the rest. You know any story like that?" Later in the film, Hajime identifies the similarity between her dream and the content of Maurice Sendak's acclaimed children's book *Outside Over There*: in a world characterized by the absence of adults, a little girl named Ida embarks on a solitary journey to the titular realm, with the goal of rescuing her baby sister after she has been stolen by goblins (to be their bride) and replaced with an ice sculpture. When Yoko eventually visits the bookstore, Hajime gives her a copy of the book, which has deeply fascinated her ever since. On her train ride back home and in her apartment, from daytime to late night, she reads and rereads the book, pondering its implication in relation to her troubling dream. One close-up gives us a generous view of the book, as she flips through the ten pages that cover the specific period of Ida's journey from the goblin's kidnapping to her discovery of the ice sculpture to the beginning of her rescue (figure 2.1). Shortly thereafter, in the middle of a stormy night, it finally hits Yoko, as she eagerly shares with Hajime over phone, when and where she has previously encountered this bewildering text: in a large hall where she and her biological mother—who left her when she was four years old—partook in an unspecified quasi-religious ceremony (perhaps a nod to the cultist backdrop of the 1995 incident).

The plot of *Outside Over There*, which has haunted Yoko from the beginning of the film, anticipates the later revelation of Yoko's pregnancy and her decision to deliver the child despite being a single mother with an unstable income. A pivotal intertext between the film and the children's

book—overlooked in all scholarly writings on *Café Lumière* to my knowledge—that sheds light on the latter's significance to the former is Oe Kenzaburo's 2000 novel *The Changeling*, through which Hou first learned about Sendak's book. The novel's titular being refers to those nonhuman creatures—trolls, goblins, fairies, witches, demons—swapped in for human infants that appear throughout northern European folklores (though similar narratives have also been found in Egypt, India, China, and the Pacific Northwest).[18] The novel depicts the attempt of a writer named Choko Kogito—the given name alluding to the well-known Cartesian philosophical principle—to search for what drove his childhood friend and brother-in-law, filmmaker Hanawa Goro, to commit suicide. To this end, Kogito listens to some forty audiotapes of Goro's self-recorded voice notes.[19] Choko Chikashi, Goro's sister and Kogito's wife, also partakes in the investigation.

In the epilogue of the novel, directly titled "Outside Over There," Chikashi finds two thin books in Goro's luggage: Sendak's *Outside Over There* and a booklet that documents lectures in an academic symposium devoted to Sendak at the University of California, Berkeley. Out of curiosity, Chikashi reads Sendak's book, and a sense of total identification with Ida emerges: "The more she read and reread this uncanny picture book, the more certain Chikashi felt that she was Ida, and Ida was herself."[20] After meticulously analyzing both the form and content of the book and delving into scholarly accounts of the changeling across European folklore traditions, Chikashi arrives at an enigmatic conclusion: at some point when Goro was young and still positive about life, he was stolen and replaced with a detached, otherworldly substitute who merely shared his outer semblance. This thought sends her down a self-reflexive journey into the labyrinth of her own psyche. Chikashi wonders if her brother's abrupt change of character was what unconsciously prompted her to marry Kogito, against Goro's vehement disagreement, because he was the last person to be with the original Goro, whose essence had since remained trapped "outside over there." The novel highlights a small pictorial detail in Sendak's book, which Chikashi uses as a piece of visual evidence to support her reading of the self: when Ida sets out to rescue her sister, she jumps out of the window *backwards*—the final image of the book shown in the aforementioned close-up. Paralleling Ida's

18 Munro, "The Invisible Made Visible: The Fairy Changeling as a Folk Articulation of Failure to Thrive in Infants and Children," 251.

19 The novel has been received as an implicit reference to several real-life events, with Kogito based on the author himself and Goro Oe's brother-in-law, director Itami Juzo, who committed suicide after a scandal involving an extramarital affair.

20 Oe, *The Changeling*, 403.

unreasonable and dangerous movement, Chikashi infers that her impulsive decision to have Kogito's child was motivated by her deep desire to, in place of her mother, redeliver an infant into whom Goro could reincarnate.

Chikashi, however, has failed to achieve this fantasy because, according to a mythological account offered by Kogito, "The secret of life and death isn't in the bright heavens above; it's hidden in the subterranean darkness. That's why it's a mistake to fly looking up. You have to fly looking down or else you won't be able to observe the chthonic secrets."[21] She nevertheless gains a second chance in the final sections of the novel when she meets a young German college student named Ura Shima, with whom Goro had an affair in Berlin one year prior to his suicide. During their conversation, Chikashi finds out Ura is four months pregnant; the father is someone with whom she casually sleeps simply because of his physical resemblance to Goro. Ura had considered abortion until she read a piece of autobiographical writing by Kogito, which mentions how his mother once told him, in response to his fear of death when he experienced severe illness: "Even if you die, I'll give birth to you again, so don't worry." When the little Kogito questions whether the new child will still be him, the mother says with firm resolve: "it would be the same. After I gave birth to you again, I would tell the new you about all the things you've seen and heard and all the things you've read and all the things you've done up till now. And the new you would learn to speak all the words that you know now, so the two children would end up being exactly the same."[22] This exchange somehow empowers Ura and gives her the same idea to reanimate Goro by giving birth and raising a child who will grow to be exactly like him. Having had this thought herself before, Chikashi reaches a mutual recognition with Ura. Chikashi even makes plans to financially sponsor Ura's delivery in Germany and subsequent expenses for accommodation and postnatal care: "If Kogito asked about her reasons for doing all this, Chikashi thought she would answer that she didn't want to let any goblins (whatever deceptive form they might take) get close enough to kidnap Ura's baby." The novel's affirmation of the child's potentiality, which points to a past-oriented future where the dead could be revived, reaches its peak when it ends with a quote from Wole Soyinka's *Death and the King's Horseman*, non-incidentally a play about how ritualistic suicide is perceived differently under the distinct frameworks of indigenous animism and colonial modernity: "*Now forget the dead. Forget even the living. Turn your mind only to the unborn.*"[23]

21 Oe, *The Changeling*, 401.
22 Oe, *The Changeling*, 450.
23 Oe, *The Changeling*, 468.

Unlike *The Changeling*, which details Ida's and Chikashi's correspondence, Hou's film does not provide us with much information about Yoko's past or any access to her thoughts. We learn from a brief conversation between Yoko and her parents that she is three months pregnant and will not marry the father, a Taiwanese man whose family owns an umbrella factory. Some more information about the man emerges as Yoko continues to inform her parents in an overall unidirectional conversation, with a couple of questions occasionally posed by Yoko's stepmother and hardly any response from her father. The avoidance of dramatizing Yoko's interiority is reflected on the formal front throughout the conversation, as her bodily movements and facial expressions are largely obscured from our view by her stepmother, who sits closer to the camera. A wall in the near-foreground, which blocks out more than one-fourth of the screen from the right margin, creates an additional layer of mediation that separates the camera from this awkward family meeting.

Given that *Café Lumière* was commissioned as an homage to Ozu, such an Ozuesque plot executed in Hou's renowned stylistics of detachment seems fitting. But if, according to Hasumi's brilliant observation, Ozu is a "bright-daylight director" whose films "almost always take place under sunny skies," the fact that Yoko's epiphanic remembrance of *Outside Over There* transpires during a stormy night in an otherwise bright, hot film surely signals estrangement of some sort.[24] Deep in the night and surrounded by water—such is the chronotope in *Café Lumière* when a much deeper desire articulates its presence, prompting Yoko to keep her child. In fact, what Yoko never explicitly says she enacts in her daily drift. Like Chikashi's conceptualization of giving birth as a chance to start over again, the film implicitly draws a mystic connection between Yoko's decision to give birth and a general project of re-enchantment, which allows the past to re-emerge on the surface of the city. Yoko's search for the composer Jiang's traces across Tokyo constitutes, itself, a remapping of the city by superimposing its past contours onto the current cityscape. Mitsuyo Wada-Marciano describes that, for any viewer familiar with Tokyo, the various shops chosen as filming locations conjure an embodied but anachronistic experience of the everyday, which does not aim at an accurate description of the city's contemporaneity: "Seishindo used bookstore in Jinbocho (a district of Tokyo famous for its bookstores); the host of the Cafe Erika sporting a bowtie, a rarity in this day and age; the potato tempura shop, a long-familiar sight; the Tomaru bookshop in Koenji (which closed its doors in 2013), a fixture since before

24 Hasumi, "Sunny Skies," 124.

the war; the Cafe Momoya in Yurakucho (also now closed), and more."[25] Even the seemingly ordinary episode when Yoko borrows some sake from her landlord who lives next door—a nod to a similar minor plot event in Ozu's *Tokyo Story* (1953)—enacts a temporal displacement of the past onto the present given that, as Wada-Marciano quotes a friend's critique, "'In this golden age of convenience stores, and especially in a metropolis like Tokyo, what planet is she from that, having run out of alcohol, she would make the effort to go begging to a neighbor, landlord or not!'"[26]

All these subtle arrangements that implode multiple spatio-temporal layers within a given chronotope culminate in the moment when Hajime brings Yoko an old map of the city that marks the location of a café called Dat, Jiang's favorite during his time in Tokyo. Its cartographic vision no longer accurately corresponds to the layout of the present-day cityscape after decades of gentrification and redevelopment, but with the help of a nearby café's owner they manage to find the old site of Dat, on which now stands a company that manufactures specialized papers. Even though the physical trace of Dat has been completely obliterated, Yoko still approaches this site with curiosity and takes plenty of photographic records.

Later that day, Hajime visits Yoko in her apartment. She has been napping the whole afternoon due to a slight illness. Hajime decides to stay and make her dinner. While she eats, he shares with her a digital image of his own creation on his laptop screen. At the center of the image lies the profile of an infant who wears recording devices and a pocket watch around its neck—a reference to Yoko's gift to Hajime brought from Taiwan. The infant is surrounded concentrically first by shadows, then by a large loop comprising numerous Yamate Line trains, and finally by a sphere of dark red covered with several rails that extend centrifugally outward as well as the names of Tokyo train stations (figure 2.2). Hajime describes the image as "the womb of the trains" and admits that the infant is a self-portraiture, to which Yoko adds that he has a lonely eye and "looks a bit sorry for himself." Hajime concurs with her observation, jokingly replies that it is "close to tears" and "on the edge." Intrigued by Hajime's creation, Yoko asks him if the aim of his recording of the train soundscape is to locate "the essence of railways. Are there some clues in the sounds? What do you hear?" He doesn't give any concrete answer in response but only says that "maybe my recording will help in an investigation one day. … Someone might need to hear a tape as evidence of something."

25 Wada-Marciano, "A Dialogue with 'Memory' in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003)," 65.
26 Wada-Marciano, "A Dialogue with 'Memory' in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière* (2003)," 72.

Fig. 2.2. The womb of the trains in *Café Lumière* (2003).

The complexities of this digital image have inspired insightful readings on the corporeal and affective connectivity between the city and its residents. Lin Wenchi has argued that the fragile infant reflects both Hajime's and Yoko's current situation in the global city of Tokyo: a space that both nurtures and imprisons them to the point that the human and the machine seem to form an inseparable and organic whole.[27] Following the pursuit of a past-oriented future in *The Changeling*, though, might we further hypothesize that this state of connectivity between the animate and the inanimate is, itself, a desirable state that once existed but was, at some point, substituted by the evil goblins? (Or did the infant commit suicide like Goro?) Trapped in the netherworld, the lonely, sorrowful infant awaits a chance of reincarnation, which Yoko could deliver in her own reconstruction of both Jiang's and the city's pasts, the former pointing to a history of East Asian colonialism and the latter various traumas of modernity, including the 1995 terrorist attack. It comes as no surprise that the image that crystallizes this point is produced by Hajime, a mysterious character whose precise relation to Yoko has remained elusive and kept film critics wondering. Adam Bingham describes him as "a sturdy companion throughout, more like a female friend than a potential partner as one may expect (he in fact seems entirely asexual)"; Emilie Yueh-yu Yeh infers that the film is "a love story, though implicit and

27 Lin, "Yiwai de chuntian yu jiafei shiguang de taocengmicang shixue," 95–99. While not commenting on this image, Chang Hsiao-hung similarly reads the film as Tokyo's "becoming-train." Chang, "Shenti chengshi de danrudanchu: Hou Hsiao-hsien yu jiafei shiguang," 26.

understated."[28] While I do not necessarily think that their relationship needs to be defined, Hajime anticipates Song's role in *Flight of the Red Balloon* discussed in chapter 1: not only do both of them show animist images of their own creation on their laptop screens, but, more importantly, they function as guardian angels who come to facilitate the protagonists' engagement with childhood.

Indeed, Hajime is consistently associated with the past (an owner of a used bookstore; a recorder of fleeting sounds). He materially provides Yoko necessary support during her pregnancy (food)—one recalls Chikashi, willingly taking care of Ura—as well as her tracing of the past (Jiang's CD; the old map). It is with Hajime's companionship, instead of that of Yoko's ex-partner or her parents, that she ultimately gains confidence in herself as well as the assurance that things will be fine as she embarks on the journey of pregnancy. The film recognizes and visualizes just such a peculiar form of togetherness in the penultimate shot where they stand on a platform in a train station. Placed on the other side of the platform, the camera registers their transitory presence through the gaps of a speeding train that shrieks continuously. However blurry the image of Hajime and Yoko might seem, however brief the time we are granted to observe their faces, we see enough to know that they stand right next to each other: the two sole figures visible through that narrow space, patiently recording the "evidence of something" when everyone and everything else will not stop moving on.

The film soon ends with a magnificent shot that brings Hajime's digital image to life. Across a river that runs diagonally from the upper right to the lower left of the frame, five trains emerge from screen left and right (figure 2.3). Not merely a graphic mirroring between the natural and the technological as the trains flow through the space like the river, the trains themselves produce wonder through their intersection. One by one, the first four trains come into our vision from different directions, culminating in a good seven seconds when they co-exist in the frame. It is during these seven seconds that the prelude to the film's theme song, "Hitoshian" (written and performed by Hitoto, the actress who plays Yoko), joins the diegetic sounds of the train's progression. The gradual disappearance of the fourth train into the background is then followed by the entrance of the fifth one from a tunnel in the foreground. The

28 Bingham, "Café Lumière," 138; Yeh, "Remaking Ozu: Hou Hsiao-hsien's *Café Lumière*," 104. Hasumi also reads from Yoko and Hajime's interactions "a love that needs no sexual language." Hasumi, "The Eloquence of the Taciturn," 193.

Fig. 2.3. When trains meet in *Café Lumière* (2003).

camera gently tilts down to capture the former's departure from the frame, accompanied by Hitoto's recitation of a poem, before the film fades to black. Such a visual symphony orchestrated by the trains is a rare sight captured by the crew after days of waiting on location. Collectively, the trains form a continuous loop that encircles this very space in the same way that the Yamate Line trains surround the infant in Hajime's digital creation. In this inconspicuous corner of Tokyo, the body of water and the trains' protection of it form a real-life scenography of the womb of the trains, where hidden vitality is calmly nurtured, as if reversing the human-nonhuman vector in Walter Benjamin's description of mimetic behavior, in which he observes that "the child plays at being not only a shopkeeper or teacher but also a windmill and a train."[29] The train, instead, plays at being the foster of a child.

A commitment to looking down into the infrastructural depths of Tokyo in search of all the possibilities of re-enchantment, the ending recalls Kogito's conviction that "The secret of life and death isn't in the bright heavens above; it's hidden in the subterranean darkness." Hitoto's "Hitoshian," which bridges the final shot and the closing credits, confirms this positive note by acknowledging her character's decision to fully embrace the potentiality of life. One section of the song's poetic lyrics confidently recounts: "Casting a backward glance as an adult / Look / All the sweats that could not fruit / Finally, finally blossom into clumps of daphnes / How nice it was to be born."

29 Benjamin, "Doctrine of the Similar," 694.

The Miracle Train

The staging of, quite literally, Yoko's "train of thought" points to the ambivalent conceptualization of the railway network in *Café Lumière*, at once associated with an elusive familial trauma in the past and its exorcism in the present. It is as if the film reenacts not only the primal scene of traumatic neurosis, understood as the result of railway disasters (among other impacts of modern mechanical forces) according to a commonplace discourse in twentieth-century Western medicine, but also the Freudian metaphor that views the topography of memory like the structure of a train network, the access into which serves as a key to the rediscovery of the past.[30] As the film also demonstrates, though, Yoko's relentless pursuit and decipherment of her past—or, more precisely, my reading of her pursuit and decipherment—indicate not so much a stable kernel of truth as a process of a posteriori interpretation, motivated and facilitated by sundry chance encounters with external agents and intertexts: from the biographical subject of Jiang Wen-Ye to *Outside Over There*; from Hajime's old map to his digital creation. The animist train network that transubstantiates the Tokyo cityscape points to the determining influence of contingency and, therefore, the flexibility of the animist imagination itself as a utopian construct. If the cinematic train, recalling Löffler's description, summons "a spectrology of cinematic spaces," the ghost by no means exists solely in the sediment of a bygone childhood that awaits therapeutic retrieval; rather, it manifests itself in cinema's active projection of an animist future, where the child's shamanic power approaches and reshapes the existing reality from a sphere where the nonhuman is viewed as an impending threat into one characterized by human-nonhuman co-existence instead.

Such a future-oriented dimension of the cinematic train's spectral pedigree is vividly materialized in *I Wish*, which expands on the final shot of *Café Lumière* wherein five commuter trains run past one another. The narrative of Kore-eda's film unfolds around the opening of a new bullet train line and its impact, as imagined and experienced by several primary school children: when two bullet trains whoosh pass each other on the newly constructed railway, they generate an otherworldly energy that momentarily opens up a portal to an alternative spacetime, where even the most fantastical wishes might be fulfilled—a miracle, indeed, which is the literal meaning of the film's Japanese title, *Kiseki*.

30 Massicotte, "Mapping Memory through the Railway Network: Reconsidering Freud's Metaphors from the *Project for a Scientific Psychology* to *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*," 159–178.

I Wish begins in Kagoshima where Sakurajima, an active composite volcano, has been in a constant state of calm eruption. A glimpse of Sakurajima on the distant skyline is offered through the point of view of weary sixth-grader Koichi (Maeda Koki) when he stands on his bedroom balcony at the beginning of a bright day, before conducting his morning routine of dusting a white rag and using it to sweep away a thin layer of ash that covers all surfaces in his bedroom. These actions denote at once the pervading physical influence of the volcanic eruption and a general sense of frustration that characterizes Koichi's psychological state. Following the break-up of his parents, Koichi has lived in Kagoshima for the past six months with his mother and grandparents. His father, a guitarist in an underground band, stays in Fukuoka with his younger brother, Ryu (Maeda Ohshiro), with whom Koichi stays in touch via mobile phone. Negatively impacted by his parents' separation, Koichi constantly fusses about his reluctant relocation to and new life in Kagoshima: Why don't the locals seem to be affected in any obvious way by the permeating ashes that annoyingly pile up on everything all the time? Why is his school on top of a hill, which makes his daily commute on foot a grueling toil? The source of all these trivial complaints points deep down to Koichi's discontent with the status quo of his family, tainted by his parents' separation just like his perpetually dust-coated room.

During a science class in his school lab, Koichi hatches an unconventional plan to catalyze the reunion of his family after overhearing an urban legend from a couple of fellow students (the air of empiricism and objectivity in the setting perhaps enhances the legend's credibility): when the first two trains that run on the newly constructed Kyushu Shinkansen pass each other at the speed of 160 miles per hour from opposite directions, they stimulate an energy so intense that the wishes made by the eye witnesses on site will come true. As Koichi, seemingly convinced by the certainty of this account, considers the most appropriate wish he should make to bring his family back together, he wonders if a full-on explosion of Sakurajima might enforce a large-scale evacuation of all the residents from Kagoshima. Surely, in that case, he and his mother would have no choice but to stay with his father and younger brother in Fukuoka, or the entire family would move back to Osaka where they used to live before the couple's separation. Later that day, Koichi and two of his friends witness just such a supernatural force of the train when an old woman who stands on the other side of a level crossing from them suddenly disappears after two commuter trains pass in front of her (figure 2.4). "Time travel?" they ask, as if the passing of the two trains grants her an otherwise sealed access to the fantasized "fourth dimension" quoted in my epigraph. Convinced by the passing trains' power after witnessing

Fig. 2.4. At the level crossing in *I Wish* (2011).

the incident, that night Koichi draws a watercolor painting of an erupting volcano and hangs it high up a wall in his bedroom. He kneels in front of it and worships the sublimity depicted on paper and in his imagination, as if initiating his own private ritual.

An urgency to execute his plan registers when Koichi notices that his family members have all settled in their new lives and begun to develop long-term commitments to something or someone. Koichi and his two friends manage to sponsor themselves for a day trip to Kumamoto, where the first two trains on the new Shinkansen line will pass each other at approximately 6:40 AM. On the day before the operation of the new line, the three kids skive off school and venture to the site. Joining them in Kumamoto are none other than Ryu and three classmates of his, who also want to participate in the escapade after learning about Koichi's plan. Each of them comes with a sincere wish to make: Koichi and his brother hope to reunite their family; one of Koichi's two friends hopes his father will quit gambling while the other, right before embarking on the trip, changes his wish from becoming a professional baseball player to reviving his recently deceased pet dog; Ryu's three friends respectively hope to become a successful actress, to run fast, and to obtain supreme painting skills.

Intriguingly, not only have Koichi and his friends contrived to fool some adults to gain a day off with ease, but several adults willingly assist their journey throughout the film. They include, in Kagoshima, a school nurse who teaches them how to feign fever symptoms, and Koichi's grandfather, who shows up at school to authorize their "sick leave"; in Kumamoto, an old couple pretends to know the children in front of a suspicious policeman

and generously accommodates them for one night, before driving them to their targeted vantage point for train-viewing the next morning. As if the whole universe is helping them, the children's matter-of-fact escape from their usual school tasks and daily duties recalls the narrative trope termed "the fantasy of neglect" by Pamela Robertson Wojcik, which submits the centrality of adult's negligence to the cultivation of (urban) children's agency and subjectivity in twentieth-century American children's fiction.[31] In a truly neglectful fashion, *I Wish* renders the world as a playground in which the seven children are allowed to freely imagine their own identities and self-positioning in the world, as indicated by the unique wish each of them hopes to make in front of the passing trains. Admittedly, several of the wishes hardly require supernatural forces to realize—to run faster, to paint better, or to be an actress. But two of them beckon, given their relation to the animist discourse: Koichi's friend hopes that the miracle of the passing trains can revive his dog, Marble, and even brings along the dog's corpse; Koichi's wish of a violent eruption that essentially points to a thorough animation of Sakurajima. The former adheres to a commonplace understanding of animism as far as the correlation between the soul's presence and a person's (human and nonhuman alike) acquisition of vitality is concerned. In Koichi's case, we recall his grandfather's language of personification earlier in the film, which views the eruption of a volcano as proof of its vitality: "It's alive, so it has to let off energy once in a while." Indeed, the term for "active volcano" in Japanese, *katsukazan*, literally means "living volcano."

That said, Koichi ends up being the only child who remains silent in front of the two passing trains despite his efforts to initiate and organize the group adventure. This is because, during the journey to Kumamoto, he has come to be aware of the extremely high stakes and selfish nature of his devastating wish. In a crucial phone conversation between him and his father before the trip, the latter tells Koichi that "I want you to grow up to become someone who cares about more than just your own life." When Koichi asks his father to clarify what this altruistic form of care entails, he vaguely responds: "for instance, music, or the world." Confused and slightly irritated by the brief and seemingly offhand comment, Koichi dismisses his father's words as incomprehensible gibberish. As the narrative unfolds, however, Koichi comes to the realization that "the world" is predicated on a collective flourishing, which a forceful volcanic eruption only hinders if not eliminates. When Koichi is first questioned by his friends regarding the likelihood of their own death should his wish come true, Koichi answers

31 Wojcik, *Fantasies of Neglect*.

with a sure sense of conviction that all of them will manage to evacuate in time before the ecological catastrophe. But as he awaits Ryu on the platform of a train station in Kumamoto, a conductor's words implant doubt in his mind. As the conductor introduces Mt. Fugen in the distance to Koichi and his two friends, he mentions the tragedy that took fifty lives during its last eruption twenty years ago: "I don't want to live through that ever again." When the two other children's gazes remain fixated on the faraway volcano, the camera captures a contemplative look on Koichi's face as he turns to look at the conductor. It slowly occurs to him, for the first time, that his wish for a wildly animated volcano could obliterate Kagoshima and all its residents, paradoxically resulting in a state of total devitalization. The awareness grows stronger throughout the journey that leads up to his arrival at the precise coordinate of train-viewing where his wish for a family reunion could soon come to fruition. At the decisive moment when the two trains pass each other, Koichi concludes that Sakurajima should not be awakened in spite of all. As the journey soon comes to an end when Koichi bids his brother farewell and confesses his silence in front of the passing trains, he has by now well understood the lesson his father tried to convey. "I chose the world over my family," as Koichi's simple but powerful reasoning to not make the wish clarifies.

To dwell a bit longer on Koichi's realization, this decisive moment is captured in the climactic scene when the two trains pass each other, as his determined silence distinguishes him from the other six children. When all of them anxiously anticipate the advent of the trains, the camera focuses on Koichi's absorption in his own thoughts, looking not at the rails ahead but at his Sakurajima drawing in his head. Such a mental image occupies the entire frame, though it is by no means a simple rendition of Koichi's point of view. Accompanied by the diegetic sound of the approaching trains' mechanic uproar, the whole image falls into a state of tremor. Another soundtrack evoking a trembling earth joins the scene, further augmenting the feeling of something unsettling to come. The intensity lasts for five seconds until explosive molten lava gushes out from the crater and fills the entire frame. A soothing non-diegetic melody, then, emerges to gently replace the violent sound of the volcanic eruption. The acoustic shift simultaneously motivates a visual transition from the pictorial animation to the thirty shots of various entities in the following two minutes. Most of them close-ups of everyday objects and minor gestures in Koichi's life that the film has previously shown but not endowed with any legible significance, including a soda popsicle that Ryu savored when on the phone with Koichi after his swimming class; his speedo; the crumbs at the bottom of a bag of potato chips that he saved

to the last for slow enjoyment; the pigments and palette for drawing the volcano; a digital thermometer, the top of which he rubbed to feign fever in order to escape school for the adventure; a coin that lay underneath a vending machine; a newly planted vegetable in Ryu's garden; a nuclear family of four that walked up the stairs at the train station where his journey began; the hand movement of his grandmother when she danced hula; the hand of Marble's owner as he gently caressed the dog's corpse; his own hand as he dusted off the volcanic ashes on the left shoulder strap of his backpack; a piece of the *karukan* cake made by his grandfather; the train conductor's hand pointing to the distant Mt. Fugen; the wind in the flowering shrubs where the seven children visited the day before; a piece of white fabric upon which the children wrote down their wishes; four photos of Koichi and Ryu shown in four successive shots; two shots of a bright sky; and two shots of numerous wooden plaques (*ema*) in a Shinto shrine, on which prayers were written. This magnificent montage sequence concludes as the camera returns from Koichi's ecstatic sojourn through all these sites—related one way or another to many of the previous plot events—to his pensive gaze at the vantage point where the children stand, as he appears lost in the reserved but enduring impact of these otherwise trivial, fragmented instants of his life, which have nevertheless burst out in imagistic form and held him back from articulating the wish in this pivotal moment. The musical score likewise ends as the camera brings us back to Koichi's physical reality, shortly before the here and now of the two trains' passing, at which the other six children shout out, with all their minds and strength, their heartfelt wishes—a collective yearning for happiness.

At the end of the day, Marble the dog is not revived (unlike, say, the revitalized canine in Tim Burton's 1984 *Frankenweenie* and its 2012 remake of the same title); neither has the real Sakurajima erupted. The non-eventfulness that defines the aftermath of the children's journey, however, does not indicate that the miracle of their animist vision has failed to take place. Even if no visible sign of canine or volcanic animation manifests itself in the diegetic spacetime, the film wonderfully expresses the silently animated world that Koichi has come to notice and, indeed, *care for*. Bookended by Koichi's contemplative looks, the montage sequence grants us a glimpse into the form of just such a world of attentiveness and intimacy. What gets animated is not vitality understood in the narrow sense as a biophysico-chemical process but a qualitative transformation through which Koichi—unquestionably a child insofar as age is concerned—acquires, for the first time in the film, a childlike worldview that aligns him with the vision of the shamanic figure of the child. With the completion of the rite

of initiation for Koichi the shaman, the film's literal presentation of the animation of his drawing becomes contagious, as the train-energy that has stirred Koichi's pictorial volcano penetrates the boundaries of the paper—and likewise the boundaries of the screen frame. The force spills out, overflowing into all aspects of his life and, in its course, converting the daily life from a stagnant sphere where historicity is deprived, where nothing seems to happen, into one in which animism continuously and ubiquitously thrives. Like the volcanic ashes that steadily cover every surface and fill up every seam across Kagoshima, the all-encompassing energy leads the camera afar, back to the constituents of Koichi's day-to-day life—animate and inanimate entities alike—which otherwise remain inconspicuous that the essences and stories of their beings no longer register, even to a supposedly curious schoolchild. But unlike a real volcanic explosion, which would indiscriminately wipe out all these human and nonhuman persons who populate Koichi's world, the permeating energy elevates their significance instead. The intimately framed things and gestures orchestrate the very "silent soliloquy," theorized by classical film theorist Béla Balázs, that gives faces to and reveals the hidden souls of onscreen entities through the mystic power of the close-up in silent cinema. As if reaffirming Balázs's description of the modern age when the camera's optical expression reconnects humans with the environments from which they are alienated, all the entities shot in the film's climactic series of fine close-ups "radiate a tender human attitude in the contemplation of hidden things, a delicate solicitude, a gentle bending over the intimacies of life-in-miniature, a warm sensibility."[32] Sentimental as Koichi's animist realization might be, how could anyone bear to wish for the world's annihilation?

Balázs's language of personification that describes the camera's revelation of the soulful qualities of things is echoed throughout writings on cinema's potentiality by other film theorists, such as Benjamin's account of the camera's optical unconscious and Jean Epstein's submission of an animist vision that the camera might afford, not least through the close-up as well. As Gertrud Koch has emphasized, however, what Balázs proposes is not so much the illusion of an unmediated autonomy of things as an "anthropologically centered aesthetics which assumes a basic human bent and need for expressive behavior."[33] Admittedly, the humanly subjective basis that undergirds Balázs's writings limits their scope within the domain of a schematic recursion of Romantic ideals, hence diminishing their radicality

32 Balázs, *Theory of Film*, 56.

33 Koch, "Béla Balázs: The Physiognomy of Things," 176.

in comparison with other film theories that more thoroughly undermine any anthropocentric association between the human eye and the kino-eye. Nevertheless, I engage with Balázs's account for the purpose of accentuating a less-discussed aspect of his cinematic phenomenology: a connection drawn between the camera and children. While the close-up might reveal the occulted souls of the world, part of the ultimate significance of its mytho-mechanical prowess, Balázs suggests, lies not in the manifestation of souls in and of themselves but in the restoration of a childlike perception: "Children are more familiar with the secret corners of a room than adults because they can still crawl under tables and sofas. They know more about the little moments of life because they still have time to dwell on them. *Children see the world in close-up.* Adults, however, in hot pursuit of distant goals, hurry past the intimate experiences of these nooks and crannies. They may know their own minds, but they often know nothing else. Only children at play gaze pensively at minor details."[34] The child's encounter with the world, in effect, shapes the utopian immediacy between the viewer and the viewed enacted by the close-up. At stake here is a call for a revitalizing artistic expression that, by approximating the child's interiority, perceives the world anew and thereby reconfigures the viewer's vision and worldview more generally. Subjective and human-centric as Balázs's cinematic vision might be, it nevertheless departs from the specific subjectivity of the child as a shamanic figure—which this book insists should not be reduced to mere anthropocentrism at an abstract level.

On this note, *I Wish* at once responds to cinema's animist potential as celebrated in classical film theory and continues an aesthetic tradition in experimental filmmaking that interrogates the epistemological positions of cinema by taking up a child's perspective, most memorably the opening of Stan Brakhage's "Metaphors on Vision": "How many colors are there in a field of grass to the crawling baby unaware of 'Green'? How many rainbows can light create for the untutored eye?"[35] While the overall stylistics of *I Wish* can hardly be described as avant-garde (or comparable with any of Brakhage's creations), the montage sequence reverberates with the visionary search for the lost universalism, embodied in the child's pre-linguistic access to the world. It is only befitting that Koichi remains silent in the film's otherwise cacophonic climax sounding a mixture of

34 Balázs, *Béla Balázs*, 62.

35 Brakhage, "Metaphors on Vision," 12. It is also this term that Marjorie Keller borrows for her study of the concept of childhood in the work of other experimental filmmakers. See Keller, *The Untutored Eye*.

the trains' shrieks and the children's shouts, for his own animist wish exceeds the domain of language, at least not easily expressible in the fleeting duration of the two trains' passing. The film thereby constitutes an exploration of the child's worldview not simply because it ticks all the boxes for the generic conventions of children's film—representations of children, fantasization of irrationality, or the lowering of the camera height to imitate children's physical conditions. These commonplace thematic and stylistic features establish but the prelude to a form of spectatorial engagement that the film takes over from Koichi and models for the viewer. Such is the pedagogical function of the animist imagination: through specific configurations of cinematic elements, ranging from themes to formal devices (in this case, the close-up, the intricate use of sound, and the editing pattern mobilized to stage the encounter between the child and the train), we, too, partake in imagining what an animist sphere might tangibly look, sound, and feel like.

On the narrative front, the opening of this animist sphere leads to Koichi's belated recognition of the wonders that fill his life in Kagoshima. In sharp contrast to the film's opening sequence, the final sequence again sees Koichi looking into the distant skyline from his bedroom balcony. Instead of repeating his morning routine of dusting around, however, this time he performs a trick learned previously from his grandfather. Rather than picking up the rag that hangs on the railing, he puts the index finger of his right hand in the mouth before holding it in the air for a few seconds. The coolness left by the breeze on his wet finger allows him to feel the direction from which the wind blows. A few seconds later, he asserts with confidence: "It won't pile up today." No longer a self-imposed outsider whose inner reluctance to accommodate to his immediate surroundings has repeatedly resulted in his failure to live at ease in Kagoshima, today Koichi acts like a true local. Despite all the ashes that will continue to fall and accumulate on the objects and floor of his room, he is finally ready to embrace the very place he has been unwilling to call home. The ending thus offers a distinct vision in response to a trend in contemporary Japanese horror film that, in Karen Lury's words, routinely renders "the traumatised, abandoned child—children living on the margins, all but invisible to adult society" as a malicious ghost who consistently threatens the temporal and social orders of the adult-centered, normative world.[36] Like Kore-eda's *Nobody Knows*, which Lury analyzes, *I Wish* invites us to go "'back stage' into the children's lives and examine not their brief interruptions into the adult world but instead explore, without

36 Lury, *The Child in Film*, 41.

judgment, their 'hiding places' and strategies for survival." The film takes a step further in actively reconciling the differences between the world as perceived by children and adults.

Suppose the Changeling Stays?

As an articulation of the child's animist vision concludes *I Wish*, so my charting of the topography of animist childhood along the railway comes to an end. In lieu of a conclusion, though, I would like to return to *Café Lumière* and dwell on its reference to the changeling tale, which harbors the seeds of more animist imaginations than this chapter can exhaust.

A typical changeling tale goes like this: a child is believed to be stolen and swapped by nonhuman creatures, usually fairies, with a human-like substitute that nevertheless demonstrates certain traits distinct from the original, including newly developed medical symptoms, or changes in physical appearance or personality that are considered non-normative. A commonly accepted scholarly reading of the tale today thus sees this corpus of writings as a premodern medical discourse that functions as an explanation of the emergence and development of certain diseases and disabilities. Several folklore scholars have pointed out that modern psychology prompts a reading of the supernatural intervention in the changeling narrative as a depiction of a certain condition of disorder, disability, or parental mistreatment that results in, according to Joyce Underwood Munro, "failure to thrive in infants and children."[37] Similarly, historians of medicine have particularly observed similarities between descriptions of changeling children in premodern folklore and those of children with autism spectrum disorder in modern medical records. J. Leask, A. Leask, and N. Silove suggest that "Some of the features of these stories, including the initial health and beauty of the human child, the change after some period of 'normalcy,' and the specific behaviours of the changeling (listed above) are well matched to symptoms in some presentations of autism."[38] Commenting on writings surrounding "one Brother Juniper, who was naively innocent and lacking in any social intuition or common sense," Lorna Wing posits that while his

37 Munro, "The Invisible Made Visible," 252. Other writings in folklore studies that explore the intersection between the changeling tale and disability studies include Goodey and Stainton, "Intellectual Disability and the Myth of the Changeling Myth"; Eberly, "Fairies and the Folklore of Disability: Changelings, Hybrids and the Solitary Fairy."
38 Leask, Leask, and Silove, "Evidence for Autism in Folklore?," 271.

peculiarity, according to these texts, indexes his connection to divinity, today "he may well have been diagnosed as having Asperger syndrome."[39] (This description recalls Roberto Rossellini's 1950 *The Flowers of Saint Francis*, a retelling of precisely Brother Juniper's story. Perhaps an animist reading of the film could generate insights regarding the titular character who interacts with several nonhuman animals.)

While it is necessary to avoid a transhistorical correspondence between cultural traditions and lived experiences (including medical symptoms), which often disguises certain ideological constructs, I emphasize this covert aspect of *Café Lumière* to explore the intertextual potential of its complex narrative and to probe the limitations of childhood in relation to the animist imagination. Consider a series of hypothetical scenarios that would complicate the utopian promises offered in *Café Lumière*: What if Yoko never redelivers the child? What if the changeling brought by the goblin to swap the human infant stays and grows? What if the cold, expressionless surface of an ice sculpture, rather than the child's vision and the inner lives of things that it discloses, is all that cinema can offer? We shall address these inquiries in the next chapter by following the lead of the above interpretation of the changeling tale and examining another prominent agent of the animist imagination: people with autism spectrum disorder. The main object of study will be Hou's *The Assassin* (2015) which, in an ethically daring move, travels the road not taken in *Café Lumière* by conceptualizing a character with Asperger syndrome as another shamanic figure, characterized by an innate capacity to communicate with nonhuman animals.

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39 Wing, "The History of Ideas on Autism: Legends, Myths and Reality," 14.

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3. Spectrum Animality

Abstract: This chapter addresses the intriguing character set-up of the protagonist in *The Assassin* (Hou Hsiao-hsien, 2015) as a person on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum—a choice seemingly irrelevant to the narrative. Drawing inspiration from the overlap between the film's preproduction stage and the filmmakers' involvement in animal welfare movements in Taiwan, the chapter argues that the characterization should be understood within the context of a discursive exchange between disability studies, modern ethology, and animal studies. The performance of this character not only reflects the film's broader mise-en-scène design, which actively elicits spectatorial engagement with the nonhuman, but also proposes an anti-anthropocentric paradigm of screen performance more generally.

Keywords: screen performance; animal phenomenology; autism spectrum disorder; spectatorship of exteriority

They're just kids, they had to describe their favorite animals. One little girl of eight chose a bird. It went: "A bird is an animal with an inside and an outside. Remove the outside, there's the inside. Remove the inside and you see the soul."
– Paul in *Vivre sa vie* (dir. Jean-Luc Godard, 1962)[1]

Unlike the figure of the child, explored in chapter 1 and 2, whose interaction with the nonhuman evokes all kinds of sentiments and emotions from curiosity and excitement to nostalgia and sobriety, Godard's *Vivre sa vie* outlines the opposite of such pathetic fallacy in a little girl's avian anatomy. Rather than anthropomorphizing the bird's interiority, she pares it away as if it were a removable layer of rind; the result is direct access to the creature's

1 These lines appear in an anecdote shared by Paul that concludes the opening sequence. This translation is from the English subtitles of the DVD released by Fox Lorber.

Tang, Pao-chen. *The Animist Imagination in East Asian Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2025.
DOI 10.5117/9789048563999_CH03

soul. Her eccentric schematization of the nonhuman reverberates with this chapter's submission of an aesthetic paradigm that explores the fine line between human and animal subjects by short-circuiting emotional expressivity.

The paradigm has manifested itself across artistic practices from different media and historical intersections, drawing a trajectory that runs from Heinrich von Kleist's theorization of corporeal grace to Robert Bresson's method of screen acting, culminating in the performance of the titular character in Hou Hsiao-hsien's *The Assassin* (2015). What conglomerates these distinct texts is their shared exploration of certain characteristics in performance that signal the subtraction of interiority and, consequently, the emergence of animality. Hou's film is particularly intriguing because it associates these performative features with core symptoms of autism spectrum disorder (ASD) that have been described as the withdrawal of expressivity—consider autism's Greek etymological root, *autos*, or the modern Chinese term for autism, *zibi*, literally meaning "self-enclosure." Even though the film, at first glance, does not seem to be about either ASD or animals, this chapter demonstrates how it consciously mobilizes a positive correlation between the performance of ASD and animality. My proposal is that Hou's film stages a character on the spectrum as a shamanic figure with animalistic perception.

To establish this figure, *The Assassin* accentuates certain symptomatic traits in its artistic discourse. I want to be clear that (1) many aspects of ASD remain uncertain; (2) this is a move with high ethical stakes and varied implications related to the stereotyping and stigmatization of disease and disorder. The latter perhaps explains why, to my knowledge, no scholarly writing on this high-profile film (which won Hou Best Director at the 2015 Cannes Film Festival) to date has even mentioned ASD—a circumvention I find problematic. Instead of shunning this prominent aspect of the film, I want to take the chosen traits as seriously as possible, insofar as they are turned into the integral properties of an artwork. How and why have certain medical conditions or scientific research been incorporated by filmmakers into the shaping of this figure and its realm of experience? How is this figure performed? How does such a performance help us reevaluate the cinematic representation and performance of ASD more generally? And in what ways might this aspect of the film contribute to our rethinking of human-animal relations? Tackling these questions means that, rather than seeing medical and scientific discourses as the key to explaining why a work of fiction is made in one way or another, I consider them as integral components of *The Assassin*. The aesthetic paradigm that this

chapter advances, then, is based on formal characteristics and an animist worldview related to ASD, which are conveyed by cinema not necessarily as medicine does. By placing *The Assassin* and ASD into conversation, my goal is to deepen at once our understanding of the film, how it imagines the autistic character as a shamanic figure, and the nuances behind the performance of this figure on screen.

Symptoms of ASD in *The Assassin* are suggested in Taiwanese actress Shu Qi's performance of the titular character, primarily through carefully controlled facial and bodily expressions. Under Hou's directorial instruction of repeated acting, semiotic expressivity through words, movements, and gestures was displaced—if not forced to recede—so that the actress could act out a specific cognitive bond between animals and people on the high-functioning end of the spectrum, which allows both of them to perceive and react to minute environmental signals. In film history, such an acting style has been made famous by Bresson, from whom Hou consciously learns. As this chapter explores, the Bressonian method, which enforces a retreat of affect, is itself connected to the animal, not least the opacity of the animal to anthropomorphism. Taking Shu's performance as a point of departure, I further examine how the ideology of interspecies correspondence bleeds out of an individual character into her surrounding milieus, both within the film and the ideal form of spectatorship that the film elicits. The film's mise-en-scène puts forward an expansive sphere of animism where creative kinship among humans, nonhumans, and the cinematic apparatus transpires. In discreet corners of several shots that reveal themselves only to attentive viewers, the film lays bare the relational ground of this threefold kinship. It is also in these shots that nonhuman lives leave barely perceptible traces of their presence.

Before delving into the film, it is crucial to recognize that, in mobilizing a high-functioning autistic character as a trope and having the actress perform specific autistic traits, Hou's film risks the "supercrip narrative," about which scholars of disability studies have rightfully reminded us to be cautious: the stereotype of high-functioning autistic people as perceptually acute, intelligent, but emotionally dysfunctional. On the depiction of these characteristics in literature, Sonya Freeman Loftis has demonstrated how, even if executed in positive terms, it might still reinforce stereotypes. Regarding the common trope of the autistic detective in crime fiction, Loftis suggests that "the presumably redemptive fiction of the autistic hero often proves oddly *dehumanizing*: even as his incredible feats of deduction are praised as a work of genius, Holmes is objectified by his beloved Watson, who constantly compares the brilliant sleuth to machines and

repeatedly describes him as 'inhuman.'"[2] My study of *The Assassin* thinks seriously about this commonplace association of ASD with the rhetoric of dehumanization. My proposed aesthetic paradigm that holds the autistic and the animal together invites a reconsideration of what "the human" entails: not so much a negative dehumanizing or inhuman move that turns a person into a kind of machine as a recuperative attempt to challenge stagnant anthropocentric accounts, including the bias that the animal—a collective term that comprises numerous species—is inferior to an abstract understanding of the human. Both the autistic and the animal, on this note, are by no means less-than-human, but as human as can be, if not more. And by "more," I do not mean that they, perforce, reveal a more profound or enshrined humanity, but an alternative mode of being that lies at the limit of the human condition.

The Making of an Assassin

The Assassin addresses the boundary between humanity and animality by grappling with a dramaturgical challenge: the fashioning of an assassin par excellence. As the film's title suggests, the identity of its protagonist is defined by a set of lethal skills. Named Nie Yinniang, she is the consummate killer—as swift, precise, elusive as can be—in both the film and Pei Xing's Tang-dynasty *chuanqi* tale, "Nie Yinniang," on which the film is loosely based. The agential aspect, or the lack thereof, of this special identity—the will to execute someone else's command through the act of killing—motivates the unfolding of the narrative. During the last and turbulent years of the Tang Dynasty, Nie (Shu Qi) follows the order of her nun-master, Princess Jiaxin (Sheu Fang-yi, who also plays the character's twin sister Princess Jiacheng), to slay corrupt government officials. On one occasion, when Nie cannot bring herself to kill a target out of sympathy for his little son nearby, the nun-master assigns her to a more arduous task: to return home and assassinate the military governor of the Weibo Province, Tian Ji'an (Chang Chen), himself Nie's cousin and childhood playmate to whom she was once betrothed. In Weibo, Nie reconnects with her past and finds herself enmeshed in a series of political conflicts internal to the Tian family, initiated by Tian Ji'an's wife, Lady Tian (Zhou Yun), and her sorcerer-master (Jacques Picoux). In this process, Nie receives help from a mirror polisher (Satoshi Tsumabuki); she also develops a new set of morals

2 Loftis, *Imagining Autism*, 23.

as she independently judges whether she shall kill Tian based on her own evaluation of the overall political situation and power balance in Weibo. In the end, Nie decides to disobey her nun-master and follows the mirror polisher back to his hometown.

The figuration of Nie condenses a host of real and fictional prototypes, all of which are documented by one of the film's screenwriters, Hsieh Hai-meng, in her book *Xingyunji* (Records of a walking cloud, 2015), published before the release of the film. In *Xingyunji*, Hsieh provides the film's original script and details the process of filmmaking from preproduction to the conclusion of principle photography. One section outlines the prototypes imbricated in the characterization of Nie: from the former CIA agent Jason Bourne played by Matt Damon in the *Bourne* film franchise (2002–2016) to the autobiographical account of the Xinjiang-born writer Li Juan; from the nine-year-old girl in Guðbergur Bergsson's *The Swan* (1991) to Lute in Eileen Chang's *The Fall of the Pagoda* (2010).[3] In most cases, the filmmakers' selections are motivated by shared plot events. The girl in *The Swan* is forced to spend a summer in the countryside away from her parents, just as Nie is taken away from hers by the nun at the age of ten; the episode in which Lute covers her tearful face with a handkerchief is reenacted in *The Assassin* when Nie, too, cries. Elsewhere in *Xingyunji*, however, Hsieh emphasizes two sources of inspiration that define Nie not because of what they have experienced or done but *who they are*. The common ground between these two sources is their respective association with ASD.

One of them is Hsieh herself, who has openly acknowledged that she has Asperger syndrome—a neurobiological condition originally considered as a standalone diagnosis located on the higher-functioning end of the autistic spectrum but which, since the American Psychiatric Association's redefinition and reclassification in 2013, now falls under the umbrella of autism spectrum disorder.[4] Hsieh's biography fed into the characterization process, particularly her photographic memory, her fervent devotion to a handful of things that interest her, and her tendency to avoid eye contact when communicating with people.[5] The other prototype is Lisbeth Salander, a computer hacker in Stieg Larsson's Millennium Trilogy (2005–2007). A survivor of childhood trauma, the heavily tattooed and pierced Salander

3 Hsieh, *Xingyunji*, 39–41.

4 Since ASD has been understood as a continuum of sensory processing capacities, it groups a variety of syndromes, ranging from those closer to the high-functioning end such as Kanner and Asperger syndromes to those on the low-functioning end, defined by severe cognitive disorders, such as the lack of distinction between one's bodily boundaries and the environments.

5 Hsieh, *Xingyunji*, 38.

frequently displays asocial, if not antisocial, behaviors. A fellow character in the novels thus suspects that she has Asperger syndrome. This relation between ASD and Nie, à la Hsieh and Salander, is perceived to be more than analogous. Hsieh explicitly states that "Nie Yinniang has Asperger syndrome."[6]

The addition of autobiographical elements into an artist's own creation is not at all uncommon. But *The Assassin* is neither Hsieh's autobiography nor a faithful representation of any person on the high-functioning end of the autism spectrum. Other than perhaps Nie's ostensible quietness throughout the film (only nine lines of dialogue), *The Assassin* does not invoke any association between the character and ASD. Whether Nie is autistic or not does not seem to matter, either, for the display of her assassination skills and her decision to disobey her master. This aspect of characterization is even more intriguing when we compare Nie with Jing, the leading character (played by the same actress) in the third part of Hou's *Three Times* (2005). Largely based on the life of writer and model Gin Oy, Jing, who suffers from epilepsy, is another character with a neurological disorder in Hou's oeuvre. But what marks her difference from Nie is not only the direct mirroring between this character and Oy the biographical subject but the fact that *Three Times* explicitly shows her seizure: a memorable sequence in which she sits on the backseat of a motorcycle. In other words, medical symptoms are truly a matter of representation in *Three Times*. Given this point of comparison, the enigma of *The Assassin* further crystalizes: Why did the filmmakers highlight ASD as one of Nie's defining features in paratextual materials? Not least considering that a general tendency in the entertainment industry today is to deny that a fictional character has any specific mental disorder, even if core symptoms are clearly dramatized, in order to avoid pathologizing the character and, consequently, the charge that the representation might medicalize the character. Additionally, insofar as these accounts in *Xingyunji* were not later reflections but materials that came out in anticipation of the film, thus working within the public context of reception and generating a discourse surrounding Nie in relation to Asperger syndrome, why should the viewer be prepared to see Nie in this way even before going to the cinema?

I suggest that this aspect of characterization is crucial because *The Assassin* advances a conceptual trio among ASD, assassination, and animality. These seemingly unrelated notions are bound by three interconnected reasons: (1) a state of animality to which the assassin aspires in the worlds of

6 Hsieh, *Xingyunji*, 39.

both the film and the original tale; (2) a cognitive bond, manifested primarily with regard to acute sensibility to detail, which autistic people have been said to share with animals; (3) the cinematic techniques that ASD inspires, through which Nie's supreme skills of assassination come to be performed. Both the film and the original tale draw a connection between the assassin's kinetic proficiency and an animalistic perception; ASD, as portrayed in a specific popular discourse related to animality, serves as a key for humans to approach, sense, and feel the world as animals do.

The Animal Question

To corroborate the threefold connection, let us start with an instance of activism in Taipei in 2011. Coinciding with the long preproduction of *The Assassin* (the first draft of the script was written six years before the film's 2015 release), it clarifies the personal and conceptual affiliations that ground the film's thinking in terms of the animal. In a conference room on November 14, nine representatives from the Alliance for the Establishment of the Department of Animal Protection (*Cuisheng dongbaosi xingdong lianmeng*), an animal welfare organization, sat next to Tsai Ing-wen, the presidential candidate representing the Democratic Progressive Party for the coming election in January 2012. The activists asked the politician to consider their agenda of establishing an administrative unit devoted to animal welfare under the Council of Agriculture of Taiwan's Executive Yuan within her future government. Among the nine representatives were researchers and administrators in animal welfare organizations, college students, and university professors (in fields ranging from public policy to literary theory and international relations), as well as Hou and novelist Chu Tien-hsin.

This high-profile event, which received broad media coverage and some vague promises from the involved politicians, marked the temporary conclusion of a series of small-scale street campaigns in Taipei hosted by the organization in the preceding months, which Hou and Chu had attended. Chu's appearance came with little surprise. One of the representative figures in contemporary animal and ecological writing in Taiwan, Chu has devoted several of her recent works to reflection on human-animal relations. Chu has also been an active practitioner and advocate of the Taipei City Government's TNVR program for street cats, a program through which unregistered stray cats are humanely—insofar as it replaces euthanasia—trapped, neutered, vaccinated, and medically treated before they are returned to their original

street habitats. In comparison, Hou's appearance seemed unexpected, but it should not surprise anyone given his intimate affinity with a network of animal welfare and TNVR practitioners, two of whom have been directly involved in his filmmaking: Chu's older sister, the novelist and screenwriter Chu Tien-wen, has been a longtime collaborator of Hou since the early 1980s; Chu Tien-hsin's daughter is none other than Hsieh, who joined her aunt to co-write the screenplay of *The Assassin*. Unlike Chu Tien-hsin, who was thoroughly engaged and vocal throughout these events, Hou maintained a passionate detachment from the heated ground of activism—a balance of involvement and distancing that could be described as congruent with his film aesthetics. While his presence drew much attention from the media, he remained quiet but not indifferent. When asked by journalists about his motivations for attending these events, Hou said that he showed up to offer silent support.

The instance of activism and my brief biographical mapping of Hou's connections with animal welfare activists in Taiwan suggest a potential ecopolitical consciousness at work in *The Assassin*.[7] As this book tries to demonstrate, the pressing realities and associated discourses of ecological emergency have been the driving forces behind the animist imagination's attempt to envision modes of coexistence between humans and nonhumans. Crossreferencing the film with Hsieh's *Xingyunji* further highlights how the question of the animal has formed the central problematics for the filmmakers, articulated implicitly or explicitly through the film's engagements with and references to modern ethology, ASD studies, and sundry literary, theatrical, and cinematic texts.

As much an activist concern in the filmmakers' lived reality, the question of the animal is also an intertextual element in the world of *The Assassin* as the text moves from page to screen. Consider the training process that the eponymous heroine has undergone as well as the skill she eventually acquires in the original tale:

> When I was first taken by the nun, I had no idea how far we had traveled. At dawn, we arrived in a large cave which spans some dozens of paces. No person dwelled in it but there were several *gibbons* and *monkeys*. Two girls were there already. They were also ten years old.

7 This ecopolitical awareness can be seen in Hou's early work too. The screenplay of *The Green, Green Grass of Home* (1982) was inspired by a newspaper report on an activist movement against illegal river fishery. A plot event also sees a couple of primary school children rescuing and looking after a wounded owl.

> They were smart and beautiful, but they never ate. They could walk on the steep mountain cliff and never fall, as easily as *gibbons* moved in the trees. The nun then gave me a pill and handed me a two-foot long sword. Its blade was so sharp that a hair blown against its edge would be cut in half. She asked the two girls to teach me how to climb too. Gradually, my body became light as air. One year later, I could attack the *gibbons* without a miss. Later, I could easily behead *tigers* and *leopards*. Three years later, I could attack all the *hawks* and *falcons* in the sky. By this time, my sword had gradually worn down to five inches. The *birds* did not even see what took their lives. In the fourth year, the nun asked the two girls to guard the cave while taking me to somewhere in a city I did not know. She pointed out a man and enumerated his crimes. She said: "When his guard is down, behead him for me. Calm yourself down and it will be as easy as killing a bird." She then passed me a dagger, made of ram's horn, with a three-inch wide blade. In broad daylight, I decapitated him in the crowd, unnoticed by anyone.[8]

Gibbons, monkeys, tigers, leopards, eagles, birds—animals have been sacrificed for Nie to develop the capability to take her human target's life in a snap, unnoticed even amid a crowd. These vibrant creatures confirm the etymological connection between "animal" and "animation" as they swing from one tree to another, leap through the broken terrains of mountain cliffs, and navigate up the sky.

The narrative functions of these animals are manifold. While all the animals serve as Nie's target practice, by no means are they viewed as homogenous creatures. Each animal's speed and mobility, rather, have been specified and temporalized into units of measurement, devices of evaluation that mark each distinct phase throughout Nie's procedural learning progress. Effectively hunting gibbons is equivalent to one year of training; hunting eagles takes four years in total and tigers and leopards somewhere in between. Her training's animalistic affiliation mirrors what cultural anthropologist D. S. Farrer has described as the central role of "becoming-animal" in Chinese martial arts. "Meaning in the martial arts," according to Farrer, "is situated at the level of embodied experience, at the level of skilled practice, which lies beyond straightforward observation of the Other and beyond textual, historical, philosophical and religious inquiries that reduce animal correspondences to metaphorical, mythical

8 Pei, "Nie Yinniang," 404, all emphases mine.

or symbolic levels."[9] The world to which the martial artist aspires is an animist realm, where the awakening of the inner animal is achieved as the martial artist endeavors to open up and move out of the self, with the aim of dwelling in and navigating the greater, immanent environment where humans and nonhumans inextricably co-exist. Not just an imitation of animal movements or an abstraction of animality into various symbolic values, the martial artist's becoming-animal, Farrer emphasizes, "involve[s] *techniques du corps* inherent in our molecular animality but hidden by our molar human form," which manifest themselves most visibly with each change of the martial artist's hands, itself an indication of a change of the animal that the martial artist takes up. Given that human hands are simian, Farrer suggests, "all kung fu" necessarily begins with becoming-monkey.[10] Perhaps it is not arbitrary that Nie's training begins with her becoming-monkey, even though the achievement of this state is indexed by her mastery over the brutal skill and method of killing the simian.

The cinematic rendering of the phenomenological world of the martial artist and its affinities with shamanism—to which the awakening of one's inner animal is related—constitutes the central inquiry of chapter 4. What beckons here is that, in each phase of Nie's transformation into an assassin, her kinetic adeptness increases along with her perceptive competence, matching up to each of the animals she learns from. The result of such a gradual process of distillation resonates with one of the states of the moving body laid out in performance theory, envisioned by Heinrich von Kleist as a flawless form of corporeal kinesis in his canonical "On the Marionette Theatre": a mechanical puppet whose physical movements are not limited by gravitational forces, whose mind is unrestricted by the partial possession of human consciousness. As such, the puppet dances more gracefully than any able-bodied human dancer.[11] In Kleist's account, the human body's capacity to disregard the center of gravity that structures actions has everything to do with the human mind and its limitations. To illustrate their Cartesian interrelations, Kleist offers several illustrative cases, one of which relates how a young man happens to make a graceful movement reminiscent of a famous Spinario sculpture. When an observer challenges him to repeat the movement, however, the young man becomes conscious of his own actions, and all subsequent attempts to duplicate his initial elegance fail.

9 Farrer, "Becoming-animal in the Chinese Martial Arts," 147.
10 Farrer, "Becoming-animal in the Chinese Martial Arts," 159.
11 Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," 26.

Self-consciousness hinders his recuperation of a lost spontaneity, regardless of the amount of practice in front of the mirror.[12]

The religious moral of the story is evident: self-consciousness (which emerges following the observer's provocation) is the original sin, irreconcilable with grace. According to Kleist, there are two ways to tackle this conundrum for those who aspire to total command of kinetic grace, not limited to dancers and stage performers. They can ascend to divinity by taking more bites of the fruit from the tree of knowledge until they acquire the infinite amount of consciousness it takes to fully control their physical actions. Or, they can let go of the possession of consciousness and turn themselves into mechanical puppets, regarded as equivalent to nonhuman animals, as defined by a lack of consciousness or any sense of self-reflexivity. Another story in Kleist's essay offers a telling illustration of self-mechanization/animalization, shown through a one-sided contest between a human fencer and a bear chained to a stake. As the former recalls, the bear easily defeats him because:

> Not only was the bear able to parry all my blows like some world champion fencer, but all the feints I attempted—and this no fencer in the world could duplicate—went *unnoticed* by the bear. *Eye to eye, as if he could see into my very soul*, he stood there, his paw raised ready for combat, and whenever my thrusts were not intended as strikes, he simply did not move.[13]

The narrator's proposal of obliviousness as to what contributes to the bear's victory confirms Jacques Derrida's critique of the logocentric commonplace of "the animal's profound innocence, its being incapable of the 'signifier,' of lying and deceit, and of pretended pretense."[14] Rather than seeing the bear as intellectually capable of distinguishing trickery from truth or itself possessive of the supplementary possibility of leading its opponent astray, the fencer ascribes to it a sense of stationary readiness outside of the symbolic order. The bear, sans self-consciousness, pierces straight into the fencer's interiority while oblivious to the reflexivity that goes into his act of feinting. Not incidentally, being exterior to the ideology of goodness is also a moral quality commonly associated with an assassin who, like a marionette, merely executes an order to kill in order to fulfill someone else's vision.

Kleist's bear functions as a useful point of comparison with the characterization of Nie: an animal that is itself a master sword fighter. But a

12 Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," 25.

13 Kleist, "On the Marionette Theatre," 26–27, emphasis mine.

14 Derrida, *The Animal That Therefore I Am*, 130.

fundamental distinction between them must be clarified. The result of Nie's training may have turned her into a supreme assassin; by no means, however, do the filmmakers view her as an animal-machine without consciousness or subjectivity. The animalistic figure that she is designed to be achieves the same ends of the kinetically perfect body outlined in "On the Marionette Theatre" through a means conceptually opposite to logocentrism. Approaching this question from modern ethology, the filmmakers conceptualize the assassin's combat skill to be thoroughly engaged with the reflexive process of conscious deception. Consider the fight between Nie and the masked Lady Tian. Hou has specified that the two actresses should behave like "two lionesses."[15] Referring to renowned accounts of animal behavior in Austrian ethologist Konrad Lorenz's *King Solomon's Ring: New Light on Animal Ways*, Hsieh surprisingly reads Hou's directorial instruction as his understanding of the behavioral science behind fights among carnivorous animals, especially wolves and dogs, who are generally restrained from inflicting serious injuries to opponents of the same species. Given their abilities to cause damage of much greater degree, these animals intentionally avoid unnecessary conflicts and their lethal consequences either through such intimidating moves as growling, grumbling, and snapping their teeth in the empty air or carefully controlled attacks in the actual process of fighting. This is one of the reasons, according to Hsieh, why the fight between Nie and Lady Tian stops immediately once the latter's mask comes off. Given that Lady Tian's identity has been revealed, Nie makes the judgment that she poses no real threat, leaving no reason to continue the battle.[16] Indeed, this logic is consistent throughout Nie's fight scenes in the film, such as the brief fight between her and her nun-master. The outcome of this final showdown is revealed when the former, after twice dodging the latter's attacks, retaliates and, in one move, leaves a barely visible horizontal cut on her white robe, close to the right side of her abdomen. The fight promptly ends at this moment, as the tiny cut spells out the wide gap between their martial arts skills.

Returning to "On the Marionette Theatre," a passage from *King Solomon's Ring*, though unquoted by Hsieh, provides a more precise explanation of the bear's triumph. In a chapter devoted to the animal's linguistic capacity, Lorenz revisits the legends of famed animal "geniuses" capable of mathematical calculation. Imagine the following scenario: "You are invited to set the examination yourself and you are put opposite the horse, terrier or

15 Hsieh, *Xingyunji*, 105.
16 Hsieh, *Xingyunji*, 106.

whatever animal it is. You ask, how much is twice two; the terrier scrutinizes you intently and barks four times. In a horse, the feat seems still more prodigious for he does not even look at you."[17] It is neither telepathy nor intelligence defined in anthropomorphic terms but the animal's perceptive apparatus that allows the horse or the terrier in question to capture fleeting environmental signals. When the horse knocks or the terrier barks for the fourth time, they are prompted to stop by the smallest gestures that the surrounding humans betray, even if unconsciously and involuntarily for a split second. For the transmission of the correct signal to the animal, a microscopic change of state or a physical movement from the human observer suffices. Should the surrounding people be unaware of the correct answer or miscalculate the mathematical equation themselves, the terrier would, accordingly, go on barking until a stop sign eventually appears or simply provide the wrong answer that the people have in mind.[18]

Lorenz's account invites a rethinking of Kleist's understanding of the kinetically consummate body in Cartesian terms: not a result of the possession of an extreme degree of consciousness—be it all or nothing—but something altogether exterior to the paradigm of consciousness. A modern ethologist would likely correct Kleist and attribute the bear's victory to its capture of the minutest expressional movements that the fencer unconsciously conveys and, hence, the apparent prediction of each move he is about to make. Ordinary humans are simply incapable of partaking in animalistic communication as such, across all parts of its apparatus from the productive to the receptive end. Intriguingly, Lorenz notes that the signal in this transmissive process cannot be conveyed—let alone sensed and deciphered—even by actors with superb mimetic skills such as "George Robey or Emil Jannings."[19] How, then, does *The Assassin* stage what determines the irreversible defeat of the human fencer and what fine actors like Robey and Jannings could not have achieved? In what ways is the animal-like assassin's interiority performed, particularly when there are few, if any, interactions between Nie and animals in the film? Indeed,

17 Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring*, 77.

18 The episode described here is known as the Clever Hans fallacy. The eponymous animal was an Orlov Trotter who caused a sensation in the early twentieth century and initiated a series of studies on animal perception. Around 1907, Hans's owner Wilhelm von Osten, a retired German mathematics professor, claimed that the horse was able to perform mathematical calculations in the way described by Lorenz. Oskar Pfungst devoted himself to addressing Hans's human-like behaviors. His research, published in 1907, serves as the foundation of Lorenz's explanation. See Friend, *Animal Talk*, 50–53.

19 Lorenz, *King Solomon's Ring*, 75.

the film skips all of Nie's training processes detailed in the original tale and starts in medias res with her effortless decapitation of a man on a galloping horse, surrounded by an entourage of bodyguards.

Translating across Species

Even though it is not shown in the final cut of *The Assassin*, the backstory of Nie's autistic character, as documented in *Xingyunji*, is associated with her lifelong fascination with horses. In the screenwriters' imagination, Nie spends most of her childhood with horses in stables and markets, disregarding needlework, reading, and other activities typically bound up with domesticity and femininity. She is also skilled in equestrian activities, such as polo. While Hsieh admits that a major flaw of this fictional arrangement lies in the fact that people with Asperger syndrome, herself included, are generally less developed in motor coordination, the affiliation between Nie and the equestrian is not entirely unjustified.[20] One senses a nod to Peter Shaffer's *Equus* (1973), which similarly explores the boundary of neuronormativity through a boy's at once intimate and disconcerting interactions with horses. Another media text that has made equine-assisted therapies for ASD visible in the public discourse is Michel O. Scott's 2009 documentary *The Horse Boy*, based on travel writer Rupert Isaacson's 2009 memoir, *The Horse Boy: A Father's Quest to Heal His Son*. Both the film and the book recount the 2007 journey of Isaacson and his wife Kristin Neff, a professor of educational psychology, to Mongolia, where they took their autistic son Rowan for a treatment through horseback riding and shamanic healing. (Intriguingly, the animist worldview played a key role in this journey for, according to the Mongolian shamans, Rowan was the victim of a malevolent ancestral spirit from Neff's family.)[21]

Furthermore, Hsieh details the clinical fact that equine-assisted therapies, featuring horseback riding and hippotherapy, have been routinely used to treat autistic children. Research has also been done on autistic children's nonverbal communication with horses; one of the most renowned studies was conducted by American ethologist Temple Grandin, herself also an advocate of animal welfare, designer of farm animal systems, and autistic person. Grandin's *Animals in Translation* famously begins with an

20 Hsieh, *Xingyunji,* 39.

21 Rowan hosts a series on YouTube called New Trails Learning Systems, in which he shares his experience of living with ASD.

account of her lifelong fondness for horse riding, one of the few physical activities she is capable of mastering. As if speaking directly to the kinetic flaw singled out by Hsieh, she writes: "My sense of balance was so bad I could never learn to parallel ski no matter how hard I tried … Yet there I was, moving my body in sync with the horse's body to help him run right." What distinguishes the necessary conditions underlying the perfection of parallel skiing and that of horse riding is a bidirectional, nonverbal communication that characterizes autistic people's interactions with animals: "Riding a horse isn't what it looks like: it isn't a person sitting in a saddle telling the horse what to do by yanking on the reins. Real riding is a lot like ballroom dancing or maybe figure skating in pairs. It's a relationship."[22] Both parties have to be extra-sensitive to each other's changing states in order to strike a twofold balance that ensures mutual safety and comfort throughout the process.

What makes horse riding manageable for her, Grandin claims, is a radical framing of ASD as not only a human condition that enables a particular group of people's proximity to animals but also a general characteristic of how animals themselves engage with the world: "Animals are like autistic savants. In fact, I'd go so far as to say that animals might actually *be* autistic savants."[23] Based on neuropsychiatric studies, results of brain scans, and her own experience, Grandin suggests that what she takes to be an ontological bond between animals and autistic people can be observed in both of their environmental perceptions. A fundamental lineament characterizes their cognitive processing: all-encompassing sensitivity to details, not only through visual acuity but all other senses as well (though the former constitutes the linchpin of autistic perception). This allows autistic people and animals to see and amplify their surroundings in all their parts, rather than their sum: "When an animal or an autistic person is seeing the real world instead of his idea of the world that means he's seeing *detail*. This is the single most important thing to know about the way animals perceive the world: animals see details people don't see. They are totally detail-oriented."[24] A farm plant, a feed yard, or a slaughterhouse, broken down into one bit after another according to this cognitive processing, is composed of shiny reflections on puddles glancing off of the wet floor or on the surface of smooth metals; chains that jiggle back and forth, in rhythm with which the cattle swing their heads; the clanging of metal sliding doors; high-pitched

22 Grandin and Johnson, *Animals in Translation*, 5–6.

23 Grandin and Johnson, *Animals in Translation*, 8.

24 Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 31–33.

noises like hissing air produced by a hydraulic system, motor, or even backup alarms on trucks; a hanging rag or towel on the fence or small objects on the floor, still and moving alike; and small changes in the texture, color, or brightness of the environment that create subtle contrasts. Each new environmental element introduces novel colors and contrasts to the scene. These minutiae, to which allistic people remain oblivious, constitute the center of attention for animals and autistic people, triggering oftentimes a host of negative responses such as fear, angst, and anxiety.[25]

In claiming to a reality parallel to and, thereby, no less real than normative consensus reality, Grandin's version of autistic perception operates in its own sphere, one shared with animals but inaccessible to neurotypical people. She places emphasis on the enclosed singularity of one sphere and its unbridgeable gap from other possibilities of bodily, emotional, and cognitive engagements with the world. Herein lies the specificity of the autistic person as a shamanic figure: ASD remains a condition exclusive to autistic identity from the outset to the end. The aesthetic paradigm that this chapter puts forward thus describes a set of formal properties that offers us a glimpse into what an alternative relationship with the world might be like.

Before further placing Grandin's discourse into conversation with *The Assassin*, I want to pause here and think about the former as a subject of study in and of itself. With numerous publications, public lectures, and several films on her life and work (including a 2001 TV documentary by Errol Morris called *Stairway to Heaven*, a 2006 BBC documentary called *The Woman Who Thinks Like a Cow*, and a 2010 eponymous biopic), Grandin has become one of the most visible spokespeople for the ASD community. At least five of her books have been translated into Chinese and published in Taiwan, including those related to the animal—possible sources for the makers of *The Assassin*.[26] I stress that I do not take Grandin's claims at face value, despite her scientific authority and biography having shaped them into empirical facts rather than cultural constructs. One can even describe Grandin's work as an ontological project, embracing certain stereotypical traits as part and parcel of the autistic identity without problematizing the

25 Practically, the attention to detail may carry an ethical weight when it comes to animal welfare. With the aid of autistic translation, one could detect and remove anxiety-inducing factors for animals in animal farms or slaughterhouses. Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 167–68.
26 The five books translated into Chinese include: *Thinking in Pictures: and Other Reports from My Life with Autism* (1995); *Emergence: Labeled Autistic* (1996); *Animals in Translation* (2005); *The Way I See It: A Personal Look at Autism and Asperger's* (2008); and *The Autistic Brain: Thinking Across the Spectrum* (2013).

potential supercrip narrative.[27] As Cary Wolfe suggests, however, a critique of Grandin's agenda from the perspective of identity politics is a missed opportunity on thinking about disability studies and animal studies together. The theoretical payoff of such intersectionality allows us to move beyond the "fetishization of agency" in disability discourse and see the structuring organization that has come to order what we conceive of as lives.[28] In the process of mapping these normative forces, we can catch the heterogenous tensions and micro-ruptures that emerge out of them.

Following Wolfe, who reads Grandin critically to address what he sees as an impasse in the current theoretical framework of disability studies, I consider the mobilization of the discourses surrounding ASD for artistic creation: how *The Assassin* helps us rethink the question of the animal—inextricably a question of the human as well—and, conversely, how these discourses generate novel ways of reading cinematic performance both in the film and in general. My approach to ASD in relation to artistic techniques therefore echoes what Erin Manning calls "the autistic perception," which serves "not only to honor neurodiversity, to take into account modes of existence I consider key to making our worlds richer, but to make a political case for the necessity of creating techniques and minor gestures that open existence to its perceptual more-than."[29]

Gazes Projected or Evaded

The ability to register tangible details, I propose, serves as the foundation for Nie's becoming-animal or, following Grandin's ontological claim, a channel through which *being*-animal transpires. *The Assassin* enacts this inner capacity through Shu's performance of two of Hsieh's own symptoms: a lack of eye contact during communication and an obsession with an interest or activity.

Regarding the first symptom, it is generally suggested that subtle emotional cues are detached from the physical existence of a given entity (animate and inanimate alike) for autistic people. The conventional loci of human expressivity (such as eyes, mouths, facial expressions, and hand gestures), thus emerge as no more significant than the appearance of any

27 For a critique of Grandin's animal-autism analogy, see Muller and McNeill, "Toppling the Temple of Grandin: Autistic-Animal Analogies and the Ableist-Speciesist Nexus," 195–225.
28 Wolfe, "Learning from Temple Grandin, or, Animal Studies, Disability Studies, and Who Came after the Subject," 101.
29 Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 14.

other object and hence do not draw their attention, frequently manifested as a sustained projected sight line to these loci. All scenes of verbal communication featuring Nie accentuates her lack of eye contact by blocking, disruptions of face-to-face conversations, and acts of concealment, which literally "deface" her. We first see this in the black-and-white opening, in which Nie kneels outside the threshold of a gate and looks down at the floor while her nun-master assigns her the task of assassinating Tian Ji'an—admittedly, this scene also depicts the social decorum that regulates Nie's interaction with her superiors. A more radical depiction of the feature takes place when Nie looks straight ahead without turning to her mother, who sits to her right and recollects Princess Jiacheng's life. Shortly after her mother's words bring Nie to tears, the possibility of expressing any mawkish sentiment through facial countenance is thoroughly rejected, for she now covers the entirety of her face with a handkerchief. Other instances abound: when Nie's wounded father confesses, to her face, his deep regret about letting the nun take her away, she halts the conversation at once by turning her back to her father; when the mirror polisher sits behind her to apply ointment on her wounded back, she lowers her head and tells the story of the bluebird; and when she fights with Tian Ji'an after he misrecognizes her as the perpetrator of the malicious spell cast on his concubine, Huji (Nikki Hsieh), she subdues him with force and, with her gaze notably fixated on his chin, whispers her diagnosis of Huji's pregnancy.

These evasions of eye contact are contrasted with Nie's fixed glance upon people in scenes where verbal communication does not define the nature of their interaction, particularly when a matter of life and death is concerned. Consider the opening shot, which sees Nie's nun-master ordering her to kill a villainous man "expertly, as if he were a bird in flight." Slowly but surely, Nie moves about in the next shot, bordering the edge of a grove where she hides. Her resolute and unremitting gaze stays fixated upon the target, of whom we catch a glimpse in the following point-of-view shot from her perspective. When the opportune moment arrives, she sprints out of her hiding place and, in the next four slow-motion shots, which lengthen an instance of a blow into a nine-second display of her supreme skills, slashes his neck with swiftness and accuracy. Pulled by gravity, the corpse leans forward shortly before it falls off the horse. During this process, Nie's hawk-like eyes concentrate on the targeted man. Not once has she blinked. The only time she closes her eyes in the sequence comes after the moment of her last blow, namely, after the killing concludes.

Throughout the entire film, in fact, Nie's eyes simply do not blink during tasks of spying, eavesdropping, and killing. An exception occurs when

Fig. 3.1. A rare blink in *The Assassin* (2015).

she first returns home to execute the assassination of Tian Ji'an. She puts on colorful clothes that her family, in anticipation of her return, has been preparing for her. Here, perhaps the blinks are caused by the actress's physical standpoint on a terrace facing the incoming wind (figure 3.1). But one can also read this subtle change of her face not as an index of the set's windy exteriority—one that blows in, borrowing André Bazin's renowned description, "a grain of sand that gets into and seizes up a piece of machinery"—but as a non-indifferent constituent internal to the unfolding of the diegesis: a performance contingent upon her temporary disrobing of the black outfit and, consequently, her disarming of her identity as an unblinking assassin.[30] The link between this particular outfit and her identity is decisive (to which we shall return)—a point best illustrated by the official Japanese translation of the film title, *Kokui no shikyaku*, meaning literally "the black-robed assassin."

But is hostility the only form of affect that a concentrated gaze projects? Leo Bersani poses this question in his analysis of the various "stares" in Bruno Dumont's *Humanité* (1999), a film that similarly dramatizes the kinds of withdrawn and hostile looks hitherto discussed. Other than these affective stares, Bersani wonders: "Can the world be welcomed—met, received, somehow, with

30 Bazin, "*Le journal d'un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson," 131.

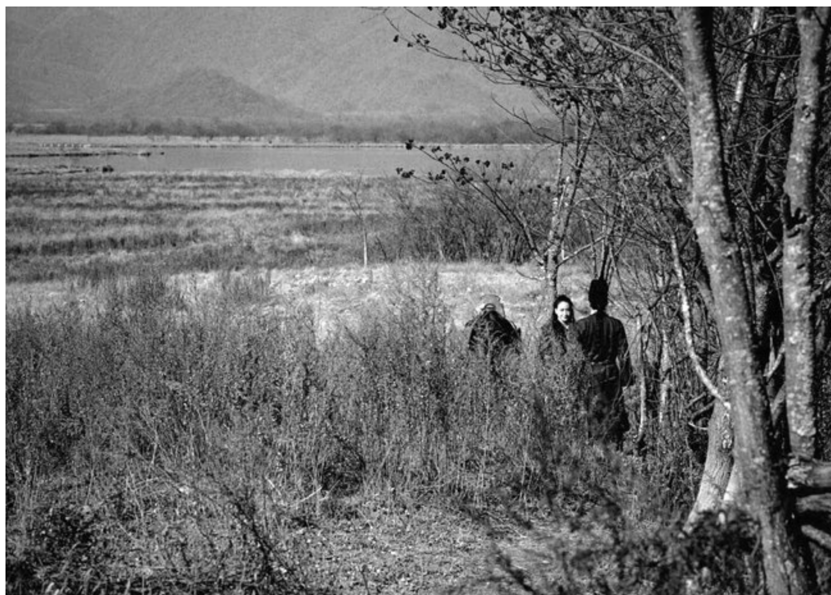

Fig. 3.2. A rare smile in *The Assassin* (2015).

pleasure? … What if [a non-searching] gaze, fixed with unceasing attention on everything that enters its field of vision, were to become *interested* by something within that field? Interested enough to move toward it, to test ways of knowing it."[31] It is as if *The Assassin* were both conducting this inquiry and answering it affirmatively. Indeed, the other instance of Nie's eye contact comes loaded not with hostility but full-on fondness. Towards the end of the film, upon Nie's return, the mirror polisher runs out of a hamlet to greet her. A long take allows us to glimpse the contour of the two characters' intimacy, framed in a distant space whose coordinates are those of the extreme long shot. More than fleeting contacts of wandering gazes, here their eyes are locked on each other. Talk is cheap when, finally, in the denouement, a vague tinge of Nie's smile—unmistakable even at the deployed shot scale—says it all (figure 3.2). In several interviews, Hou has mentioned that the character set-up of the mirror polisher was inspired by the actor Satoshi Tsumabuki's signature smile, so childlike and beaming that it seems capable of melting down a piece of impenetrable armor.[32] After numerous displays of unreciprocated gazes, such communicative immediacy at the very end of the film articulates the possibility of togetherness. If one thing could create a captivated center in

31 Bersani, *Receptive Bodies*, 106–12, 116.

32 Xu, "Xie haimeng jiemi nieyinniang: qifumu cong de xiaorong qifa le hou xiaoxian."

autism's state of confusion, characterized by the leveling of the affective intensity across all entities, what might be more reassuring and transparent than an unreserved smile that lays bare the fullness of interiority to lower Nie's affective filter and garner her candid regard?

Might we hypothesize these distinct motivations behind Nie's concentrated gazes—either extreme aggression or subtle affection—as reverberations with the complex mechanism behind the second symptom that Hsieh indicates: a target in which the autistic person's attention and interest are fully instilled? As Grandin has also suggested, autistic people's investment in a privileged focus is a dialectical process. While such a focus in an otherwise neutralized world might have given rise to hostility, the deepening of this engagement also facilitates autistic people's concentration on and familiarity with the object of interest.[33] Concerning the film's narrative, the switch from the antagonistic gaze to the affectionate look marks the transition of the ways Nie's self comes to be defined across different phases. While the notion of "selfhood" hardly captures the autistic experience of the world, predicated on a diffused, centerless state of subjectivity, Nie's initial identity as an assassin is established due to her success in developing an acute sense of seclusion that groups herself and her target in a microcosm. Such is the cloistered but heightened sphere wherein her animalistic perception operates, insofar as specificities stand out from an otherwise undifferentiated milieu. As Nie's sympathy first fails her in the execution of a target who holds his napping child in the arms, her identity as an assassin undergoes self-questioning and begins to transform—a turning point in the narrative reflected on the stylistic front, too, as the film's opening black-and-white sequence comes to an end. She once again fails to deliver the assassination of Tian Ji'an in the remainder of the film in color. The cause of her failure this time, however, is not simply compassion but her evaluation of the political role that Tian plays in the game of power balance between the provincial Weibo he rules and the central government. No longer her old self who single-mindedly executes her nun-master's assigned tasks, Nie gains an alternative sense of autonomy through her interactions with the mirror polisher. The film thus concludes with Nie's departure from the nun-master and her new companionship with the mirror polisher back to his homeland. We can perhaps describe Nie's new identity as a lover, since, at this point, the film unfolds into what Chu Tien-wen has envisioned: "a romance with some occasional fights."[34]

33 Grandin, *Thinking in Pictures*, 161–63.

34 Chu's positioning of the film was shared by Shu on her Chinese social media platform, Sina Weibo, on August 27, 2015.

Excursus on Bresson

Nie's animalistic perception, withdrawal from the world, and investment in privileged foci shape the acting method devised for Shu's performance of the character. In numerous interviews, Hou has repeatedly emphasized that Shu's sustained gaze during combat, projecting outward from an expressionless and impenetrable face, is the forced result of his direction. As every moment could be her last, no assassin adept at and devoted to her task could afford to lose her vision, not even for the span of, literally, the blink of an eye.[35] The ostentatious gestures routinely mobilized in the martial arts genre's staging of action—the intense stare emphasized in a close-up or a dramatic zoom-in; the demonstrative opening pose before the fight; the dramatic display of specialized weapons; or the signature move of the martial arts school to which the practitioner belongs—amount to mere redundancy on the ground, exposing only the practitioner's amateurism. The skills essential to assassination, in Hou's own sportive analogy, are comparable to those of a top tennis player: "Even as he returns fast groundstrokes, Roger Federer stays focused without a slight change of facial expression. This is *wuxia*."[36]

To the end of restraining Shu's facial expressions, Hou adopted Bresson's famed directorial method of shooting the same shot numerous times until all acting was drained from his actors—whom he called "models"—to the extent that they were simply enacting the actions and uttering the lines. Habitual traces were erased one after another in the duration of Shu's repeated performances, as the actress worked against the face's constant formation of expression, which had, over the course of her career, molded a recognizable repertoire of expressivity that defined her star persona in contemporary Chinese cinema. Borrowing Bazin's evaluation of Bresson, this directorial method is best understood through the operative power of subtraction, as seen in his use of a series of negative qualifiers to describe its effect: "the countenance of the actor *denuded* of all symbolic expression, *sheer* epidermis, set in a surrounding *devoid* of any artifice."[37] To further Hou's own tennis analogy, I think he would applaud David Foster Wallace's diagnosis of the attraction of a Federer match lying in how his kinetic aptness offers a "religious experience," the divinity of which emerges when we "come at the aesthetic stuff obliquely, to talk around it, or—as Aquinas did with his

35 Hsieh, *Xingyunji*, 98.

36 Hsieh, *Xingyunji*, 217.

37 Bazin, "*Le journal d'un curé de campagne* and the Stylistics of Robert Bresson," 136, emphasis mine.

own ineffable subject—to try to define it in terms of what it is not."[38] Not a grimace, not a blink, not a trace of any codified expression of emotion—the purity of Nie's assassination skill achieves its fullest potentiality through the poverty of animation and of legibility that Shu's face, itself an image, carries.

On this constellation formed by ASD, Bresson's directorial method, and a negative mode of visual address manifested on the face and through the glance (or the lack thereof), Noa Steimatsky grounds her inquiry into what she describes as a kind of cinematic "reticence." In Bresson's narration, dramaturgy, cinematography, and editing patterns, which unfailingly enact an assertive detachment of images from their semiotic conventions and functions, Steimatsky observes a conceptual reverberation with the autistic conditions outlined above. Just as the evasion of eye contact of a person on the spectrum is symptomatic of the leveling of the anthropomorphic (and frequently anthropocentric) hierarchies of the world, so do Bresson's stylistics expose the fallacy of an expressive, communicative center in cinema, not least that of the command of the human visage: "His shots are obstinately composed and paced to level persons, objects, and spaces; they raise barriers everywhere between things, or else drain them in a flat, opaque field, wherein the face is displaced as measure and medium of address."[39] Mobilizing the language of animism as well, Steimatsky likewise associates this "anti-animistic inclination" in Bresson's treatment of the world with the state of confusion in the autistic experience.[40] The placement of all entities on the same order of significance indicates a negative mode of the animist imagination, as vitality has been pulled down to the horizontal status of a corpse, as foregrounded attractions have been sucked back into a non-discriminating chaos of inanimation. The aesthetic paradigm to which *The Assassin* belongs thus defines the animist imagination, somewhat counterintuitively, through an extreme rejection of anthropomorphism: a sphere of animism that is animist because everything is equally not animate, not personal.

Thinking with the counter-anthropomorphism that Bresson's method effects, one would be remiss not to mention *Au hasard Balthazar* (1966), wherein the titular donkey—the consummate Bressonian model—remains resistant to any psychological depth that the viewer might be tempted to ascribe. Throughout the film, Balthazar's face does not function as a Kuleshovian ground for the viewer to conduct an empathic reading through

38 Wallace, "Roger Federer as Religious Experience."

39 Noa Steimatsky, "Of the Face, in Reticence," 161.

40 Noa Steimatsky, "Of the Face, in Reticence," 168.

retrospective projection. Nor does any readily legible meaning emerge, specifically in the beginning of the unforgettable circus sequence, when the donkey's face is juxtaposed, through montage, with four other animals' unexpressive and even fragmented faces. With regards to the world of the animal behind the reach of ordinary human perception, doesn't the film stage precisely an episode of Balthazar as a "mathematic genius," which Lorenz demystifies? In the second part of the circus scene, after Balthazar's bodily measurements are taken, he arrives at the center of the venue where a blackboard is placed, performing the trick of calculation in front of a full house. After the show host asks for some random numbers from the audience, Balthazar performs arithmetic tasks by multiplying two sets of numbers and indicating the results by tapping his foot on the ground. The number of taps, similar to the cases in *King Solomon's Ring* previously discussed, suggests the answer that the show host should fill in on the blackboard in the order of each digit. A rejection of anthropomorphic communication that, nevertheless, could not take place without subtle cues from the human spectators, the entire circus scene turns to animalistic perception as a key to rethinking and performing the limit of humanness. It comes as no surprise that two donkeys make a cameo appearance in the first shot of *The Assassin* (see the cover image of the book).

What Hou has learned from Bresson, then, is a hermeneutic structure, one that demonstrates how the repetition of action (at least for human actors) hollows out interiority. We get a sense of how deep Hou's intuition goes when he resorts to the Bressonian method to shape his shamanic figure. To be sure, performing the same set of actions repeatedly has been a common directorial method for Hou since the late 90s, first implemented during the principal photography of *Flowers of Shanghai* (1998), where each scene was filmed at least three times. The underlying ideology is comparable to the neorealist ideal of the non-actor, though not achieved by employing non-professionals. Rather, durational exposure to the camera, if not placement within the cinematic apparatus more broadly, has forced Shu to overcome the necessary conditions of stardom, which, in Edgar Morin's anthropological account, entail that she "plays her own character, i.e., the ideal character which her face, her smile, her eyes, her lovely body naturally express."[41] This process concludes when the star as an archetype becomes a specific type of character—in our case, an assassin with Asperger syndrome. Similarly, the reticence of Shu's face, while in dialogue with the Bressonian method, is not necessarily motivated by a philosophical interrogation of the limitations

41 Morin, *The Stars*, 158.

of the image's legibility and ability to signify. While it might appear that, like Bresson, Hou is also probing the possibilities of imaging at the zero degree, the motivated performance of autistic traits and of the assassin as an identity, instead, situates Hou's approach within the diegesis as well as the animist imagination's specific commitment to the nonhuman.

To illustrate the distinctiveness of Shu's performance and Hou's borrowed method, consider a counterexample of how the interaction between an assassin and an animal could have been filmed: Jean-Pierre Melville's *Le Samouraï* (1967). In an unforgettable sequence that addresses head-on cross-species communication as well as the limitation of human perception outlined in both Kleist's and Lorenz's accounts, hitman Jef Costello (Alain Delon) returns to his apartment, which has previously been bugged by the police. Costello is about to make a phone call before the ceaseless chirping of his caged bird catches his attention. Something about this sound and, upon closer examination, a few loose feathers in the cage strike him as unusual, not least when contrasted with the bird's ordinary calmness, as established in a close-up from the first sequence of the film. Alerted by the agitated bird, Costello searches the room and locates the hidden eavesdropping device. While, here, it is also an assassin who demonstrates a perceptive apparatus as efficient as that of the animal, the bird's anxiety is expressed through its agitated sounds and movements. That is, Costello gains awareness of the bird's unusual state through exterior clues, including tangible objects such as its fallen feathers, rather than a subtraction of his own affect.

With ease, we can imagine other actors' delivery of the same performance of Costello. Few specificities regarding Delon's acting are demonstrated; whether Costello is autistic is a question of little consequence.[42] And if this question does not matter, can a similar observation be made concerning other autistic characters in contemporary media? Consider one of the most famous portrayals of late: Sherlock Holmes (Benedict Cumberbatch) in BBC's *Sherlock* (2010–2017), in which Dr. John Watson (Martin Freeman) mentions, in the second episode of the second season, that the eponymous detective has Asperger's. Cumberbatch's performance of the iconic detective has certainly shown several core symptoms of ASD, thus generating a wide range of media discussions regarding the authenticity of his performance, the pros and cons of portraying Holmes as an autistic supercrip, and the representation of neurological disorders in popular visual culture more

42 On the contrary, some recent films that explicitly thematize a correlation between high-functioning autism and assassination skills include Prachya Pinkaew's *Chocolate* (2008) and Gavin O'Connor's *The Accountant* (2016).

generally. However, Asperger's in *Sherlock* remains the screenwriter's retrospective diagnosis of an iconic fictional character's behaviors. Unlike *The Assassin*, the primary goal of *Sherlock* is not to conduct an aesthetic inquiry into how acute perception—quite useful to the detective's work, one would assume—could be rendered or performed with the sundry possibilities that the cinematic (and televisual) apparatus affords.

This is not to say that no other film has tackled this task. Quite the opposite. Tim Webb's *A is for Autism* (1992), Bob Sabiston's *Snack and Drink* (2000), Mick Jackson's *Temple Grandin* (2010), Roger Ross Williams's *Life, Animated* (2016), Jerry Rothwell's *The Reason I Jump* (2020), among others, have all explored the interiority of autistic people through creative use of visual effects and animation techniques. Whether these films present the autistic experience realistically is up for debate, but, in them, what the world might be like for an autistic person has become thoroughly visible, to the point that viewers are frequently invited to take up the protagonist's first-person perspective. Considering these representational strategies in relation to the Bressonian method that Hou has privileged, *The Assassin*'s emphasis on the exteriority and opacity of human expression presents itself as the exact opposite of the accessibility to interiority. The film therefore establishes a new approach to the staging of ASD and delineates a whole spectrum of the performative means to this end.

Assassins, Mask-to-Mask

If *The Assassin* invites an inquiry into the performance of ASD, paying heed to ASD as a mode of performance also contributes to our reading of the film. Consider the encounter between the "two lionesses," previously explored through the lens of modern ethology. It is a decisive moment when the external political threat that Tian Ji'an faces is laid bare as an internal crisis initiated by Lady Tian, herself also a skilled assassin, and her sorcerer-master, who has remained behind the scenes (I discuss his black magic in the introduction of this book). The film has hitherto hinted at Tian Ji'an's awareness of his wife's scheme through his exposé of a hidden messenger in her room, who passes information between Lady Tian and her sorcerer-master. His subsequent warning to her that his uncle Tian Xing, whom he has demoted and banished to Linqing, must not be buried alive is equally revealing—not the kind of daily conversation one expects to hear from a loving couple. But it is in this encounter between Lady Tian and Nie that the former physically partakes in the elimination of political opposition.

It is also after this encounter that Nie grasps the internal conflicts within the Tian family, leading to her subsequent decision to spare the life of Tian Ji'an.

The crucial fight sequence is composed of twenty-three shots, beginning with Nie's entrance into a withered white birch forest and ending with a close-up of Lady Tian's split mask on the ground. It lasts only about three minutes, with the screen duration devoted to the actual fight less than fifty seconds. Yet for these fifty seconds, Shu went through the same set of choreographed actions repeatedly so that any visible trace of emotions—the hesitancy, fear, and unfamiliarity revealed typically with one's shut eyes—disappeared from her bodily gestures and facial countenance. Unsatisfied by the actress's kinetic control, Hou even reshot everything from scratch a year later.[43] The end-result is that the fluid expressivity of Shu's face has coagulated and stiffened itself into a vacuous surface, a (death) mask. Even under frame-by-frame scrutiny, the lack of expression remains consistent from Lady Tian's initiation of the attack to Nie's last blow. Between these two actions, about two dozen thrusts and counterstrikes have been delivered, blocked, or dodged.

This style of performance and its underlying ideology not only shed light on Nie's characterization but also permeate other aspects of the film. The face's capacity to lock itself into a mask speaks to the fact that Lady Tian wears a mask in this scene. On the narrative front, the object functions as a conventional device of concealment that facilitates her fashioning of an identity alternative to her domestic (but not feeble) role in Weibo, thus allowing a channel for the internal conflicts within the Tian family to be externalized. Given the accentuated visibility of this object, however, might we also regard the mask as a device of self-transformation, one that allows Lady Tian, supposedly neurotypical, to approximate and assume the autistic perception so advantageous to the identity of the assassin according to the film's own logic? More precisely, the mask functions as a kind of prosthesis that elevates the wearer's physical capacity to a level on par with that of Nie. If ASD allows Nie to *be* the fencing bear in Kleist, the math-solving terrier in Lorenz, or the arithmetic donkey in Bresson, the addition of a mask onto Lady Tian's face indicates an external alternative through which the anti-animist levelling of the self and the world can take place—a willed affectlessness. She becomes, in this line, another consummate assassin who stands face-to-face or, more accurately, *mask-to-mask* with Nie.

It is only befitting that the fight concludes with a slow-motion shot in which the two assassins swiftly spin their bodies to create axes of rotation,

43 Hsieh, *Xingyunji*, 215–217.

through which maximum speed is generated, before they simultaneously deliver one last strike to each other, with Nie aiming at none other than her opponent's mask. Lady Tian's posture shortly becomes less reactive, as she repositions herself from an action-ready partial squat to an ordinary upright stance. A subtle but visible crack on her mask appears. She tosses the mask on the ground in the following extreme long shot—a move easy to miss on first viewing given the deployed scale. Both parties then leave the scene from opposite directions, and the sequence ends with a close-up of the broken pieces of the mask on the ground. The result of this fight supplements a scenario missing from Kleist's wide spectrum of (non-)conscious entities: while the ideological positions of God, the animal, and the marionette have all been laid out, among which human consciousness is defined, what might have happened when a bear fights a marionette? That is, an encounter between two distinct but equal entities that occupy the same position on the spectrum of kinetic proficiency. *The Assassin* provides an answer to this thought experiment: with the breakdown of the mask, such equality collapses, soon followed by Lady Tian's surrender.

As this final close-up also reveals, not just the act of masking but the mask itself beckons: a half mask that covers Lady Tian from the nose up, meaning that the fight is, more accurately speaking, a half-mask-to-mask encounter—perhaps the half-ness explains why Lady Tian is bound to lose. The rich ornament on the surface turns it into a symbolically loaded object, as the mask conventionally is. Radiating from the center of this gold-embroidered half mask, irregularly shaped and fire-patterned carvings extend to embrace Lady Tian's forehead and the sides of her head, as if her gaze is materialized into centrifugally bursting flames. According to the production designer Huang Wen-ying, this is because the elemental attribute of the character is conceived of as fire, the symbolic and material qualities of which reflect her fierce personality and identity-switching flexibility. Instead of seeing Lady Tian as a governor's wife who has lived with a secret identity, it is more accurate to describe the wife and the assassin as but two of the character's aliases: her essence, like the fire, stays "ever-shifting and ungraspable."[44]

Returning to Lady Tian's fight between Nie, the fiery quality expressed in the material conditions of her half mask also anticipates the gap in their mastery of martial arts skills. The color of Nie's signature black outfit indicates, by definition, a post-transformation state. As Huang conceptualizes, the classical understanding of blackness documented in *Shuowen jiezi*, a second-century

44 Huang, *Baifang cike tangchuanqi*, 74–75; Huang and Hsieh, *Tang fengshang*, 180–181.

Chinese dictionary, is “what results from flame”; the color black associated with Nie is thus the final outcome of a fiery transformation.[45] Like the contrast between a half mask and a full mask, the color contrast between Lady Tian’s and Nie’s clothing symbolizes a distinction between what is still unfolding and what has already undergone the necessary process of becoming a supreme assassin. Lady Tian’s elemental affinity with fire is reflected, too, in the design of the objects that decorate her dwelling, notably a six-panel folding screen that appears in her room where Tian Ji’an comes to punish her after discovering her scheme. It features a withered forest and a bright sun, both in gold, against a dark coral sky. When light passes through the surface of this screen made of fine, translucent yarn, it enlivens the mysterious pictorial landscape and transforms it into a flowing redness that takes turn giving off “a shadowy weight, a sparkling incandescence, like flaming larva, like dripping blood, revealing both the message of life and the message of death.”[46] The multiple circular stars that decorate the screen correspond to the starry landscape on the folding screen behind her sorcerer-master and therefore imply their discreet connections. The constellation of whirlpools that constitutes the main body of Lady Tian’s mask likewise links her to the sorcerer-master, who wears a black robe decorated with whirlpools that symbolize “the convergence of energies from heaven and earth, connecting cosmic principles with individual fates and bridging natural and artificial forces to fashion abundant, bursting, and recurring vitality.”[47]

Just as this symbolized flow of vital force permeates the film’s mise-en-scène, my brief mapping of the material chains and elemental geographies—from Lady Tian’s costumes to those of Nie’s; from Lady Tian’s folding screen to that of her master’s—demonstrates that the anti-anthropocentric logic behind the film’s characterization and performance also undergirds other aspects of its world. Facing all the materialist, creaturely, and energetic vibrancies in *The Assassin*, I would like to conclude this chapter by considering some open questions regarding the form of spectatorship that the film elicits: How do we register these fleeting intricacies on the screen? What does it mean when the viewer, on top of sorting out the already elusive narrative, focuses on the formation of the film’s world by various human and nonhuman entities? In what ways does *The Assassin* as an animist imagination ask to be viewed? No place comes more suitable to address these inquiries than two curious insectile shots.

45 Huang and Hsieh, *Tang fengshang*, 102.
46 Huang and Hsieh, *Tang fengshang*, 181.
47 Huang and Hsieh, *Tang fengshang*, 199.

Spectatorship of Exteriority

The first shot depicts the courtyard outside a corridor of Princess Jiacheng's dwelling. It appears after Nie's recollection of the Princess playing a zither there—the only moment in the film when the aspect ratio breaks through the narrower confine of 4:3 into widescreen—and before the sequence where Nie's mother recounts past events during her time as the Princess's servant. Two white flowers in the lower right quadrant of the frame stand in sharp focus, against a blurry background that includes other architectural components. About ten seconds into this fifteen-second shot, an insect flies in and lingers on the flower on the right for five seconds until the screen fades into black (figure 3.3)—could it be a nod to one of the emblems of contingency in modernist cinema: that iconic bug crawling on the windowpane in François Truffaut's *Jules and Jim* (1962)? The second shot is the penultimate shot of the film. When Nie fulfills her promise and returns from Weibo to the idyllic hamlet where the mirror polisher awaits, the camera pans left as he walks her back. In the precise spot where the camera movement stops, between the lens and the wood fence that structures the entrance to the hamlet, fleeting reflections of light register the threads of a spider web in the foreground, covering almost the entirety of the lower half of the frame.

Inconspicuous or implied, the presence of the insectile occupies liminal spaces, marking the boundary between the interior and the exterior of a built environment: the courtyard of the Princess's dwelling and the entrance to the hamlet, respectively. Situated at the transitional shot from Nie's memory to the present, the liminality of the first shot also signals a temporal shift and the associated changes of film form. And when read intertextually, the two shots point to a straightforward equation of the human and the nonhuman from the original tale: to protect her patron Liu Chang-yi from an assassin's swift decapitation at night, Nie undergoes a Kafkaesque metamorphosis into an unspecified bug, hides inside Liu's intestines, and waits for the right timing to initiate a counterstrike.[48]

While these intricacies might be non-sequiturs to the film's narrative, they nevertheless carry great stylistic significance. Since the widescreen format affirms that the first shot belongs to the domain of Nie's memory, the fade-out to black at the end conveniently smoothens the transition into the present, reducing the jerky abruptness when the aspect ratio shrinks back to 4:3 as the next shot fades in. In the case of the spider web, had the camera movement followed the characters further, with a few inches of a forward

48 Pei, "Nie yinniang," 406.

Fig. 3.3. A bug lingers on the white flower in *The Assassin* (2015).

track the lens would have been entrapped in the spider web, if not ruined the threads. Therefore, while this long shot seems unassuming insofar as it rehearses Hou's signature aesthetic, which privileges respectful distance from the filmed object, the spider web adds hitherto unseen layers to the profilmic space. It is as if the camera acquires an ecological awareness; its placement and the shot scale maintain the coherence and integrity of specific elements in this meticulously designed scenography. The shot duration holds relevance, too, for the threads only become visible under specific lighting conditions. It takes not only a certain amount of light but also a certain lighting angle cast onto the spider web to create the fleeting shimmers necessary for the camera to visually register its presence. Unlike the insect in the first shot, whose precise location anyone can pinpoint, the entirety of the spider web is only visible as part of a moving image. Indeed, from the moment when the pan stops, the film generously provides the viewer with more than forty seconds to appreciate the shimmering threads. Such a scenography of display, which allows the nonhuman contingencies to reveal themselves to careful viewers, thus serves as an example of what Japanese director Kore-eda Hirokazu has described as the anti-anthropocentric quality of Hou's deployment of long shot/long take, discussed at length in chapter 1.

To notice all these profilmic and stylistic surprises entails one's awareness of the film's inconspicuous insectile aesthetics, among a wealth of other subtleties. Implicitly, the film encourages the spectator to survey its milieu through a kind of scrutiny that can be described as an animalistic perception on which interpretive potentials are predicated. Unlike the

privileged cinephilic moment in film theory, not least the close-up celebrated by Béla Balázs and Jean Epstein for its capacity to reveal the inner soul of things (discussed in chapter 2), *The Assassin* elicits a kind of spectatorship that focuses on details and the anti-interiority that runs through the film, including the performative style, which works to restrain affect. Not so much a dynamic exchange between what lies interior and exterior as the outer being the outer—and nothing else. Such a spectatorial engagement is required in order to fathom an extraordinary aspect of the film that lies beyond the scope of this chapter: the vibrancy of the natural landscape. Examples abound: the last shot of the opening black-and-white sequence, in which one tree, out-of-focus in the background, is rippling leaves, while the other, in sharp focus in the foreground, is not; the first time of the day when a flock of resting birds in a tree collectively breaks into action, flying into the foggy distance against a mysterious blue hue that blends the sky and a lake together; the clearing and dispersal of the fog up in the mountains, seamlessly mirroring the clouded relationship between Nie and her nun-master. Our heightened awareness of the environment is the necessary condition for the vivacity of lives and matter to manifest themselves on screen.

While these details might not register on first viewing, as Shen Shiao-ying reminds us, Hou's films always elicit—in fact, deserve—repeated viewings.[49] The detail-oriented spectatorship that *The Assassin* calls for will continue to guide my approach to other films in the rest of this book. But for now, to transition to the next chapter, devoted to the martial artist as another shamanic figure, let me offer one more intertextual link that the absent spider binds in its web with the film. As we look at Nie through the frames-within-the-frame formed by the foregrounded spider web, the specific combination of the spider and a female martial artist recalls a remarkable moment in the history of Chinese martial arts cinema: the opening of King Hu's *A Touch of Zen* (1971), in which a spider creeps towards an entrapped prey in its web at dusk.

It is tempting to read the subtle arrangement in *The Assassin* as a discreet nod to Hu's urtext of contemporary martial arts films. By fate or by chance, Hou's film seems to confirm my intertextual speculation with another inconspicuous detail. After the display of the spider web, the final shot captures Nie and the mirror polisher's journey back to the latter's hometown. Accompanying them is an old man who appears for the first time in the film. The camera position and scale of this extreme long shot prevent us from clearly seeing the

49 Shen, "Benlai jiugai duokan liangbian—dianying meixue yu hou xiaoxian."

character, let alone identifying the actor, whose performance must have been edited out almost entirely. Fortunately, some detective work using the cast list soon reveals that the old man is played by Shih Chun, who ascended to stardom after his first two screen appearances as the leading actor in none other than Hu's *Dragon Inn* (1967) and *A Touch of Zen*. But if the spider and its habitat in *A Touch of Zen*, according to Stephen Teo, come loaded with psychoanalytic significance (a sense of uncanniness, an imagery of the structure of the unconscious, a symbol of female sexuality, among others), the web in Hou's animist imagination invites a materialist reading that points not so much to the width and depth of the interpretive vista as to the film's quietly animate environment itself.[50] Though I have not approached *The Assassin* from the generic perspective of martial arts cinema, except for a brief account of its aesthetics of action, precisely how martial arts practitioners navigate the larger environment in which they are immanently situated constitutes one of the most crucial aspects of the genre. The next chapter follows the lead of a few luminaries of world cinema who have playfully rendered the martial artist's navigation of the screen world, set in natural landscapes.

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50 Teo, *King Hu's* A Touch of Zen, 17–28.

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4. In the Snow

Abstract: This chapter explores a cinematic tradition that portrays the martial artist's capacity of controlling the exchange of natural energies between the interior and exterior of the body. *The Grandmaster* (Wong Kar-wai, 2013) illustrates this skill through its distinctive use of digital effects. By analyzing a central character's interactions with the ubiquitous digital snow, the chapter demonstrates how the film's visual effects materialize the energetic flow, drawing from traditions of Chinese visual culture, medicine, and martial arts—all prominent motifs in the film's setting in early to mid-twentieth-century China. The chapter further studies the specific technique that produced the effects, particle systems, to highlight its links to both the animist worldview and its cinematic offspring, animation.

Keywords: martial arts in cinema; traditional Chinese conceptions of the body; hygienic modernity; particle systems; landscape aesthetics

But perhaps by now all the houses had turned to snow, inside and out; a whole city of snow with monuments and spires and trees, a city that could be unmade by shovel and remade in a different way.
– Italo Calvino, *Marcovaldo: or The Seasons in the City*

This chapter explores the martial artist as a shamanic figure of the animist imagination by discussing Wong Kar-wai's *The Grandmaster* (2013), which devises a discursive enterprise surrounding the appropriate ways in which the martial artist can be filmed. Based on close analysis of select sequences and paratextual documents related to the filmmaking process across all stages of production, I demonstrate how the film constructs and stages a cultural tradition in Chinese martial arts that regards its adept practitioners as capable of participating in an energetic exchange of vitality between the inside and the outside of their bodies. In this process of exchange, division

Tang, Pao-chen. *The Animist Imagination in East Asian Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2025.
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between the self and the world melts, resulting in a cosmic correspondence between the individual and the environment as well as an expanded attribution of personhood from the martial artists to the natural elements that populate their cinematic milieus.

The level at which this melding or melting takes place is more than a rhetorical device that confers human agency onto things. What we see in Wong's animist imagination is something that strives towards an ontological flattening, where it turns out that everything becomes one, where all matter seems to be the self. That said, while the film enshrines this ontological state of confusion as desirable to the martial artist, it foregrounds the centrality of her corporeality by resolutely rejecting to the viewer any impression that such a state might exist. One of the film's great puzzles lies in the fact that the ontological oneness enjoyed by the martial artist in the diegetic world is presented in a way that renders itself nearly imperceptible. Put another way, the martial artist's animist capacity transpires so elusively that it takes a special, if not extreme, mode of spectatorial attentiveness to even register its traces—a restrained enchantment available to those who truly look at the screen. What does it take, then, for us to recognize just such animism hidden in plain sight? Why should we even be bothered with this task of recognition, especially when the film seems to be ambivalent about laying itself bare to our gaze?

In *The Grandmaster*, such subtleness, undergirding the martial artists' animist capacities, is achieved through digital visual effects, pervasive in scenes when they perform martial arts moves. While the effects per se are difficult to perceive, in the artistic discourse that paves the way for the film's public reception they have curiously taken up the form of a lack, with their presence entirely downplayed. The effects thus present, according to Wong in an interview, "real martial arts … not movie martial arts."[1] In another interview, Wong also states with firm resolve: "When it comes to fighting, you must restore its true appearance in history without the aid of visual effects; you should also restore the intuition, energy, and spirit (*jing*, *qi*, *shen*) of the martial artists of that era."[2] At first glance, the live-action shooting of the film on location and in studios across Hong Kong and mainland China was indeed separate from the postvisualization process in the Paris headquarter of BUF, the French company in charge of

1 Lee, "Wong Kar-wai: Fighting Is Like Kissing."

2 This line comes from "Wong Kar Wai's Journey into the Martial Arts," a special feature included in the film's DVD released by the Weinstein Company. My translations of *jing*, *qi*, and *shen* here follow Michael Saso's in Saso, "The Taoist Body and Cosmic Prayer," 231.

the film's effects work. "I didn't have the opportunity to meet [Wong]," said the effects supervisor Isabelle Perin-Leduc, "he was in China on the stage, while we worked on the movie sequences at the studio. So, we were used to send [sic] him frequently shot by the web, and he sent us back its [sic] comments by email." According to Perin-Leduc, however, throughout the film's production from 2010 to 2013, a team of people—from one to fifty, depending on the time and the task—contributed to a total of 512 effects shots, the majority of which feature martial arts actions.[3] This does not include more than 200 people's labor on the film's 3D version (2014); one particularly arduous task was to render tens of thousands of rain drops three-dimensionally for the six-minute opening sequence alone.

Beyond reflecting the high level of professional specialization within the contemporary effects industry, the inconsistency between Wong's and Perin-Leduc's words poses more questions concerning what post-production effects and the ideology of martial arts could mean to each other, especially regarding the second half of Wong's statement: the representations of such immaterial, formless entities as the martial artists' "intuition, energy, and spirit"—and the system of knowledge that these culturally specific terms point to—that require laborious effects work to realize. Rather than situating the director's and the effects supervisor's positions in disparate phases of the production process, then, this chapter places them in conversation. A connecting tissue lies in the defining characteristic of the shamanic figure of the martial artist: the energetic exchange between the interior and exterior of the body. This process is presented throughout the film in the fleeting moments when the profilmic actions interact with the effects work, not least those that capture the contact between the martial artists and the ubiquitous falling snow created by the technique of particle systems.

When actions and effects interact in the film, they invite inquiries concerning not only cinematic realism but also the status of corporeality in the age of digital animation and compositing when the lines in the sand between the vitalist and the mechanist, between the physical and the virtual, have been relentlessly blurred and redrawn. It is a commonplace today that the plasticity of the digital image enables cinema to braid and traverse—ontologically, phenomenologically, or otherwise—across modes of representation, projections of fantasy, and pathetic fallacies, among other audiovisual desires. The fact that Wong and Perin-Leduc communicated only via email already bespeaks the notion that digital effects work destabilizes

3 Frei, "*The Grandmaster* (Yi Dai Zong Shi): Isabelle Perin-Leduc—VFX Supervisor—BUF." BUF's official website documents only 509 VFX shots, however. See BUF, "*The Grandmaster*."

these conventional dichotomies. However, beyond acknowledging the power of digitality—something that needs no more acknowledgement today—I want to take Wong's words as seriously as possible. Since there is no question as to his awareness of the labor put into the effects work, his choice to de-emphasize its presence and, instead, highlight the profilmic as the real and the absolute seems all the more perplexing. If the false binarism between the actions' authenticity and the effects' illusion set up in the above interview carries any significance beyond a mere promotional gimmick, what is reflected in this insistence upon the former? What kind of "reality" accessible only through the actors' physical movements does the film hypothesize and uphold? It is no secret, after all, that Wong had all the leading actors and actresses, especially Tony Leung, Chang Chen, and Zhang Ziyi, receive rigorous martial arts training for years in the pre-production phase—Chang eventually became so adept at Bajiquan, the formalized martial art that his character Razor practices, that he won an amateur competition in China.

While the focus of this chapter is *The Grandmaster*, to approach the martial arts genre more broadly from an animist perspective, I further submit a group of films that experiment with capturing or intimating the martial artist's energetic exchange. In them, the construction of natural landscape—be it a real location or an impression of nature created in studio—is the privileged stylistic device mobilized to this end. Notable, though perhaps unexpected, examples include Maya Deren's *Meditation on Violence* (1948) and Lau Kar-leung's *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* (1978). My goal behind tracing and assembling this cluster of works is to illustrate how *The Grandmaster* both follows and renovates what could be seen as a visual tradition of Chinese martial arts on screen. What distinguishes Wong's film from these precursors is that its cinematic landscape is rendered primarily through digital effects that animate, energize, and personify natural elements surrounding the martial artist. My accentuation of Wong's film, however, does not espouse a drastic paradigm shift from analog to digital filmmaking. The assemblage of these films, itself, indicates a shared ideological objective that their aesthetic inquiries invariably address. The main difference between *The Grandmaster* and the other films lies in how digital technology opens up an alternative approach to their common task: cinematic landscape transformed through the manipulation of the pictorial and plastic quality of pixels. Based on this technologically specific engagement with the image, *The Grandmaster* elicits from the viewer a sensorial reaction to the connectedness between the martial artist and nature. This chapter attends to such entanglements between the animism of Chinese martial arts, the aesthetics of nature, digitality, and spectatorship.

An Open Body

To begin our inquiry, an account of the martial artist's defining characteristics is in order. Given that this chapter studies such a figure in a film set during the early years of the Republic of China, my discussion focuses on the so-called Eastern, especially Chinese, traditions of martial arts. According to philosopher Yuasa Yasuo's account of the human body, Eastern traditions of martial arts have long served as methods of self-cultivation through which practitioners manage and enhance not simply their kinetic capabilities or strength of mind but, ultimately, a unification of the two. Yuasa's construction and analysis of these traditions are predicated on a heuristic framework that allows their specificities to be isolated and contrasted with other points of reference, particularly the mind-body dualism in Cartesian metaphysics. The basis upon which Yuasa builds his view is the neuropsychological theory of conditioned reflex, which advances a positive and solid connection between external stimuli received through our sensory organs and the functions of our autonomic nerves. In this framework, body and mind, respectively, refer to the cerebral cortex, which governs our sensory and motor nerves, and the emotion-instinct circuit, which is, in the topology of human psyche to which he refers, located at the bottom of consciousness and bordering unconsciousness. To train such psychological responses as instinct and neurosis—typically uncontrolled, or at least not easily controllable, by our will—one works outside in from the conscious region, i.e., the sensory organs through which outer stress and stimuli are received.[4]

The mastery over seemingly involuntary reactions is the telos of what could be a long and arduous training process. A widely adopted practice comparable with the martial arts, as per Yuasa, is the breathing exercise used for meditation. Subtle differences notwithstanding, Zen, Yoga, Confucian, and Daoist methods all suggest that the control of breathing facilitates the control of emotion. These methods share the maintenance of a seated posture, normally a straightened but relaxed upper body, with the center of gravity held at the lower abdomen. This posture also "trains one to direct one's mind within while maintaining this posture as long as possible in a state of stillness (immovability) so that wandering thoughts, welling up from the bottom of the mind, disappear."[5] Through rhythmic breathing, maintenance of certain postures, and exercising codified moves, martial

4 Yuasa, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, 42–55.

5 Yuasa, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, 71.

arts practitioners likewise strive to achieve a correlative state between mind and body. While posture, degree of animation, and environmental conditions noticeably differ between meditation and the martial arts—the former seated, still, and solitary; the latter standing, moving, and sometimes surrounded by one or multiple opponents—the two methods of self-cultivation function similarly in the theoretical vista of the correlative mind-body relation.

Crucially, a sense of spatiality distinguishes the two methods: meditation trains one to "gaze into the *inner world*" while the practice of martial arts directs one to "the *outer world*."[6] Here, inner and outer, respectively, indicate the human psyche and the material environment in which the body navigates. During meditation, one centripetally concentrates on the purity of mind by filtering out as many external stimuli as possible: the ideal state is a temporarily shut down and bracketed body. When practicing the martial arts, however, one aims at centrifugally reaching out to the materiality of the world by turning the body into an "*intermediary* being between 'mind' and 'matter' … a mediating system of organs connecting the world of spirit to the world of material substance." In the consummate state to which the martial artist aspires, the body weaves itself into the fabric of the world, during the process of which the distinction between the body as an animate entity and the inanimate aspect of the surroundings is destabilized. What opens up and connects the martial artist with her milieu is the circulation of a vital energy known in Chinese as *qi* (or *ki* in Japanese).[7]

This cultural context clarifies a point in Wong's description of the film's task: the necessity to restore "the intuition, energy, and spirit of the martial artists of that era." In Chinese medical and religious parlance, *qi* is commonly juxtaposed with *jing* and *shen* to form the phrase "intuition, energy, and spirit." Simply put, each of them constitutes a vital force bound up with a specific part of the body. Collectively, they formulate the inner world that corresponds to the outer world—the poetics of microcosm and macrocosm that plays a central role in classical Chinese medical literature, itself a major influence that has shaped religious thoughts and practices from the Warring States period onwards.

The oldest received Chinese medical theory, *Huangdi neijing* (*Inner Canon of the Yellow Thearch*, ca. first century BC), states that the body's vital currents

6 Yuasa, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, 71–72.

7 The meridians are what a martial artist trains to cultivate for they are "at the same time both killing and saving points. For example, one offensive strategy for controlling an opponent is to attack on the meridians or acu-points where an opponent's *ki* is emitted." Yuasa, *The Body, Self-Cultivation, and Ki-Energy*, 76.

are contained within the meridian, or the *mo*, an elaborate system of vessels. "The character *mo* itself," as Shigehisa Kuriyama explains in his comparative study of Eastern and Western views of the body, "combines the flesh radical, marking a part of the body, with a pictograph for branching stream … We picture vital fluids steaming through the body." This bodily system in which flows of vitality come and go, roll, disperse, and sometimes pause, according to Kuriyama, "[speaks] to the central intuitions guiding Chinese palpation." Echoing my references to Yuasa's account, the distribution of the *mo*—rivers in our body whose defining feature is their constant flow—also corresponds to the actual rivers on earth: "The hundred rivers of the earth are like the streams of blood (*xuemo*) in man. Just as the streams of blood flow along, penetrating and spreading, and move and rest all according to their natural order, so it is with the hundred rivers. Their ebb and flow from dawn to dusk is like the expiration and inspiration of breath."[8] According to this medical system, a person is never a centralized, standalone figure against an otherwise diffused ground. The body cannot be contained, as it always bleeds out and links itself with the surroundings through ceaseless movements of common vitality. The practice of martial arts is a technique of the body that actively leads to the state of corporeal openness.

A Lost Cosmology

If Wong's reference to "intuition, energy, and spirit" points to a prevailing medical tradition that *The Grandmaster* endeavors to reinvent, he associates this tradition with a bygone era, the historical authenticity of which the film's choreography of action recuperates. In many ways the artistic discourse mobilized by the film—the combination of a carefully constructed cultural tradition and a pastime—forms a critique of Western modernity (and, by extension, global modernity): the conceptualization of the martial artist's body as one open to the world is a qualitatively different idea from the modern understanding of the body based on the scientific approach of anatomy. Indeed, *The Grandmaster* is set in early to mid-twentieth-century China, when the anatomical paradigm started to exert profound influence over Chinese physicians. This historical period, when two disparate ways of theorizing the body collided, generated numerous debates and self-reflections. Practitioners of Chinese medicine realized at this point that they

8 Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*, 49–50.

had not systematically registered the existence of muscles before anatomy was introduced. Reflecting on the notion of the *mo*, then-renowned physician Tang Zhonghai noted that "Western physicians don't believe in the method of the *mo*. They say that the *mo* which circulate around the body all arise from the blood vessels of the heart, that it is because of the ceaseless activity of the heart that the *mo* move. But how can the condition of the five viscera be determined by just the blood vessels?"[9] Here, Tang reiterates the point that the *mo* is not tantamount to the actual blood vessels but a system of energy that permeates the body. It is not a physical force initiated by and pumped out of the human heart into the rest of the body; rather, recalling Kuriyama's vivid analogy, the system flows, ebbs, spreads, and penetrates through the body like the hundred rivers on earth.

A fulcrum that holds together *The Grandmaster*, the martial arts tradition, and the self-reflection upon the body in this transitional period of modern Chinese history is one of the film's three screenwriters, Xu Haofeng, himself a writer of martial arts literature, martial arts practitioner, scholar of Daoism, and director of martial arts cinema. Xu's 2006 book, *Shiqu de wulin—1934 nian de qiuwu jishi* (The bygone world of martial arts: records of martial arts acquisition in 1934) records the martial arts communities of 1930s China as narrated by Li Zhongxuan (1915–2004), a master of the formalized martial art technique called Xingyi, practiced in the film by Ma San (Zhang Jin). The book serves as a foundational text on which the film's script heavily relies for the building of its historical context. Li describes the training process of martial artists at the time in several passages, one of which comments on the key to the Xingyi practice: "the inner comes first. Whatever happens outside happens. Do not stick to external forms and thus remain trapped. Seeking inner energies through external forms is like the foolish undertaking of marking on a boat where your sword is dropped into the water. Accessing external forms through inner energies helps you reach the sky in a single bound."[10] The centrifugal vector from within the body towards without characterizes the Xingyi practitioner's body as one with porous boundaries, as understood in Chinese medicine. Such corporeal porosity

9 Kuriyama, *The Expressiveness of the Body and the Divergence of Greek and Chinese Medicine*, 12, 37–38. This is not to deny, as attentive historians have pointed out, that Chinese physicians had long engaged in critical reflections and examinations of the institutionalized tradition they were in. See, for instance, Scheid, "Transmitting Chinese Medicine Changing Perceptions of Body, Pathology, and Treatment in Late Imperial China," 323. I am, however, approaching this paradigm shift from the perspective of the film, in which a body lost in the modern era has been forcefully imagined and rendered.

10 Li and Xu, *Shiqu de wulin*, 144.

is most explicitly reflected in *The Grandmaster* through the professional trajectory of Gong Er (Ziyi Zhang). It is only befitting that, after vowing to never impart the Bagua 64 Hands, a formalized martial art technique that her family practices, once she successfully avenges her father's murder, she becomes a physician of Chinese medicine after ending up as a war refugee in Hong Kong. Based on a gendered principle, self-cultivation in the Gong family takes up two forms: men practice the martial arts; women practice medicine. Even though no woman is allowed to inherit leadership of the family's martial arts school, as I shall demonstrate later, Gong's supreme martial arts skill that the film emphasizes—more so than that of any other character—would have surely made her an adept in the system of the *mo* for medical usage as well.

Moreover, Li details how the mechanism of energy flow in the Xingyi practice is analogous to how earthly energies manifest themselves. "Peach is good too," says Li, "its peak protrudes and connects to the heavenly energy; its bottom concaves and contains the earthly energy. The peach blossom has no smell, and even if it does it would smell bad. But when the peach is ripe, its aroma is thick as wine, which connects all the energies in the universe and affects people."[11] Here, Li refers to the intersubjective connection between the human and nature that underlies the ideologies of Chinese martial arts. Immediately afterwards, he recounts that "to practice Xingyi is to 'put the electric plug into the socket'. The interior must be connected—this is the secret of *feng lei* [wind and thunder]. When electric currents run through the central axis of the body, premature decay can be cured. When water is splashed onto the hot stove, it makes a 'splash' sound. This sound is the internal work of martial arts. The 'splash' contains all the nutrition. With the arrival of spring thunders, the earth revives, and everything is suddenly imbued with vitality." At first glance, the transition from the human-peach analogy to the electric currents and the spring thunder seems unmotivated. But when we consider Li's words through the prism of energy circulation, it becomes clear that the connection between the human and nature takes up the form of energy currents: the martial artist's body serves as a socket, connected to the currents permeating out there.

However, as the main title of Xu's book, *Shiqu de wulin* (meaning literally "the bygone world of the martial arts"), makes clear, the historical setting of *The Grandmaster* is haunted by a sense of loss: the loss of various martial arts techniques and, consequently, the martial artist's associated openness to the world. In the film's romanticized chronotope, the set of agreements

11 Li and Xu, *Shiqu de wulin*, 144.

as to what constitutes the body that serves as the basis of the knowledge system of that time—which might not be "real" in terms of authenticity but is inarguably a system of cultural belief that has remained relatively coherent and transhistorical—was gravely challenged by alternative and competing models of understanding the body. The toughest challenger of all was the anatomical body that the enterprise of modern medicine promoted, wherein, recalling Tang's critique, the system of *mo* had no place. Historically speaking, China in the early twentieth century, in response to the modern notion of health that had arrived with Western and Japanese colonial and imperialist forces, underwent a radical period defined by what Ruth Rogaski terms "hygienic modernity."[12] As individual health and social transformation became intimately intertwined, personal sanitary arrangements came to serve as vehicles for the definition of a nation's identity, expressions of a collective pursuit of modernity, and evaluative criteria of the level of modernization. The significance behind the cultivation of the body—of which the martial arts remained a central device—thus shifted from maintaining harmony with cosmological energies to advancing the strength of the nation. Hygienic modernity organizes the maintenance of health in ways that allow crises of politics and modernity to be naturalized as conditions of a specific body and its know-how regarding the protection and nourishment of health. The open body in Chinese medicine that could not be smoothly solicited to line up with these novel conditions was, then, gradually rejected as unfit for the development of a modern society.

In a Foucauldian fashion, such biopolitical tensions that emerged with the introduction of new epistemes, not entirely compatible with the existing ones, were themselves already reflected in Chinese cinema of the time. As Zhang Zhen points out, the martial arts-magic spirit film in the 1920s featured technologized bodies that played with "science and magic, film technology and folklore, avant-garde aesthetics and popular tastes." They embodied the multiple facets of modernity until they came to be officially banned by the authorities, who regarded them as "the vehicle of dangerous desires and spirits ... a source of degeneration of Chinese cinema and national spirit."[13] Against the contemporary backdrop of China's rising geopolitical influence and therefore Chinese culture's global influence, a host of martial arts films, including *The Grandmaster*, has recently revisited this collision between the traditional and the modern takes on the body,

12 Rogaski, *Hygienic Modernity*.

13 Zhang, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen*, 213, 224.

as well as the latter's nationalist connotations through the historical figure of Ip Man. Wilson Yip's *Ip Man* (2008) fantasizes a conflict between Chinese martial arts and Japanese firearms, while its sequel, *Ip Man 2* (2010), celebrates the eponymous character's triumph over the (shirtless and muscular) British boxing champion Taylor "The Twister" Milos. Peter Chan's *Dragon* (2012), likewise set in the early Republican era, visualizes and explains the complexities of the *mo* system to death under the penetrating gaze of forensic science and x-ray. Recalling Li's description of the body as a socket, the film's climactic moment humorously refers to the vital energy that circulates in and out of the open body, as the protagonist inserts acupuncture needles into the villain's soles, thus materializing him into a human conductor and taking his life by directing electricity from a lightning strike to his body.

It comes as no surprise that such a discursive conflict between tradition and modernity would appeal to Wong, insofar as the dramatized collision between temporalities present and past has recurred across his oeuvre, routinely generating a sense of nostalgia, a sentimental yearning for a lost and irrecuperable object of desire. Among renowned Chinese-language films from the late 1980s to the mid-1990s that approach historicity, Wong's gaze into the past is idiosyncratic. Unlike, for instance, Hou Hsiao-hsien's *A City of Sadness* (1989), *The Puppetmaster* (1993), and *Goodbye South, Goodbye* (1996), all of which take seriously the interrelation between past and present, Wong has been more interested in the nostalgic gesture to the extent that filming the present itself becomes an enactment of nostalgia. Such remembrance of things past has taken up various forms, with levels of intensity ranging from an everyday fuss to a mournful depression. They include an unalterably deceased romance, indexed only by anthropomorphized daily objects in a postmodern pastiche of Hong Kong (*Chungking Express*, 1994); days of wander and exile during Hong Kong's 1997 transfer of sovereignty (*Happy Together*, 1997); an auratic old Shanghai imbricated into 1960s Hong Kong (*In the Mood for Love*, 2000); or the eternal return of an impossible love from the sediment of memory (*2046*, 2004). In Jean Ma's apt description of Wong's post-1997 films: "Chronological progression cedes to a looping trajectory of repetition and return in these works, as we witness Wong's characters struggle again and again with the impossibility of making time stand still. … If these narratives do not flow in a straightforwardly linear fashion, they nonetheless still acquire a cast of inevitability, their outcomes overdetermined by what has taken place before."[14] The mounting nostalgia

14 Ma, *Melancholy Drift*, 139.

has only increased in recent years. After *2046* and a brief excursus through Hollywood (*My Blueberry Nights*, 2007), Wong returned with a new object of longing of much grander scope than any ever desired in his previous films: *jianghu*.

To Recuperate, Digitally

Meaning literally "rivers and lakes," *jianghu* in the universe of martial arts fiction is not only a tangible social system that knights-errant navigate according to their will and conscience (though typically in defiance of official orders) but also a wondrous chronotope, an "alternative society" that responds to reality by weaving historical figures, locations, and events into an imaginary narrative.[15] At once concrete and obscure, *jianghu* has served as the setting—fittingly a desert wasteland—for Wong's 1994 martial arts film, *Ashes of Time*. Given the sociohistorical context of mid-1990s Hong Kong, scholars have invariably conducted political readings of the film's rendition of *jianghu* as an allegory of futurity before the 1997 handover. Stephen Teo suggests that the film functions as "a trope for Hong Kong itself, where 'neither the urge for unification nor the value of coherence can be realised'." Hye Jean Chung also posits that "the inertia of the characters—whether they wander aimlessly as knight-errant or are temporarily rendered immobile—can be read as lived anxiety of the Hong Kong people, whose past and present are under threat of becoming subsumed into an unknowable future."[16]

The politically allegorized *jianghu*, however, is distinct from depictions of it that have emerged in Wong's more recent works, most notably a remake of *Ashes of Time* and *The Grandmaster*. A major difference lies in the deployment of digital technology. In 2008 Wong released a re-scored, re-edited, and digitally restored version of *Ashes of Time*, entitled *Ashes of Time Redux* (hereafter referred to as *Redux*). If *jianghu* in *Ashes of Time* gives form to a political atmosphere in Hong Kong, the one in *Redux* gains an additional layer of significance: a reflection on the cinematic medium in the digital age, conducted through none other than the tradition of martial arts cinema. According to Chung's tracing of *Redux*'s journey within the contemporary global film industry, digital restoration has undeniably "expanded the scale and scope of [the film's] transnational circulations" beyond its original

15 Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*, 18.

16 Teo, *Chinese Martial Arts Cinema*, 165; Chung, *Media Heterotopias*, 71.

1994 exhibition across Asia, France, and overseas Chinatowns. During the restoration process, digital technology also facilitated the mobilization of an assemblage of technicians and artists all over the world. Recalling the email communication between Wong and BUF, the division of labor behind *Redux* took place across France, Thailand, China, and Belgium and featured cosmopolitan artists, including Yo-Yo Ma and Wu Tong.[17] Intriguingly, as Chung suggests, such production conditions, characterized by transnational mobility and networks, stand in sharp contrast with the film's mise-en-scène, which frames the martial artists' bodies—frequently lethargic and immobile—in ways that make them seem subsumed into the landscape. Reminiscent of traditional Chinese landscape paintings, various moments in *Redux* bear witness to how "bodies and landscapes are mediated by a visual medium that converts them into virtually identical tones and textures. One wonders whether the bodies are moving through space, or whether the space itself is undulating with the momentum of their bodies."[18] In lieu of the mid-1990s political allegory, then, the characters' situatedness in the landscape in *Redux* now mirrors the dissolution of human physicality in digitality's endless formations of network and assemblage.

Chung's perceptive interpretation demonstrates how the production and stylistics of *Redux* generate a dialectical tension between the heterotopic production of digital cinema and the human condition in the digital age. From the perspectives of Chinese landscape aesthetics and the energetics of martial arts, however, I would advance an alternative reading of this human-nature integration as the film's response to a much more classical ideology: the establishment of a sense of cosmic oneness. Echoing the above account of the open body in early twentieth-century China, François Jullien has argued that, historically, the Chinese "pay less attention to the identity and specificity of morphological components (organs, muscles, tendons, ligaments, and so on) than to the quality of the exchanges between 'outside' and 'inside.'"[19] Chinese visual culture, not least landscape painting, has long experimented with the visualization of this worldview with the aid of various conventionalized formal devices and pictorial motifs, such as the undulation of the clothing, the mountain peaks glimpsed among the clouds, the evanescent hills and rocks, the veins of mountains that resemble dragons' backs, and rivers that vaguely fade out and blend with the distant horizon. Jullien has thus described that, "when Chinese painting depicts

17 Chung, *Media Heterotopias*, 63.
18 Chung, *Media Heterotopias*, 69.
19 Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, 59.

figures, it focuses on presenting them as intimately bound up with the world around them: for, like the human body, the entire landscape vibrates with flowing breaths that pervade it."[20] Following this aesthetic account, might we see the subsuming of the characters' bodies into the natural landscape in *Redux* as, itself, the desired state for the martial artist? While the film does not feature any landscape constructed entirely through visual effects, Wong's decision to digitally restore and remake certain parts of *Ashes of Time* nevertheless invites not so much a critique of digitality as an engagement with it, especially when viewed through the privileged perspectives of human-nature relation in the martial arts tradition and of the ecological thinking to which the animist imagination is committed.

To be clear, any retrospective establishment of a cultural tradition routinely depends on a careful framing of the world that produces certain dichotomous and essentialist configurations. However, I am less interested in reiterating the critique performed by a corpus of profound reflections upon comparison as a method of critical inquiry. Instead, my goal is to think about the stakes behind the mobilization of what could be called an enterprise of (self-)Orientalism in Wong's films, if not contemporary martial arts fiction in general. It goes without saying that not every work of art produced in Chinese-speaking areas conforms to the view of the body previously described or to the specific mode of artistic production outlined by Jullien. But one cannot afford to ignore them when landscape aesthetics and the figure of the martial artist have been so consciously set into conversation in *Redux*. Such a *jianghu* redux, so to speak, has the potential to function as more than a Jamesonian allegory of third-world literature but, recalling the literal meaning of *jianghu*, the very "rivers and lakes" accumulated by *qi*-energies that flow in and out of the *mo* and the world. Bodies in a digital production and the film's landscape aesthetics are not dissonances but elements that work closely together under the rubric of martial arts cinema. In this line, the martial artist's onscreen open body offers us a way to address how the human body has, itself, been transformed in one digital image after another today.

Moving with the Snow

Chronologically succeeding *Redux* in Wong's filmography, *The Grandmaster* continues his inquiries into digital technology, landscape aesthetics, and

20 Jullien, *The Impossible Nude*, 61.

the generic conventions of martial arts cinema. Before examining some exemplary sequences in *The Grandmaster* that demonstrate the film's fashioning of the martial artist's animist capacity, a quick note on my process of sequence selection. As is the case with *2046* and *Ashes of Time*, several versions of the film have been created for different purposes and markets: one of 115 minutes was shown at the 63rd Berlin International Film Festival, another of 130 minutes was made for general international release, a third of 108 minutes was edited specifically for the US market, and a fourth of 111 minutes in 3D came out in select areas in 2014. All the sequences analyzed in this chapter appear in the American, international, and 3D versions, except for the conversation between Master Gong and Ding Lianshan next to a pot of snake stew, which appears only in the international version. Admittedly, I am unsure whether they are in the Berlin cut; however, while the presence (or absence) of these sequences matters considering the plot development of each version, I have chosen to isolate them primarily because this chapter's problematics lies less in their narratives than their deployment of formal devices and visual effects in relation to other selected sequences. Because the narrative constitutes but one of several objects of my discourse, I hope I am justified in being eclectic in approaching these materials, if not the entirety of *The Grandmaster*, as a variorum text that includes all the versions.

In the same interview quoted in the opening section of this chapter, Perin-Leduc makes clear that it was Wong's instruction to "increase the ambiance of the shots and the character's moves" through digital effects. One aspect of rendition received the most sustained attention: the falling snow so pervasive and conspicuous throughout the film. According to BUF's production note, all the snow, as per Wong's request, must "match the 'atmosphere'" of the sequences and "[help] in enhancing the fight intensity."[21] At first glance, Perin-Leduc's description and the production note give the impression that the effects work in *The Grandmaster* is merely supplementary to the martial arts actions meticulously choreographed for the camera. Snow that dramatically swishes around martial artists has become quite a generic cliché, after all. From the highly stylized snow in *Lady Snowblood* (Toshiya Fujita, 1973) to the serene snowfall at the House of Blue Leaves in *Kill Bill: Volume 1* (Quentin Tarantino, 2003) to the violent snowstorm in the climactic battle of *House of Flying Daggers* (Zhang Yimou, 2004), the snow has taken up various forms through which martial arts cinema articulates its pathos. Closer scrutiny, however, distinguishes *The Grandmaster* from

21 BUF, "*The Grandmaster*."

these precursors and complicates the seemingly straightforward matching of the falling snow with the overall atmosphere of different scenes.

To begin with, almost the entirety of the funerary march sequence was digitally retouched. A thick layer of snow was first added to the surface of the frozen lake and the surrounding ground to "increase the emotions" of this scene, captured predominately in long and extreme long shots.[22] The mountains in the background were rebuilt to heighten them and cover them with snow; the marching team was lengthened with a train of followers digitally multiplied and placed in various areas according to the needs of different shots. Colors were then adjusted to brighten and whiten the shots, further solidifying the snowy tone and creating an air of solemnness befitting the funerary occasion. This whole layer of retouched image was then combined with a separate layer in 3D rotoscoping—an animation technique that allows animators to trace over film footage frame-by-frame—permeated by the falling snow and mist created through particle systems. These simulations of natural phenomena were generated in accordance with the native frame rate of the original plate (at various stages, the film was shot at 24, 48, 72, or 96 frames per second). Many other shots in the film were created through similar processes. What binds them together is the fact that digital technology has modified the original plate as if transforming the natural space into a scenography of display readily available for manipulation in order to establish, enhance, and otherwise transform the atmospheric quality of the space.

A similar but more complex process in snow generation involves an additional step of setting up a 2D-matte that matches the figure's shape in 3D rotoscoping. This technique is applied when figures framed in medium-long shots, medium shots, and medium close-ups move about in exterior spaces. Due to these chosen shot scales, the figures occupy the foreground of the image; a layer of falling snow imposed onto them would obscure their presence to the camera. The human-shaped 2D-matte that delineates a space where the rendering of the snow is excluded thus allows the viewer to have unobstructed access to the figures' movements when the original and the 3D plates are eventually combined. In addition, it creates a sense of proximity between the viewer and the onscreen figures, leaving an impression that the distance between them is so close that only a handful of snowflakes can fall through.

Carefully conducted as the above two sets of procedures might be, it is another type of snow-making on which I want to focus: an energetic snow

22 Frei, "*The Grandmaster* (Yi Dai Zong Shi): Isabelle Perin-Leduc—VFX Supervisor—BUF."

Fig. 4.1a and 4.1b. The natural snow (top) and the digital snow (bottom), revealed in the visual effects production video by BUF.

that magically interacts with the actors. The sequence that best illustrates this process features the opium-addicted Gong reminiscing, on her deathbed, of the good old days in her northern hometown when she practiced the Bagua 64 Hands. To render this sequence as the final moment of peace and serenity in the stormiest period of her life, BUF meticulously effaced countless profilmic snowflakes in an extreme long shot and replaced each of them with a digital reproduction. In the raw footage, the snow falls unevenly, with the majority gathering at the left half of the frame. The size and velocity of each snowflake varies, creating chaotic and violent movements that sharply contrast the smooth choreography of Gong's action. In its initial treatment of the footage, BUF removed almost all traces of the natural snow—an act that indexes a time-consuming, labor-intensive procedure—before replenishing the scene with digital snow of a different quality. These snowflakes, created by particle systems and now evenly distributed and placed across the frame, are of similar size, traveling harmoniously at approximately equal speed—the equality of physics leads to

an equality of affective harmony in a curiously literal fashion (figure 4.1a & 4.1b). A digitally modified nature thus becomes a formal tool to match both Gong's action and the tone of tranquility that the film delivers for the purpose of conveying, on the narrative front, her emancipation from the physical, spiritual, and psychological constraints—respectively, old injuries from a climactic fight with Ma San in the train station; her vow to Buddha of personal celibacy and professional termination of the technique of Bagua 64 Hands; and her unrequited affection towards Ip Man. Like Calvino's city of snow quoted in the epigraph, the falling snow in *The Grandmaster* can be conveniently "unmade by shovel and remade in a different way" with the aid of digital technology.

Four shots after this exemplary moment, a medium shot zeroes in on Gong's arms and hands. For reasons that will become clear shortly, a body double takes the place of actress Zhang Ziyi: even though she is almost beheaded by the upper edge of the frame, her lips and chin are unmistakably not Zhang's when cross-referenced with any of the actress's appearances elsewhere in the film. Facing the camera, the body double raises her arms to shoulder height and swings her arms with open palms from her left side rightward. As if pushed by her hands, the camera simultaneously pans left. In addition to these two effortlessly perceptible movements of the character's body and of the camera, a micro-movement takes place as well. Through frame-by-frame viewing of this two-second shot, it becomes noticeable that, within five frames, several qualities of the falling snow have drastically changed. The traveling direction has shifted from circulating in a whirl to forming a concentrated vector following the movement of her arms and hands. The speed has also accelerated, and the shape of each snowflake has therefore been proportionally stretched to a straight, needle-like vector (figure 4.2a & 4.2b). This one shot testifies to the film's supreme orchestration of principal photography and post-production effects: Gong's arms align with the central horizontal axis of the frame. Both the choice of medium shot scale and the framing that cuts off the upper half of the character's face establish a space at once concentrated enough for viewers to appreciate the movement of her upper body and spacious enough that BUF can digitally create snowflakes that travel in accordance with said movement. Retrospectively, these formal aspects clarify the film's choice to deploy a body double: the shot's central attraction lies in neither Gong the character nor the stardom of Zhang the actress but, rather, the very interaction and correspondence between the corporeal and the digital.

Another shot in this sequence enacts a similar interplay: a high-angle long shot that situates Gong at the center of the image. Fifteen tree branches stand

Fig. 4.2a and 4.2b. The change of snow from the first frame (top) to the fifth (bottom) in *The Grandmaster* (2013).

in the left, right, and top margins of the upper half of the frame, forming a semicircle around her. Gong practices the 64 Hands, and, within a second, her movement creates a rippling effect. On the snow-covered ground with Gong's body as the center, a circle with a radius of approximately three meters emerges as the snow is centrifugally pushed outward by an invisible force. The circumference is delineated, and, together with the semi-circle formed by the tree branches, a concentric structure emerges in the frame to visualize an outward force emitted from where Gong stands (figure 4.3). Through visual effects, Gong "moves" entities in her immediate surroundings without touching them directly. The digital snow, then, is at once tangible and immaterial as it becomes both a part of her bodily movement and an extension of her outward energy: a fantasy of martial arts expressed in and through the digital.

All the shots so far analyzed amount to less than a minute altogether, with each of them lasting a few seconds—sometimes even a split second—in this two-hour film. The elusiveness of the snow circle is particularly striking if we compare it to another circle that similarly expresses the trajectory

Fig. 4.3. A circle of snow emerges in *The Grandmaster* (2013).

of an outward energy in *Ashes of Time*: the moment when the lonesome Dugu Qiubai (Brigitte Lin) demonstrates her sword skills in the lake. In this fast-cutting sequence (twenty-two shots in twenty-nine seconds), Dugu Qiubai stands on the surface of a lake and releases an explosive force. In whichever direction she points the tip of her sword, a vector of energy bursts out from where she stands. Such an energetic release is manifested across the lake surface through one straight line of water explosion, achieved not by computer-generated imagery but underwater pieces of dynamite laid out in advance and detonated by well-trained pyrotechnicians at the cue of the actress's movement. After repeating this move twice more, Dugu Qiubai opens her arms, the sword still in her hand, in a forty-five-degree angle along her body, lifts her head up, stretches out her back and upper body, and twirls around on the same spot. Like Gong, she becomes the center from which a circle of outward energy emerges; however, unlike Gong's energy causing a barely perceptible ripple, hers fills the whole frame with such a volume of swells, splashes, and vapor that even an extreme long shot fails to capture the entirety of their scope and vibrancy.

Returning to Gong's snow circle, without scrutiny one would have missed all the intricacies of effects at play in this shot—or these frames, more precisely. Yet, digitally retouched shots like this one are not outliers but the norm in *The Grandmaster*. My choice to dwell on the falling snow in this section is due to its sheer ubiquity, which makes it inarguably the most visible digital component. But similar effects work was also applied elsewhere to such natural elements as drifting smoke, dripping water or blood, and flames. Why did the film invest all the labor of digital effects in these elemental entities? As the following section will demonstrate, the technology of particle systems adopted to create these natural elements is by no means an arbitrary decision. Designed and developed since the early

1980s by William T. Reeves, a Canadian technical director of animated films, the principles of particle systems conceptually reverberate with the animist ideologies of martial arts. The martial artist, as it turns out, is not the sole entity defined by corporeal porosity. The animist logic that guides the world of *The Grandmaster* runs across its parts, to the extent that the natural elements likewise face their own boundary problems.

The Life and Death of Particles

Reeves's 1983 "Particle Systems: A Technique for Modeling a Class of Fuzzy Objects," the founding text on the titular technique, opens with a claim that it is designed to model phenomena such as clouds, smoke, water, fire, snow, fog, and sometimes hair and skin too, which are difficult for then-current techniques of computer image synthesis to achieve. This is because these objects do not feature boundaries well defined by a set of smooth "surface elements, as polygons or patches"; rather, they are what Reeves calls "fuzzy objects," characterized by "dynamic and fluid changes in shape and appearance." A particle is "the simplest of the surface representations";[23] namely, it does not take up any specific form and is therefore technologically easy to motion-blur—not unlike a flow of energy. We recall Jullien's account of the recurring motifs in Chinese landscape painting: a riverbank disappearing into the mist, or mountains that vanish, emerge, and submerge amidst the fog as if in a state of confusion. Such a visual expression of presence dissolving into absence—and vice versa—creates an ambience of the absolute as ungraspable, unnamable forms continually lay themselves out without any metaphysical elucidation. If the undulation of the clothing, the mountain peaks glimpsed among the clouds, and the hills and rocks—in evanescence, in eclipse—serve as conventional devices through which Chinese visual culture has captured the formless and elusive flow of energy, particle systems offer a new channel with all the necessary and sufficient conditions to approximate the same end in digital filmmaking.

Aside from the topological correspondence with certain accounts of Chinese aesthetics, the development of particle systems has, itself, taken up the language of animism, intriguingly viewing each individual particle as a living being. In Reeves's words, "particle systems model objects that are 'alive,' that is, they change form over a period of time." Like a life, it moves, grows, transforms itself within a system, from which it eventually dies too.

23 Reeves, "Particle Systems: A Technique for Modeling a Class of Fuzzy Objects," 91–92.

When generated, "a particle is given a lifetime measured in frames. As each frame is computed, this lifetime is decremented. A particle is killed when its lifetime reaches zero." And like all forms of organic lives, "[new] particles are 'born' and old particles 'die.'"[24] Reflected in Reeves's use of such phrases as "alive," "die," "born," "lifetime," and even "killed," these fuzzy objects are conceptualized not as lifeless pixels but as vibrant substances with qualities of biological life forms. On this view, Reeves's design philosophy destabilizes the division between the animate and the inanimate. When mobilized in *The Grandmaster* for the rendition of corporeal porosity, it levels the martial artists and the digital snow by releasing the former's body to the world and animating (but also killing) the latter's pixels 24 times per second—or, in the case of Wong's film, 24, 48, 72, or 96 times per second depending on the native frame rate of each shot.

By rewiring the animate-inanimate distribution between characters and the matter that surrounds them, particle systems allow the film's martial arts sequences to blend photographic and animation effects—two modes that, while distinctive in theory, collectively contribute to a malleable image always in process, always in transformation. These sequences demonstrate what Sergei Eisenstein famously praises as a plasmatic quality that invokes the worldview of animism in Disney animation: "In English, Disney's moving drawing is called … an animated cartoon. And in this name, both concepts are interwoven: both 'animateness' (anima—soul) and 'mobility' (animation—liveliness, mobility)."[25] From this perspective, the animation of the snow generates not simply movements and thus an illusion of vitality; rather, each flake is endowed with soul, *anima*.

Several other shots in *The Grandmaster* operate, too, in this mode of imaging. Exemplary moments include the bubbling snake stew and the smoke emerging out of it next to the Gong brothers, the raindrops flying along the tangential trajectories of Ip's hat and clothes, the dripping blood from Razor's enemies that dyes the watery ground crimson, and the flaming tobacco in Ip's cigarette butt. A formal feature shared among their depictions of natural elements is the combined deployment of close-up and slow-motion cinematography, which amplifies the micro-movements and intensifies the affective powers of the onscreen entities. This aesthetic reverberates with the fascination with animism in another canonical writing in classical film theory, Jean Epstein's mythopoeic description of the inner lives of things that the camera is capable of revealing: "It is in the curtain at the window

24 Reeves, "Particle Systems: A Technique for Modeling a Class of Fuzzy Objects," 91–92, 96.
25 Eisenstein, *Eisenstein on Disney*, 54.

and the handle of the door. Each drop of ink can make it bloom on the tip of the fountain pen. In the glass of water it dissolves. The whole room is saturated with every kind of drama. The cigar smoke is poised menacingly over the ashtray's throat. The dust is treacherous. The carpet emits venomous arabesques and the arms of the chair tremble."[26] Shot intensely in close-up, inanimate objects become animist forces and, together with slow-motion cinematography, they construe situations that lay bare the objects' inherent personhood. This ontological blurring curiously reveals an empathetic side, wherein animism is also understood as a response to and translation of the emotions of the physical world. Such an affective room in Epstein's account has not been foreign to Wong's previous mise-en-scène configurations: Who could forget how the pathetic fallacies of a crying towel and a withering soap bar in the apartment of Cop 663 (Tony Leung) articulate their owner's unspoken post-breakup blues in *Chungking Express*? And how Cop 663 gets cured as Faye the waitress (Faye Wong) secretly cleans and redecorates his grief-stricken apartment—a gradual appeasement of his depression from outside in? In *The Grandmaster*, this room relocates to the *jianghu* of early Republican China, now featuring such fuzzy objects as snow, smoke, water drops, and flaming tobacco formed by one living and dying—and maybe thereby soulful too—digital particle after another.

Because of the affiliation between particle systems and animism, the snow in *The Grandmaster* fashions a dialogical sphere in which distinct ontological grounds and epistemological positions—animate and inanimate; human and nonhuman; modern Western and traditional Chinese—are at once foregrounded and reworked. Such a sphere carries significant stakes for our contemporary world for a couple of reasons. First, as per Lev Manovich's now familiar claim, the foundation for audiovisuality has been overtaken by computer-generated images in graphic, digital, and animated forms, of which the photographic and the cinematic come to settle as subsets.[27] Second, globalization has generated new philosophical vocabularies out of sundry local, indigenous traditions—through insensitive appropriations and critical translations alike—in service of adumbrating new transcultural epistemologies.

These two sets of problematics frequently converge in contemporary effects cinema where the lines in the sand between myth and disenchantment, between magic and technology are constantly redrawn. The animism of *The Grandmaster* proposes an intriguing frame to tackle this tension:

26 Epstein, "The Senses I (b)," 242.

27 Manovich, *The Language of New Media*, 295.

the discourse of everything as potentially living and soulful operates both as a possibility of new technology and in correspondence with the classical understanding of corporeality. On the one hand, it intimates that the foundation of the film's digital effects dreams, after all, an animist dream. On the other hand, it clarifies the geopolitics of the effects as more than an indigenized Western device that articulates the energetics of Chinese martial arts. A confusion of identity resulting from an all-encompassing attribution of soul and a wide-ranging circulation and exchange of vital energy, in effect, constitutes a utopian principle that transcends the fissure between the modern and the premodern across cultures. One recalls what Eisenstein—learning from Chinese landscape paintings—has elsewhere envisioned as the possibility of a "nonindifferent nature": "Everywhere this was the emotional landscape, dissolving into itself the human being, or more precisely: Everywhere the emotional landscape turns out to be an image of the mutual absorption of man and nature one into the other."[28] Particle systems, used as such, materialize Eisenstein's painterly observation on screen by enabling not simply an affective correspondence but a concrete contact between the martial artist's subjective particularity and the animist universal.

Excursus on Deren

To further explore the significance of particle systems in relation to the landscape aesthetics of martial arts cinema, I take a detour here to situate the deployment of particle systems in *The Grandmaster* within a longer genealogy that tackles similar concerns through non-digital means. Wong's film responds to what could be considered as a central, albeit long-neglected, puzzle in the scenography of martial arts actions, insofar as a host of filmmakers have likewise endeavored to capture the martial artists' "intuition, energy, and spirit." My objective in constructing this genealogy, however, is not so much to downplay the centrality of digitality for *The Grandmaster* as to foreground the specificities, if not peculiarities, of how the film mobilizes digital technologies. Works under the rubric of this genealogy share two characteristics: 1) they feature Chinese martial arts even if they might not have been historically categorized under the generic category of Chinese martial arts film; 2) they turn to natural landscape, real and pictorial alike, in search of a formal device that communicates the subjectivity of the martial artist.

28 Eisenstein, *Nonindifferent Nature*, 359.

An exemplary case is Deren's *Meditation on Violence*, wherein the energetics of martial arts is articulated through a martial artist's body and movements in relation to its setting and soundtrack. A short film of thirteen minutes, *Meditation on Violence* takes up a nonlinear structure, starting and ending in medias res. Three parts form the first half, which concludes with a moment of stasis in the third part. From that moment onwards, the film runs in reverse from the third part back to the first. Each of these three parts features the demonstration of a style of Chinese martial arts by Chinese-American actor and dancer Chao-Li Chi. The film works to stage Chi's corporeal porosity, as reflected in the title, which juxtaposes, recalling Yuasa's account, two major means of self-cultivation: the martial arts and meditative methods that, respectively, lead to an outward connection with exteriority and an introspective concentration on interiority.

In the first part of the film, accompanied by the sound of a Chinese flute, Chi, shirtless in an interior space against a white wall, practices the Wudang (or Wu-Tang) style of boxing, a formalized technique of martial arts named after the Wudang Mountains in the province of Hubei. A strong side light casts into the space, creating distinct shadows of Chi on the wall. Towards the end of this part, a soundtrack of the Haitian shaman's drumming recorded by Deren herself emerges. Both soundtracks flow into the film's second part wherein Chi, still shirtless but now standing in front of the convergence of a white wall and a black wall, shifts his martial arts style. He practices, instead, the Shaolin style of boxing, another formalized martial arts technique, named after the Shaolin temple located in the Song Mountains of Henan Province. The soundtrack of flute dwindles down, all while the drumming persists and continues into the film's third part. The transition from the second to the third part takes place in a shot wherein Chi jumps out of the frame from the right and, in the following shot, re-enters from the left. The cross-shot leap brings along several stylistic changes. No longer confined within the interior space, Chi now moves about in the open air on a round stone plateau surrounded by a short stone wall, overlooking what seems to be a river and a land on the other side of the shore. He practices the Shaolin style of sword fight in what resembles a conventional costume of *duanda wusheng* in Peking Opera (the convenient, short clothing for martial artists).

On this mise-en-scène shift, Sarah Keller points out that the interior spaces in the first two parts organize what Deren calls the "interior reality" while the outdoor space in the third part organizes a "hard reality … specifically reserved for confrontation."[29] Indeed, Chi's performance of the

29 Keller, *Maya Deren*, 193–194.

Shaolin Sword is marked by an increase in intensity, swiftness, and force from his Shaolin style of boxing. At times, it seems like his sword is directly addressing, if not attacking, the camera head-on. As the most prominent stylistic change in the film, the appearance of the exterior location initiates a contact between "the inner and outer realities," allowing for an extension of "the balance to the individual's relationship to the world. Thus in the place of a strong side light, we now have 'the real sun.'"[30] Following Keller's take and my previous account of the martial artist's realm of experience, might we read the exterior location as materializing the reach into the outer world that the martial artist trains to achieve? Accordingly, the interior space in the first two parts corresponds to the interiority of the martial artist's body. From a purely white space in the first part, which indicates a positive energy, to the introduction of black backgrounds in the second part, which introduces a negative energy, the interior space has undergone a qualitative transformation. Together they point to an energetic synthesis, forming a cinematic translation of the equilibrium of *qi*, conventionally represented in Chinese visual culture as the tai chi symbol formed by two teardrops of *ying* and *yang* forces. Ten years after *Meditation on Violence*, Deren would again manifest this pictorial motif in the opening credit of *The Very Eye of Night* (1958), featuring the tai chi symbol as the pupil of a depicted eye.

The interior space, both divided and integrated by the black and white walls, testifies to the circulation of energy in the martial artist's body as well as Deren's understanding of the philosophy of Wudang based on *The Book of Change*. In an audio recording collected in Martina Kudláček's documentary *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* (2001), Deren comments that, in the theory of Wudang, "life is an ongoing process, constantly; and that it is based on a negative-positive, a negative-positive with constantly a resolution into another negative and positive and so on. And so my first problem became to construct a form as a whole, which would suggest infinity. Now, the Wudang based on the negative-positive principle translates that in physical terms into the breathing. And that's why it's called an interior boxing because the movements are governed by an interior condition." The shift to the exterior space after a long build-up from the slow Wudang style to the speedy Shaolin style signals the very instance when the energetic synthesis between the positive and the negative transpires, emitting literally inside out. As the martial artist manages to open up his body, so the camera moves out of the stylized but vacant

30 Keller, *Maya Deren*, 196.

room into the realm of nature, against an open sky wherein exist not only "the real sun" but also real trees, real stones, and a large body of water, among other natural elements. This change of setting likewise motivates the change of Chi's outfit. Insofar as the martial artist's body now merges with the surroundings, there is no reason for Chi to be shown shirtless—a demonstration of muscular anatomy privileged in the modern Western expression of the body.

If this analogy between the first half of the film and the practice of martial arts stands, the second half of the film, which reverses this process—from the exterior back to the interior—points to the trajectory of a centripetal concentration that practitioners of meditation follow. *Meditation on Violence* therefore offers a way to visualize and temporalize the ideologies of self-cultivation from two perspectives: how violence (the martial arts) can be so thoroughly explored on both thematic and stylistic fronts in the first half; how the malleable materiality of filmstrip allows doubling, reversing, and re-editing of the first half, consequently offering an additional meditation on the tight unity of film's form and content in the second half.

What intrigues even more is that *Meditation on Violence* works with the agential aspect of animism. A strong correlation is intimated between a martial artist's open body and a shaman's body—the latter is trained to be opened up, as well, so that spiritual possession becomes possible in a ritualistic context. This is evidently reflected in the acoustic encounter between the soundtrack of the Chinese flute and the Haitian drumming, and the latter's eventual replacement of the former. Chi mentions in *In the Mirror of Maya Deren* that Deren and he "started with many arguments because she had just come back from Haiti and she was all involved with Haitian Voodoo and the trance and the shaman culture. And I was saying that in the Chinese context, it was quite the opposite. It was the wise man is the one [sic] who controls nature rather than allowing nature to possess." I will revisit this hierarchical relation between the martial artist and nature at the end of this chapter. Here, I want to highlight how the culturally specific ideologies of Chinese martial arts have spoken to Deren's artistic concerns about Haitian shamanism.

Since as early as 1947, one of the primary goals of Deren's renowned project on Vodou was the ethnographic recording and mythopoetic rendition of the shaman's entry into ecstatic trance. But this goal was also, paradoxically, the very cause of the project's eventual incompletion, at least not in the cinematic form she had hoped for. Film scholars have speculated on the cause of the incompletion, from the impasse of identity politics to the notion of inability

as, itself, a stylistic device integral to Deren's filmmaking.[31] Regardless of the reason, though, filming metaphysical presence—the moment of cosmic oneness when the divine force possesses the human medium—proves to be a challenge that lies at the threshold of visuality, for how could this process of contact be fixated and actualized through the privileged devices of any documentarian mode or, as per Deren's celebrated description of cinematography, any "creative use of reality"? Reading against the backdrop of Deren's post-Haiti representational conundrum, the energetics of Chinese martial arts and meditation seemed to have provided her with an outlet to articulate, however indirectly, the Haitian magic onscreen. While her camera might not have been capable of capturing the ritualistic climax, it could facilitate the qualitative transformation of Chi into an intermediary, through which the communication between interiority and exteriority similarly transpires: the fashioning of a martial artist as, quite literally, a shaman.

The triptych structure that defines *Meditation on Violence* later found its way into a Hong Kong martial arts film, similarly signaling the energetic transfer into exteriority. I have in mind the opening credits sequence of Lau's *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin*, a meta-martial arts film about the process of the protagonist's acquisition of (Shaolin) martial arts. As if mirroring Deren's mise-en-scène, the sequence can be broken down into three parts. The first part sees the protagonist San Te (Gordon Liu) practicing the Shaolin style of boxing in an empty interior space with a white floor against a white wall. The second part places San Te, first performing the Shaolin Stick and then boxing again under falling water, in an interior space with a black floor against a black wall. Like the transition from part one to part two in *Meditation on Violence*, a dichotomy between positive and negative spaces is established through a sharp contrast between white and black spaces. The third and final part of the sequence begins with a medium close-up of San Te exercising a saber against a crimson wall. As the shot zooms out and reframes, however, it reveals that San Te alone stands in a desert constructed in a studio, surrounded by artificial low sandhills under a trompe-l'oeil cerise sun and grey fibrous clouds painted on the studio walls.

My comparison of this sequence with *Meditation on Violence* does not aim to advance a causal relation between two intertexts. To be sure, they differ from each other in almost every other formal aspect (camera movement, shot scale, editing, sound, lighting, costume, and the style of the martial

31 Russell, "Ecstatic Ethnography: Maya Deren and the Filming of Possession Rituals," 285; Keller, *Maya Deren*, 135–188.

arts action). Insofar as the set design logic is concerned, however, *The 36th Chamber of Shaolin* features the same yearning for a release of energy, breaking through the interior setting into the realm of natural landscape, or, more precisely in this case, a landscape depicted naturalistically. Even if the third part is not shot on location, it still creates, within the film studio, a mimetic landscape to situate San Te's final display of his skills in a "natural" environment: a realistic sun instead of a real one. The shared shift of setting in both films thus functions as a formal device to register the martial artist's state of intermediacy. Upon reaching the third part, in which natural landscape emerges, both Chi and San Te arrive at a stage where they connect with the exterior world beyond their body.

Although my objective is not to propose historical connections between these films, by no means am I interested in mere coincidences either. There are other moments in the history of global cinema that resort to structures highly similar to the one I have discussed. Another film that aligns itself with this tradition is American filmmaker Tom Davenport's brilliant but little-known short, *T'ai Chi Ch'uan* (1969). Filmed on location in the northeast coast of Taiwan, *T'ai Chi Ch'uan* plays with black and white spaces by capturing the contrast between the profilmic scenery's light and darkness. The result is a transformation of the entire landscape into a tai chi symbol, as if the film has located in nature this pictorial motif manifested in *The Very Eye of Night*. Each of these moments in Deren's, Lau's and Davenport's films links itself to the paradigm of the natural landscape in martial arts cinema, even if it does not describe the paradigm to itself in exactly the way I have suggested. Indeed, my previous analysis of Gong's snow sequence in *The Grandmaster* identifies how the film likewise responds to such necessity of nature in its own formation of the martial artist, albeit with a twist. In contrast to Deren's and Lau's highly stylized approaches, the snow sequence does not feature the evident alterations of setting. From the outset it takes place outdoors, surrounded by constructed snowflakes that do not attempt to conceal their constructedness. Unlike Deren's and Lau's films which visualize the outward trajectory of the martial artist's energy through their symbolic and conspicuous use of space, through digital technology Wong's film quietly literalizes the release and impact of said energy onto nature. Might we think of the snow circle on the ground as another tai chi symbol, of which Gong occupies the center?

Such a combination of literalness and quietness beckons, for even as the technique of particle systems enacts, recalling Eisenstein, a "mutual absorption" between the human and the nonhuman, the way it is used in *The Grandmaster* does not aspire to a radical levelling of all differences

between them. While the kind of animism that Eisenstein celebrates in Disney animation belongs to a realm of fairy tale, populated by shape-shifting creatures that can take up virtually any form, Wong's film locates its enchantment around authentic actions untouched by digital modification. Unlike the vast desert wasteland in *Redux* that underlines the tininess of the characters, if not enfolding them into one unified whole in one extreme long shot after another, the digital snow, as an outward extension of Gong, remains subordinated to her body placed at the center of the image. This articulation of animism, embodied as numerous environmental elements, seems unassuming but attractive—if not slightly distracting. Something about how they interact with Gong makes it impossible to disregard her corporeal presence. Forcefully, they solicit our consideration of the cultural and aesthetic significance of the film's human-nature relation by zeroing in on the martial artist's body, around which the digital particles revolve. What, then, does such a treatment of Gong's body reveal regarding the bodies in contemporary live-action cinema more generally, the ontologies of which CGI effects have come to define?

In Dissolution

Through the prism of animation, Thomas Elsaesser suggests that "cinema—in its widest sense, i.e. including its digital forms—ought to be seen not as an image system only but as a 'life system,' once we accept the idea that cells, organisms, groups, corporations, nations, networks, and other assemblage-ensembles all process matter, energy, and information."[32] The soulful quality of particle systems that fulfills the animist promise of cinema à la Eisenstein and Epstein constitutes one such micro-life system. This is not to overlook, however, a looming dark side of the promise: the flattening of human beings with automata, with objects deprived of agency. While celebrating the animation of the inanimate, Epstein has already issued a warning that this effect, pushed to the extreme, results in the development of the world into "a desert of pure matter without any trace of spirit" where "any living substance goes back to its fundamental viscosity and lets its deep colloidal nature rise to the surface … humans become statues, the living merges with the inert."[33] With little difficulty, one can envision the effacement that such nondifferentiation likewise exerts on the specificities

32 Elsaesser, *Film History as Media Archaeology*, 312.

33 Epstein, *The Intelligence of a Machine*, 29.

of the martial artist as a biographical subject in *The Grandmaster*—and by extension, on the cultural-historical conditions of the early twentieth-century China that the film reimagines so as to lament its loss. As Garrett Stewart has noted, bodies have habitually served in contemporary effects films as "scapegoats to their own optic possibility—where the science of the image becomes part of the fiction … screening per se, has here more openly claimed the status of *trucage*: image itself as *digitage*."[34] Stewart's observation is equally applicable to martial arts cinema today where the body of the martial artist functions as a medial hybrid that synthesizes technology and corporeality. Given the relation between digital compositing and animation/animism, the division between effects and actions, like the inside and the outside of the porous body, is increasingly impossible to draw as well. Effects and actions can hardly be thought through separately, for they construe a unity so airtight that one cannot tell if the former has determined the latter or the other way around.

But it is out of this otherwise enmeshed corporeal-cum-visual plasticity that the peculiarity of the snow sequence transpires. We are, once again, reminded of the mystery behind Wong's decidedly obsolete insistence upon the indexical authenticity of actions even after the digital turn. Except this time some sense of clarity accompanies. The porosity of the martial artist's body is only hinted at through the surrounding snow rather than an in-your-face emission of force, such as the lake explosion in *Ashes of Time*. Rather than superseding the body, the particles extend it and serve as the decisive elements that enable its apotheosis. Admittedly, as the use of Zhang's body double makes clear, one body still might be replaced by another; this, nevertheless, does not negate the fact that all these bodies are *actual* bodies. In a way, my emphasis on such corporeal concreteness is made possible only because of an uncanny aspect of particle systems: the power of this technique, as Jordan Schonig understands it, lies in its tendency to defamiliarize the world on screen without overwhelming other constituents in the frame. The ubiquitous particles in contemporary effects films, particularly animated features, are not so much "spectacles interrupting the diegesis as background details that quietly beckon our attention. … Such films shock us not with their imaginative possibilities—possibilities that were already a staple of their cel-animated predecessors—but instead with the uncanny familiarity of their natural environments."[35] Something

34 Stewart, "Digital Mayhem, Optical Decimation: The Technopoetics of Special Effects," 15.

35 Schonig, "Contingent Motion: Rethinking the 'Wind in the Trees' in Early Cinema and CGI," 46.

wonderfully poised, classical, even humanist—which does not have to be tantamount to anthropocentric—hovers behind the 3D rotoscope layering and formal processing in *The Grandmaster*, acting stubbornly against digitalization's propensity for the transformation of either the body or nature into one synthetic spectacle after another. At both discursive and visual levels, the martial artists in the film are persons as well as images, which are not opposed even if a commonplace technological paranoia has repeatedly warned us that the wake of the former's presence constantly lies under the threat of the latter's dissolution. One cannot help but recall Walter Benjamin's description of the preservation of an actor's humanity in the cinematic apparatus by "placing that apparatus in the service of his triumph."[36] *The Grandmaster* celebrates just such a triumph of the martial artist, whose body remains intact, central, and dynamic in the digital snowscape.

As the film's effort to place profilmic actions into an equal, however inconspicuous, partnership with pixels suggests, the key to addressing the ontologies of actions and effects, of the human and the nonhuman in the age of digital compositing lies not simply in an ethical insistence upon the body's authenticity but how its openness could and should be viewed. Throughout this chapter, I have emphasized that my visual analysis of the particle systems would not be possible without repeated frame-by-frame viewing, a method inspired by the late animation scholar Hannah Frank's formidable examination of hundreds of American animated cartoons frame by frame. As Frank herself admits, this approach to the materiality of celluloid is a perverse way of film viewing, or, more accurately, film *looking*. While this gaze of film criticism interrupts the flow of movement, which constitutes the very appeal of animation if not the moving image more generally, such a penetrating vision recognizes how even the tiniest of details in one single frame "can be placed into larger theoretical debates about the nature of technological reproduction as such, for instance the relationship between image and text, the fraught authorship of popular art, and the political implications of the circulation of hitherto inaccessible works of art."[37] Although the reimaginations of modern Chinese history and its corporeal politics with which this chapter deals drastically differ from the questions posed by Frank's objects of study, I see my work as an extension of her method: how frame-by-frame viewing might work behind cel animation into the realms of digital animation. Something about how *The Grandmaster* uses effects elicits our recognition of the film's particle-sized animism; to

36 Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility," 31.

37 Frank, *Frame by Frame*, 2.

recognize this animism entails a radical and radically distinct mode of perception. Indeed, according to Christian Metz's classification of effects, when slowed down to frame-by-frame viewing, the particles are the flawed "imperceptible *trucages*" that fail to conceal their ubiquitous idiosyncrasy, exceeding beyond the "limits of what is called the 'realistic film.'" But even for the average viewer they serve as "invisible *trucages*" not seen but *sensed* for their harmonious fluidity—the sense itself "may even be indispensable, according to the codes, to an accurate appreciation of the film."[38]

What, then, might constitute "an accurate appreciation" of *The Grandmaster*? What actions of film spectatorship might the bodies of spectators be moved to perform, just as they watch Gong touch and move the snow? I have shown that the action of film scrutiny not only discerns each snowflake's movement, trajectory, shape shift, and interaction with Gong but also plays a key role in our recognition of the martial artist's animist capacity. Elsewhere, the film proffers intricate demonstrations of the open body, which might or might not be done through digital means. The remainder of the chapter expands on my method of scrutiny, which attends to the act of sensing at once internal to the film and in our own viewing process. I do so by discussing two interrelated moments that acoustically stage the energetics of martial arts.

The Energy Recognized

The first instance appears during the fight between Ip and Gong in a brothel. In the moment when Gong's fist hits Ip's palm, a high-pitched sound emerges, seemingly generated by metallic vibration. It is as if the film's sound design gives form to the acoustic description of the energetic collision in the practice of Xinyi previously quoted from Xu's *Shiqu de wulin*: "When water is splashed onto the hot stove it makes a 'splash' sound. This sound is the internal work of martial arts." With a pitch too high to come from normal physical collisions, the sharp sound signals the very "splash" between Ip's and Gong's energy fields. What is intriguing about this sequence is that the film highlights the attentiveness of the surrounding viewers in the brothel. The sequence begins with several shots that capture the moments when

38 The same can be said regarding the film's use of body double, which, according to Metz, would also belong to the imperceptible category. As demonstrated early in this chapter, however, frame-by-frame viewing likewise brings Zhang's stunt woman in full light. Metz, "'Trucage' and the Film," 664.

people pause their chores at hand and direct their full attention to Ip and Gong. These gazes, projected from all over the site, initiate the scene, not least two crucial shots that bring us to the conversation between Ip and Gong before their fight: each shot begins with a courtesan's face and then pans to follow her sightline before eventually stopping to frame either Gong or Ip in a medium close-up. As well as an implicit acknowledgement of the performative nature of the two martial artists' encounter, the two shots stage the high level of concentration it takes for their spectators to witness the actions soon to take place.

The same high-pitched sound, accompanied too by the reflexivity of the act of sensing, reappears in a later sequence when Ip uses a chopstick to "hear" the priceless "music of steel" from Razor's razor. At first hearing, the sound is, again, an unrealistic sound effect insofar as it is not the direct result of a collision between physical entities. This impression soon gets complicated once we consider the presence of this sound in relation to other competing soundtracks. When Ip and Razor walk out of the chess house with their metals at hand, non-diegetic symphonic music emerges. The camera, in four shots, shows us their positions on the street, as well as several workers and diners who concurrently occupy this space. Afterwards, every time the camera cuts from a medium or medium-long shot of these background characters to a close-up of the two martial artists' metals, the high-pitched sound emerges abruptly against the symphonic music, indicating that the Ip and Razor have imbued energies into their metals and thus changed the energetic flows in this space. The use of the high-pitched sound and the symphonic music respectively represent two kinds of energy fields: the former points to the special identity of the martial artist; the latter is associated with everyday activities on the street. In the climactic eight shots that take place within less than four seconds, Ip's and Razor's metals confront each other, and the high-pitched sound merges with the music into a new, lower-pitched sound, the emergence of which is immediately registered by the surrounding people as the next four shots showcase their reactions. Simultaneously, all of them turn their heads in curiosity to identify the acoustic source. Originally unnoticeable, the two energy fields become, at this instance, one force that directly impacts the listeners' perceptive organs as the mingling of sounds bleeds in. Paralleling the function of digital particles, the ultimate convergence of these different timbral qualities followed by their collision reveals, too, an underlying sonic landscape of energy structurally akin to the animist snowscape.

Might we read the witnesses' concentration on the impending brothel fight and the street people's reactions to the metallic crash together as a call

for the viewer's recognition of those moments when the logic of animism undergirding the film's worlding surfaces? In these sporadic and fleeting instances, background characters' attentiveness to given sight and sound models for us "an accurate appreciation" of the animist promise that the figure of the martial artist carries. Is this a promise of cinema as an apparatus for generating new ways of perception that go beyond what the "natural" eyes and ears can sense as well? More than a bygone cultural icon, more than a body that stands against digitality's assimilation, the martial artist as a shamanic figure crystallizes the quiet energetic affinities between human and nature hitherto unnoticed. The second sequence instantly confirms the significance of perceptive sensitivity and reaffirms it through visual means. Right after showing the street people's reactions, the camera cuts to an extreme close-up that replays, in slow motion, the process of metallic collision and renders visible each of the tiny metallic pieces that the razor pares off from Ip's chopstick. The deployment of overlapping editing here serves a decisive purpose. Aside from being a magnified attraction in and of its own right, this shot disjoints the manifestation of acoustic synergy in the previous four shots from the visible physical collision. The acoustic phenomenon is not an accompanying supplement to the visible matter but the privileged form that the energy flow has taken up. Overlapping editing effectively juxtaposes both different viewing perspectives and different modes of perception and sensation. What *The Grandmaster* therefore pursues is not so much a stylistic coherence of the image as a heterogeneous screen space, a space that encompasses both diverse modes of visual effects and distinct, or even competing, sensual impacts.

As the film foregrounds and diversifies the act of sensing, it facilitates our reflection upon the role of perception in the animist imagination. If chapter 3 similarly ends with my reconciliation between Hou Hsiao-hsien's aesthetics and an all-encompassing sensitivity to audiovisual details that the autistic person as shamanic figure is staged to possess, *The Grandmaster* invites us to train with its martial artists through the repeated practice of intense looking and meticulous listening, among other ways of conducting thick engagements with the image—and perhaps, by extension, with our world. Even if attentiveness entails such willingly perverse methods as frame-by-frame looking, its outcome, like the telos of martial arts as a means of self-cultivation, proves to be worthwhile. As we recognize the fleeting transformations throughout Gong's snow dance and the metallic vibrations sounding the martial artists' energetic collisions—in fact, only when we do so—can we follow them into the lost realm of *jianghu* and momentarily partake in its cosmic oneness and grace.

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5. A Tale of the Evil Wind

Abstract: This chapter examines *Sweet Bean* (Kawase Naomi, 2015), the protagonist of which adopts an animist mode of being characterized by openness to and communication with nonhumans, including the titular ingredient used in her signature confection. The film links this animist capacity to her contraction of Hansen's disease and the institutional history of leper colonies in Japan. The chapter analyzes how the film engages with haptic visuality and navigates various generic frameworks—from the process genre to melodrama—to portray the protagonist's animist capacity through culinary production. This emphasis on food preparation and cooking holds ethical and political significance for contemporary Japanese society, particularly in light of the post-Fukushima food security crisis.

Keywords: Hansen's disease; the ethics of eating; embodied memory; the process genre; melodrama

… an aberrant tradition of shamanism … he who does not succeed in mastering the "spirits" will be "possessed" by them.
– Mircea Eliade, *Shamanism: Archaic Techniques of Ecstasy*

The opening of Kawase Naomi's *Sweet Bean* (2015) sees the seventy-six-year-old protagonist, Tokue (Kiki Kirin), dodder through a crowded street in Tokyo, presumably after alighting from a commuter train shown in the previous shot. As she walks past a fellow pedestrian, a gust of wind sweeps through the sidewalk and blows off his hat. Tokue notices the falling hat but does not stop walking. Only after a few seconds does she pause and, with a subtle smile, look up and to the right, offscreen. While the film immediately cuts to another location without capturing the precise object of her intriguing gaze, it covertly establishes, from the outset, an affinity between the natural force of the wind and Tokue, who is later revealed to be capable of attending to the wind and decoding the messages from various

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nonhuman entities that it carries. In a move with high ethico-political stakes that this chapter explores, the film associates Tokue's mysterious power with her identity as a former Hansen's disease patient: a reimagination of the now-curable malady—though social stigma unhappily persists—based on an animist connectivity between Tokue and her world, as mediated by the wind. Retrospectively, we might infer that it is the wind, rather than the falling hat or anything else in this busy locale, that guides Tokue's friendly sightline. Indeed, the film later amplifies the significance of this moment of breeziness by recurrently drawing our attention to shots in which leaves, stripped by the wind in the trees, speed through the air.

Unsaid in this shot, too, is the location from which Tokue travels to the bustling part of the city: her suburban residence of Zensho-en, a leper colony that, in reality, has kept numerous Hansen's disease patients in total quarantine since 1931, when Japan's Leprosy Prevention Law legitimized the forced confinement of anyone deemed a public health threat. Viewers familiar with contemporary Japanese history would likely know that even as antibiotic treatments for the disease emerged in the 1960s, not until 1996 was the infamous law ruled unconstitutional. As this chapter submits, the modern Japanese history of medicine provides a crucial context for understanding the film, insofar as *Sweet Bean* tackles what the problematic label of the "leper" may entail and connote in post-1996 Japan from an animist perspective. A filmmaker who has thought seriously about human-environment relations together with cinematic aesthetics throughout her career, Kawase treats Tokue, the former Hansen's disease patient, as a shamanic figure. Through Tokue's interpretation of nature, *Sweet Bean* envisions a mode of existence urgently needed in contemporary Japan, not least after the Fukushima nuclear crisis. Her thick engagement with the windy world establishes a portal to the animist sphere in an otherwise alienating urban environment dominated by a neoliberal, capitalist ethos. On this note, the Hansen's disease patient functions in the same way as the other shamanic figures hitherto explored in this book: all of them structure the animist imagination by shaping or maintaining an animist sphere qualitatively different from the everyday onscreen.

That said, *Sweat Bean* adds a twist to this established narrative of the animist imagination by staging the death of Tokue, a move that consequently exposes all the ironies, inconsistencies, and conflicts internal to the utopian promises of my heuristic framework. If this book about animism might itself be animate, mirroring Tokue's death, it has also arrived at the inescapable dawn of life. What this concluding chapter thus explores are the demise and legacy of animism for film aesthetics and criticism: What has the death of the

shamanic figure taken permanently away with her? What methodological insights regarding human-nonhuman relations has she left behind? What stylistic devices does cinema deploy to render both the lacuna and heritage of her animist capacities? What spectatorial engagements have these devices elicited from the viewer on physical, affective, and other fronts?

Before I address these questions, it is worth thinking more about the film's representational strategies to shape Tokue and her animist prowess. By foregrounding Tokue's travel and mobility in the opening sequence, the representation of her body—once disease-inflicted and therefore still partially deformed (though this information is withheld from the viewer at this point)—deviates from the stereotypical visualization of Hansen's disease patients in global film history. From the biblical tradition (William Wyler's 1959 *Ben-Hur*) to the exotic abject (Fritz Lang's 1959 Indian diptych, *The Tiger of Eschnapur* and *The Indian Tomb*); from institutionally segregated bodies (Shirō Toyoda's 1940 *Spring on Leper's Island*; Forugh Farrokhzad's 1964 *The House is Black*) to vengeful spirits in the horror genre (John Carpenter's 1980 *The Fog*), the Hansen's disease patient routinely remains physically covered (commonly by bandage), spatially isolated, and socially marginalized. By contrast, no sign marks Tokue's difference from others, at least at first glance.

This conscious stylistic choice speaks to the historical setting of the film in post-1996 Japan, when previously segregated subjects can now exit the leper colony and, for those whose physical deformity is less visibly pronounced, might even regain some sense of normalcy in mainstream society. But the openness with which the shot endows Tokue is not limited to a coverage-free external appearance or physical mobility exterior to a site of separation. Tokue's fascination with the invigorating wind, in fact, suggests a metaphysical solution to transcending the representational stereotype of a Hansen's disease patient. Imbricated into the windy mise-en-scène is none other than the wind's (*feng*) pivotal role in Chinese medicine, which has greatly influenced medical theories and practices across East Asia. According to Shigehisa Kuriyama, since the Shang dynasty the wind has been regarded as one of the key factors that caused illness, primarily bound up with "the vengeance of unhappy ancestors" whose angry curses must be identified and appeased through ritualistic divination and sacrifice so that illness could be cured. Even as this animist tie between diseases and ancestral spirits was later gradually loosened, premodern East Asian physicians still paid much attention to the wind insofar as its unruly nature embodied chaos. As Kuriyama points out, "Evil winds arose unexpectedly, spontaneously, irregularly; they made abrupt, harsh shifts. Whence the association of winds with the most dramatic illnesses—stroke, epilepsy, madness. More generally,

it was wind's protean volatility, its lack of regularity (*wuchang*), that led physicians to conclude, 'Wind is the chief of all diseases.'"[1] A wind that blew at the wrong time or from the wrong direction formed the aetiological source of illness: the disorder of nature that constantly invaded less guarded or nurtured people through orifices across their bodies. Physicians were thus also semioticians of weather, whose central task involved observing and deciphering the messages written on the wind: When would it blow? From which direction? What effect would it cause?

Perhaps nothing better demonstrates the wind's inferential relation to health than the two terminological categories that constitute the changing lexicon of Hansen's disease in classical Chinese. In Angela Ki Che Leung's comprehensive tracing, throughout ancient and medieval periods such terms as *dafeng* (big wind), *efeng* (malignant wind), and *zeifeng* (vicious wind) all designated bone and hair symptoms suggestive of Hansen's disease, while symptoms manifesting on one's skin such as sores, lumps, and bumps were denoted by *li* and *lai*. The Chinese character of *lai*, in particular, was used to refer to Hansen's disease in modern Japanese (*raibyō*) before its gradual replacement by *hansenbyō* (literally, "Hansen Disease"), a term considered less discriminatory in the past few decades.[2] Most likely, none of these medical terms in classical Chinese squarely corresponded to the modern definition of Hansen's disease: an infection by the bacterium *Mycobacterium leprae* or *Mycobacterium lepromatosis*. But around the tenth century, they began to merge into one unified group of disorders, evolving over time into the compound term *mafeng* or *damafeng* (meaning, respectively, "numb wind" or "big numb wind"). With the later arrival en masse of Western missionaries trained in so-called modern medicine and Gerhard Hansen's identification of the bacterium in 1874, the term *mafeng* was eventually dovetailed with what we know today as Hansen's disease in modern Chinese.

From the twelfth century onwards, East Asian physicians had begun to reject the notion of the disorder as wind-induced in favor of less abstract and configurationist etiologies. Nonetheless, the nomenclature of *mafeng* continued to carry the memory of this classical conception of the body and enduringly structured the relation between Hansen's disease and the wind in the popular imagination. The archaic tie between the wind and metaphysical forces persisted as well, albeit in different forms such as Buddhist karma, as

1 Kuriyama, "The Imaginations of Winds and the Development of the Chinese Conception of the Body," 36.

2 Leung, *Leprosy in China*, 1–18.

Hansen's disease continued to be considered the result of divine retribution across East Asia as late as the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.[3] Might we speculate that Tokue's smile at the distant wind implicitly articulates the Hansen's disease sufferer's desire to appease this wind gone awry or, at least, to peacefully live with its precariousness? If the shamanic figure of the martial artist explored in chapter 4 dexterously controls the vital energies that circulate in and out of a desirable body of porosity, what the shamanic figure of the Hansen's disease patient embodies is closer to the unfortunate case described in my epigraph from Eliade's account of spiritual possession as "an aberrant tradition of shamanism" in the ancient Chinese system of belief: a medium who has been overwhelmed by, instead of controlling, the airy spirits. In the context of a medical worldview, Hansen's disease testifies to the negative consequences of said vitality's mobility and one's failure to coexist with those consequences. The subjectivity of the Hansen's disease patient conceptualized as such, in relation to the built environment of the leper colony, thus constitutes a profound irony: a subject forced by the modern Japanese state to relocate and dwell in an enclosed space due to that subject's forced openness by the malicious wind. The enduring connection between Hansen's disease and the wind; the involuntary porosity of the disease-inflicted body; and the spatial closeness of the leper colony—all these medical discourses, historical facts, and site-specific conditions have been woven into the creative fabric of Kawase's animist imagination.

Whispers in the Wind

Shortly after the opening shots, the thematization of the wind extends to a special treatment of its renowned companion in film history: the tree whose physicality has made perceptible the trajectory of the invisible air current ever since *Le Repas de bébé* (1895) by the Lumière brothers. As Tokue arrives at a small store that specializes in dorayaki (a sweet pancake consisting of two small patties wrapped around a filling of the titular red bean paste), she stands on a street flanked by flowering cherry trees. Framed under the blossoming flowers, the light pink of which echoes her earthly burgundy hat and bag as well as her sunglasses with red-colored lens, Tokue looks up to appreciate the sound of rustling leaves as a refreshing breeze passes through. The next shot cuts to her point of view to highlight the most

3 Burns, "From 'Leper Villages' to Leprosaria: Public health, Nationalism and the Culture of Exclusion in Japan," 98–99; Goble, *Confluences of Medicine in Medieval Japan*, 67–88.

classical demonstration of natural contingency onscreen: the wind in the (cherry) trees. The specific composition of a person standing under cherry blossoms will reappear in the final sequence, the significance of which the concluding section of this chapter will explore. For now, let me emphasize how the scene epitomizes the film's dialectical treatment of the conceptual categories of nature and culture, especially the latter's transformation of raw materials from the former to fashion a constructed image of nature (which lies within culture itself). Traces of nature are framed throughout the film as part and parcel of the carefully arranged urban landscape of Tokyo. And yet, even as these traces are readily available to everyone, they are not recognized—let alone appreciated—by anyone but Tokue, who has established a connection with nature not only as a cultural construct but also as a concrete, tangible entity in and of itself. This dialectical process will recur throughout the film, as Tokue exposes and enacts the passage between culture and different registers of nature.

This form of mediation is literally represented in the film as, borrowing Claude Lévi-Strauss's renowned concept, a culinary transformation from "the raw" (nature) to "the cooked" (culture)—let us not forget that the visual motif of the wind in the trees originally serves as the background for a baby's joyful eating in *Le Repas de bébé* as well.[4] Indeed, Tokue is visiting the dorayaki store because she wants to apply for a job there after reading the manager and chef Sentaro's (Nagase Masatoshi) advertisement for an assistant. A middle-aged baker, Sentaro works at the store to return a personal favor to its owner, related to his past as an ex-convict. The business has been lukewarm, unsurprisingly so given Sentaro's personal dislike of sweets, including his own dorayaki. His immediate reaction to Tokue's job application betrays a mixture of skepticism and condescension. Convinced that the workload would be too arduous for someone of Tokue's age, Sentaro discourages her by mentioning the low hourly pay of 600 yen (each dorayaki sells for 120 yen). However, Tokue insists that money is not an issue and willingly offers a pay cut by accepting only 300 yen per hour. The implication is that her interest in this position is motivated not by monetary remuneration but something else that escapes the easy calculation of value—a kind of altruism that potentially includes offering her labor for free. As the film later reveals, what Tokue offers through Sentaro's store is her culinary skill to the world, not unlike a gift that does not aim at participating in any discernable form of exchange. Insofar as Tokue does not presuppose a return, her cooking embodies Jacques Derrida's conceptualization of a theoretically *impossible*

4 Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, 336.

gift that lies exterior to the standard economics of gift giving: a gift that keeps on giving without subjecting the receiver to the obligation to repay.[5]

Slightly surprised by Tokue's proposal, Sentaro still decides to turn her down. Later that day, however, Tokue revisits the dorayaki store. To convince Sentaro this time, she not only offers to accept even less money—200 yen per hour—but also leaves some of her homemade red bean paste for him to sample. Soon after Tokue departs, Sentaro throws her bean paste away, but curiosity prompts him to give it a try. That night in a restaurant, Sentaro runs into Wakana (Uchida Kyara), a junior high school girl who frequents the store and happens to witness his interaction with Tokue during the day. He confesses to her that the appearance, texture, fragrance, and flavor of Tokue's bean paste are impeccable, superior in every aspect to the factory-made bulk order on which he has been relying due to his own inability to produce tasty bean paste. Sympathizing with, if not pitying, Tokue's desire to work, Wakana persuades Sentaro to offer Tokue a part-time position, responsible solely for producing the bean paste every morning before the store opens—an arrangement that limits Tokue's interaction with customers, perhaps betraying Sentaro's own discrimination after noticing her disfigured hands. At this point, both Sentaro and Wakana misidentify Tokue's motivation as a senior's desperate attempt to get employed. The misrecognized intentionality reflects not so much Tokue's financial situation as their own: Sentaro only manages the store for the owner because he is in her debt; Wakana has considered quitting further education and finding a job instead.

Tokue befriends Wakana in no time. The old lady, the middle-aged man, and the teenage girl gradually form something of an alternative family based on the shared experience of exclusion or deviation from the mainstream: Tokue's lifelong quarantine in the leper colony; Sentaro's previous imprisonment; and Wakana's dysfunctional family from which she longs to flee. With Tokue's bean paste, business begins to thrive. The store's newfound popularity and prosperity drastically decline, however, once customers notice Tokue's physical deformities. Rumors that they are caused by Hansen's disease and misinformation about the disease spread, consequently tanking the business. As suspected, Tokue is soon revealed to be a former Hansen's disease patient forced to live in Zensho-en since the age of fourteen until the repeal of the Leprosy Prevention Law.

A causal link is established between Tokue's culinary talent and her contraction of Hansen's disease, which mysteriously enables her to take up a mode of being that communicates with nonhuman entities, including

5 Derrida, *Given Time I: Counterfeit Money*, 7, n8.

but not limited to the red bean of which her confection is made. Several sequences depict her interaction with various nonhuman entities, as she attends to their messages sent through the wind. As with her attentiveness to the wind and the cherry blossom in the opening sequence, throughout the film Tokue is shown to be immersed within natural environments, heeding the wind, the trees, and the sunlight. Her sustained attention to these natural elements persists even in the dorayaki store's miniscule kitchen. When Tokue first prepares the bean paste with Sentaro, she draws her face close to the copper pot where the beans are cooking and stares at them intensely. Intrigued by her behavior, Sentaro asks: "What do you see there? … Putting your face so close … what are you looking at?"[6] To his inquiry, Tokue appears perplexed, as if the object of her regard cannot be more transparent. After briefly expressing her confusion over this question, she continues with her work. To add to Sentaro's (and our) curiosity, Tokue's interactions with the beans are characterized by the rhetoric of personification, as she twice anthropomorphizes their lives. The first time occurs after the scent of the steam from the copper pot alters, to which she reacts by claiming that she and Sentaro are "hosting" the admirable beans that have journeyed all the way from the fields to their kitchen. The second time take places after she adds sugar to the beans. She instructs Sentaro to wait for the unification of the two ingredients, in the same way that a couple on a first date should be given enough time to get used to each other. These seemingly naïve analogies of beans to people baffle Sentaro; he takes neither her words nor her actions seriously.

The film refrains from elaborating on what Tokue sees until one memorable sequence wherein she recounts her attentiveness to the "voices" of the beans, through which she further hears those of the wind, the sunlight, and the water surrounding the fields where the beans were once cultivated and reaped. When Tokue abruptly quits the job after realizing that her identity as a former Hansen's disease patient has stained the store's reputation, her voiceover narration emerges as Sentaro reads her resignation letter, the first half of which relates:

> When I was cooking the bean paste, I was always listening for the stories the bean tell. It's a way of imagining the rainy days and sunny days the beans have seen. What breeze blew across the beanstalks? Listen to the story of their journey. Yes, listen to them. I believe that everything in

6 Unless otherwise noted, English translations of the film's narration and dialogues are from the subtitles in the DVD released by Kino Lorber.

> this world has a story to tell. Even the sunshine and the wind, I think you can hear their stories. Maybe that's the reason. Last night, the breeze that blew in, across the hedge of the holly, seemed to be telling me that I should get in touch with you.

Accompanying Tokue's steady and composed narration, the film shows her sitting alone on a bench, bathed in the light of a setting sun, which creates a pronounced lens flare effect. The camera then supplements the unfolding narration by presenting, across the next eight shots, a voyage of the beans: from the field, where a backlit bean pod in close-up is shot in low-saturation color, through a small stream whose surface reflects the sunshine, to tens of thousands of red beans rustling into large bamboo trays, and then evenly placed across the surfaces of the tray to be sundried in the open air. The prehistory of the beans concludes with the line "Last night, the breeze that blew in, across the hedge of the holly," at which point the film cuts to a long shot of an empty street where a whirl of leaves passionately dances at the center of the frame. Another long shot follows, capturing from a low angle a few treetops from which leaves gently fall. We then return to the interior of the space as defined by the hedge of the holly, as the film cuts back to a medium close-up of Tokue's profile. She leans on and gazes out of a window, seemingly lost in the aftermath of the cosmic journey she has just taken with the beans and in the store's dire situation as related by the wind-messenger.

The kitchen scene and the letter sequence grant us a glimpse into Tokue's vision, which retrospectively addresses Sentaro's nonchalant inquiry regarding the precise target of her attentiveness. In Durian Sukegawa's 2013 novel *Sweet Bean Paste*, from which Kawase's film is adapted, Tokue names this special perception "Listening," which involves all senses including but not limited to hearing. One thing she has come to master—during her sixty-plus years in the leper colony—is to "sniff the wind and listen to the murmur of the tree" and to "pay attention to the language of things in this world that don't use words. That's what I call Listening."[7] Tokue perceives in the beans the memory of their lives from birth to fruition. Displayed on screen, accordingly, is a multi-sensory journey (looking, listening, sniffing) that transcends temporo-spatial boundaries, as Tokue interprets a wealth of textual devices that echo and rebound in these translatable hierophanies from the material world. Each bean is a poem, written out in the staccato and yet lingering rhythm as one after another slides down the gritty surface

7 Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 134.

of the woven tray. Each bean recounts a story, where the natural convection generated by solar warmth structures a narrative arc, where the streams' diffusions create wandering digressions, where the cob and stem in the field reestablish order, and where the wind's emphatic phrases breathe coolness into the hot mess of a passage.

To be sure, as poetic as the beans' voyage across these eight shots might seem, the depiction operates in a familiar aesthetic of apparency that fantasizes an immediacy with nature. The treatment of a plant's life cycle as a series of successive stages, in particular, resorts to a well-established form of natural writing that dates to an eighteenth-century notion in German Romantic literature, championed by Goethe, which sees in the metamorphosis of botany both the law of nature and the law of art. According to Jamina Wellmann, "metamorphosis is always also narrative, as much a linguistic and poetic transformation as a natural one. When literature thematizes the transformation of nature, it transforms itself. Metamorphosis therefore affects not only literature's object, but also its form; the transformation cannot be disentangled from its representation or the substance from its poetic shape."[8] In other words, both the form and content of the film's approach to capturing the supposed sublimity and alterity of nature rehearse go-to images and rhetorics that some might tenably consider clichéd, not least due to the excessive commodification of them today. Indeed, the foregrounded texture of the crops in close-up, the sunlight that bathes the earth in a warm glow, the journey from seeds to be planted to seeds to be harvested—have we not already seen the proliferation of such images in commercials for agricultural products, exotic portrayals of Global South tourism, and promotions of weekend getaways into the countryside targeting jaded middle-class urbanites? The message of Tokue's vision should thus not be accepted at face value but denaturalized, given the specific form it takes up, which comes with a long history of form and, in some cases, connotes economic value.

Here arises a quandary for any ecological project that aims to put the viewer in proximity to the nonhuman we know but cannot speak for or through. How else can it achieve this objective without falling back on clichés? How do we audiovisually mark something as elusive as nature without going to the limit of the established imagery through a set of conventions? Or is capital-N Nature simply unrepresentable? My proposal is that the film's natural imagery does not escape the existing terms: its images are still instrumental, still reflective of human values. Yet they betray a different sense of instrumentality by

8 Wellmann, *The Form of Becoming*, 122.

working out the shamanic figure in the contemporary context to contemplate the environment in a way that is not straightforward: the diegetic emphasis on a kind of human-centrism that prompts reflections on the privileged styles of ecocinema. Despite the potential hesitations and caveats of embracing the film's Romanticism, therefore, I still hope to advance a recuperative reading of the film as a good object to think with. The following sections explore how the film reworks representational and formal conventions by politicizing them and suppressing the anthropocentrism within.

The Savior-faire of Animism

The scenography of Tokue's ecstatic flight mobilizes various stylistic devices of what Laura U. Marks has called haptic visuality in *The Skin of the Film*: an experimental mode of filmmaking that compels the viewer to *feel* and *touch* the screen through vision.[9] Facing a haptic image, our spectatorial attention is drawn to the surface of objects displayed onscreen, if not the surface of the image per se. As we dwell on these surfaces, an intersubjective interaction with the object becomes possible, for we simultaneously transform ourselves from a distant observer who attempts to uncover its deep meaning into an intimate participant, or addressee, of the object's objectivity. "As our seeing comes closer to the surface," Marks theorizes, "the object begins to see us from its own depth. Haptic criticism assumes that its object has aura—that it relates to me, looks back at me," not unlike how the world whispers to Tokue.[10] This effect is often achieved through a variety of formal features, including but not limited to dissolves (frequently in a blur of colors), manipulations of visual quality in pursuit of grainy texture or color saturation, and fragmented (extreme) close-ups. Indeed, the ways in which natural entities are shown in the letter sequence characterize it as an example of the haptic image. The extensive use of the close-up, lens flare, and the amplified sound of each bean's contact with the bamboo tray irresistibly directs our gaze to the filmed objects' surfaces. As the sequence propels us to wake up from the anesthesia of senses and reconnect with the materiality of the world, so we immerse ourselves in the sediment of each bean's memory that Tokue stirs up. The bean paste that Tokue produces at the dorayaki store is presented in a similar fashion, as close-ups and saturated colors imbue the paste with an auratic, dazzling sensuality.

9 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 1–23.
10 Marks, "Haptic Visuality: Touching with the Eyes," 80.

That such formal devices are used to magically transform any profilmic object into a commanding attraction has become a clichéd aesthetic strategy today, not least in the service of food representation. East Asian cinema and media have been particularly adept at staging one gastronomic spectacle after another—from Itami Juzo's *Tampopo* (1985) to Ang Lee's *Eat Drink Man Woman* (1995) to several popular Japanese manga-turned-TV series such as *What Did You Eat Yesterday?* (2019), *Solitary Gourmet* (2012–present) and *Midnight Diner* (2009–2016), which inspired two remakes in South Korea (2015) and China (2017). That said, I accentuate how haptic visuality works in *Sweet Bean* because of its ecological implications, given that this stylistic feature is motivated by Tokue's shamanic capacity. The unity between a style and a figure preserves the occulted voices of nature available only to Tokue, to the extent that the haptic image functions as the evidence of her animism. Directly, then, *Sweet Bean* complicates a discourse surrounding the sensuous staging of food that posits how such an aesthetic enacts a twofold obfuscation: of the social labor behind the production of food and of the authenticity of food as such.

Consider a fundamental text that establishes this critical tradition: Roland Barthes's "Ornamental Cuisine," the structuralist critic's exposé of the myth behind midcentury culinary photography. Barthes discerns a "dialectical resolution" in color photography of elaborately prepared and displayed dishes in such a "veritable mythological treasure" as the magazine *Elle*, the proud petit bourgeois pinnacle of household journalism.[11] The titular ornamental cuisine, captured in photography of this kind, is composed of shiny surfaces (with the privileged color being a glowing pink). It operates by the transmutation of nature into a product of social labor, aiming "on the one hand, to escape nature by a sort of delirious baroque (to stud a lemon with shrimps, to color a chicken shocking pink, to serve grapefruit boiled), and, on the other, to attempt reconstituting that same nature by an incongruous artifice (to arrange meringue mushrooms and holly leaves on a yule log cake, to replace shrimp heads around the adulterated béchamel hiding their bodies)." Barthes associates this disenchantment of nature and the ensuing re-enchantment through an *impression* of nature—a twofold mediation on the material level of the re-naturalized mushrooms, leaves, yule log, and the composites of dismembered shrimps, as well as through the photographic apparatus of cameras, lighting, analog labs, printing plants—in *Elle* and elsewhere with the contested notion of realism. Lamentably, the reality of ornamental cuisine is restricted by the periodical's "'distinguished'

11 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 143.

vocation" to a mere "magical reality," however natural its appearance might have appeared after the decoration by the chef's hands and the camera. This reality is magical not only due to its failure to address the "real problems of alimentation (the real problem is not to stud a partridge with cherries, but to find the partridge, i.e., to pay for it)" to its predominately working-class readers but also because, at the most pragmatic level possible, one could easily imagine how unpalatable, if not outright inedible, the cuisine would taste.[12]

Devoted to the evocation of sensory experiences and nothing else, ornamental cuisine is all surfaces. Unlike fellow culinary sections in rival household magazines like *L'Express*, which assure their upper-middle-class readers of the eventual consumption of their photographed cuisines (so long as readers procedurally follow the provided recipes), *Elle* fantasizes a fundamental split between the reader-eater and what they consume. By no means does this detached relation correspond to any aspect of the actual process of eating, most wonderfully portrayed by Tristram in Laurence Sterne's *The Life and Opinions of Tristam Shandy, Gentleman* (1759). Considering the beginning of a person's possession of an apple, Tristram wonders, "how did it begin to be his? Was it, when he set up his heart upon it? or when he gather'd it? or when he chew'd it? or when he roasted it? or when he peel'd? or when he brought it home? Or when he digested?—or when he—?" If one's encounter with food can be anatomically categorized as the gradual internalization of the other into the self from observation to preparation, from collection to assimilation (before a part of that Other eventually becomes an irreversible abject), then the mechanism of ornamental cuisine disrupts this logic by ensuring that the dish remains an unattainable other through and through—a myth over yonder, never to be prepared, eaten, digested, or excreted by the gazing epicures.[13]

Given that *Sweet Bean* presents both the red beans and the bean paste in the stylistics condemned by Barthes, is Tokue's culinary creation ornamental? Can viewers of the film, in the wake of her demonstration of food production, recreate the confection in their own kitchens? What potential significance behind the formation of an animist world might her bean paste carry? A comparison between *Sweet Bean* and the original novel by Sukegawa, intriguingly, expresses the former's rejection of any illusion

12 Barthes, *Mythologies*, 143.

13 The analysis of the process and aftermath of consumption in *Tristam Shandy* is from Keenleyside, "The First-Person Form of Life: Locke, Stern, and the Autobiographical Animal," 119–121.

of facile reproducibility of Tokue's product. The film proposes that while Tokue's bean paste is inarguably a cuisine of the surface, its superficiality is not a result of what Barthes diagnoses; rather, the myth of ornamental cuisine laid bare by Barthes as an obliteration of labor is transformed into an ecological myth of animism, an object of desire that can be amply sensed but never interiorized. The visual pleasure of ornamental cuisine that Barthes denies due to its non-egalitarian nature is what *Sweet Bean* holds onto as its privileged articulation of the animist principle that guides the diegesis. In the face of (commodity) desire sanctioned by Barthes's somewhat moralistic semiotics, the film celebrates visual pleasure all the same.

Let us begin the comparison between the original novel and the film by heeding how the former approaches the process of culinary production. The final chapters are driven by Sentaro's desire to carry on Tokue's legacy through reproducing her signature bean paste so that her supreme skill—a testimony to her subjectivity and therefore a proof of the possibility of animism—can continue even after her death. The last time Sentaro and Wakana visit Tokue in the leper colony, they eat the sweet bean soup that Tokue has prepared for them. The confection, as always, tastes flawless. But this time she asks them to eat some homemade salty kombu, a seaweed in the kelp family, which gives an aftertaste of "a pleasant plum scent that tickled the back of the nose."[14] The unexpected supplement and elevation of the soup's sweetness by the seaweed's savoriness amaze Sentaro, who desperately enquires about this combination's magical effect. It turns out that Tokue has added a pinch of salt into the soup to balance the sweetness, just as her bean paste is similarly on the salty side compared to the factory-made paste that Sentaro used to order. What the novel thus provides is a moment of demystification that rationalizes the appeal of Tokue's paste. Knowing that her time in the world will soon come to an end, Tokue presents the salty kombu as her last gift to Sentaro: a hint at a viable product that Sentaro can create to support himself. If, like the film, the novel has previously established Tokue's culinary skill as a result of the mysterious Listening, it now reverses this premise by suggesting that there are feasible, empirical ways to take on her animist capacity, potentially available to anyone who masters the use of salty ingredients during pancake production.

From here, the novel depicts Sentaro's trial and error at great length, detailing each step he takes in recreating that fine mix of sweet and salty flavors. His search starts from the selection of salt from specific locations, including "well-known brands of natural sea salt such as Ako from the Seto Inland Sea

14 Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 147.

or Yanbaru from the Okinawan island of Iejima."[15] A series of calculations with regards to the quantity, technique, and timing of placing salt into the bean paste ensues, initiating a drastic shift of the novel's mode of narration from conventional storytelling into the kind of exposition that typically characterizes a cookbook or, recalling Barthes, a magazine like *L'Express*:

> At first Sentaro tried increasing the amount of salt he mixed into the bean paste. Ordinarily he would add only a pinch to a four-kilogram batch—one gram at the most. He tried increasing it to two grams, then three grams. And something mysterious happened when he did; the salt flavour stood out against the sweetness, clear and fresh—an unexpected blossoming of flavour. The taste was fleeting and not overpowered by sweetness. He found it refreshing. But that was only when he added salt in minute quantities. Once he increased the amount of salt—specifically to three or more grams per four-kilogram batch—the flavour abruptly turned coarse, and lost all subtlety. … What should he do then? The obvious answer was to try adding salt to the pancake, so he decided to experiment with the batter. As always, he blended equal amount of eggs, salt, and soft flour. Then he added some baking powder to leaven, honey, and sweet rice wine, and a tiny dash of green tea for flavouring. Next he divided the batter into several bowls, put varying amounts of salt in each, and cooked the pancakes.[16]

Four-kilogram batch; two or three grams of salt; equal amount of eggs, salt, and flour; a dash of matcha powder—Sentaro becomes a chemist and his kitchen a laboratory. His experiments, however, do not lead to success. When he offers a sample to the store owner, she complains that there is "something *poor* about it."[17] After trying one of his own samples, Sentaro reluctantly admits that while the first mouthful tastes refreshing, a disagreeable aftertaste then emerges. Rather than complementing the sweetness of the bean paste, the salty dorayaki ends up as a one-time gimmick.

Sentaro's experimentation promptly stops when Tokue dies. He soon quits the job, refusing to accept the store owner's proposal to add the savory okonomiyaki pancake to the store's menu. One night, however, he dreams of an encounter with a young girl whom he immediately recognizes as the young Tokue. The dream takes place in her hometown, an idyllic landscape

15 Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 153.
16 Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 153–154.
17 Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 155.

featuring a river streaming down the mountains, with the entire riverbank covered by a carpet of blossoming cherry trees. She asks him to enter a teahouse standing amid a cloud of pink flowers and offers him a cup of tea, on the surface of which float a few petals. The cherry-blossom tea tastes "[a] little bit salty with a lovely smell of flowers," because, as the young girl reveals, the petals—a specific kind of "double-flowered variety, not your usual *somei yoshino* [Yoshino cherry]"—have been handpicked and pickled with salt at home. An epiphany hits Sentaro, for he recalls that Tokue once mentioned pickling cheery blossoms as a child. Realizing that the pickled flower could be just the missing ingredient in his salty dorayaki, Sentaro desires but never manages to ask her for confirmation: "did you ever eat them with sweet food?"[18] As if the illuminating dream has not already explained Tokue's recipe to death, the last page of the novel further identifies the precise location of Tokue's hometown as "Shinshiro in Aichi Prefecture."[19] The extensive process of demystification that Sentaro has undertaken thus concludes when a kind of deus ex machina traverses the boundaries between life and death and submerges Tokue's childhood memory into the realm of Sentaro's unconscious. Such an ending cannot be more instructive; one can even expect a readerly response by following the step-by-step process outlined in the novel-cookbook, purchasing all the ingredients necessary for reproducing Tokue's floral bean paste.

Kawase's adaptation, in comparison, betrays reservations about the novel's epistemological assurance. While the film also features Tokue's suggestion of the addition of salt, her exchange with Sentaro lasts less than two minutes. The screen duration devoted to the lengthy trial and error behind Sentaro's selection of salt and refinement of the paste's taste amounts to only a minute; Sentaro's dream, which concludes the novel, does not appear in the film at all. This is not to say that *Sweet Bean* outright denies a transmission of animist knowledge from Tokue to Sentaro. But it does so with uncertainty, withholding the kind of empiricism that undergirds the novel's optimism and conviction. A sense of mystery permeates the making of the bean paste: Tokue does not define what constitutes a good bean when she scolds Sentaro for not separating the good ones from the bad ones, nor does she explain, after quietly attending to the boiling pot for hours, the timing of her suddenly pouring all the beans into a colander to rinse them with cold water. Repeatedly, the film establishes that the recipe is the last thing it wishes to provide.

18 Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 180.
19 Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 213.

If it is possible to learn how to make Tokue's bean paste and to codify it in the form of a set recipe, the recipe would not be the result of her animist engagement with the world, which belongs exclusively to the Hansen's disease patient as a shamanic figure. A step-by-step audiovisual representation of the paste production—even for the duration of one sequence—would turn the film into an example of what Salomé Aguilera Skvirsky terms "the process genre," defined as "the sequentially ordered representation of someone making or doing something."[20] This generic category, which demystifies a given object by showing all the steps of production it takes for the object to reach its final form, Skvirsky argues, "offers up a world that can be understood, known, mastered by anyone, by everyone. Like Neil Harris's operational aesthetic, its ethos is democratic and egalitarian. A world full of stuff whose genesis can be known and understood (even by a child), a world full of bodily skills that can be practiced and learned by anybody willing to put in enough hours—that world is a world under my control. It is also a world that can be molded and transformed by one such as me."[21] Unlike the process genre, then, *Sweet Bean* offers an alternative approach to the tracing and preservation of memory that remains in the personal domain, not popularized through procedural instructions.

In this way, the film avoids the pitfalls of ornamental cuisine even as it preserves the joy of both tasting and looking at culinary delicacies. Instead it resorts to what Luce Giard calls "doing-cooking," an acquisition of culinary knowledge not by following recipes "devoid of both illustrations and 'feminine' flourishes" and therefore seemingly authoritative but, rather, through mobilizing one's memory of past experiences and sensory acuteness on the ground.[22] On the one hand, doing-cooking involves "a multiple memory: memory of apprenticeship, of witnessed gestures, and of consistencies, in order, for example, to identify the exact moment when the custard has begun to coat the back of a spoon and thus must be taken off the stove to prevent it from separating." On the other hand, it depends on "the smell coming from the oven that lets one know if the cooking is coming along and whether it might help to turn up the temperature."[23] Such a method—at once pre-programmed in the depths of memory and contingent upon the atmosphere of the cookery site—is what Tokue privileges in and out of the kitchen as she never ceases to see, hear, and smell each of the world's

20 Skvirsky, *The Process Genre*, 2.

21 Skvirsky, *The Process Genre*, 220–221.

22 De Certeau, Giard, and Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 152.

23 De Certeau, Giard, and Mayol, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, 157.

wind-carried messages. The film's animist imagination thus embodies what Pamela H. Smith calls "artisanal epistemology": Tokue is an artisan, understood not just as someone with experience but a philosopher.[24] As both her cooking and understanding the world for human purposes are intimately fused, the knowledge she holds is both of a how-to and that of the world, including the nonhuman materials.

Crucially, while *Sweet Bean* associates the haptic mode with the privacy of Tokue's animism, it insists that the significance of this aesthetic operates not simply on the level of the individual but also on that of a particular collective: the Hansen's disease patient as a shamanic figure. The film alludes to the broader culturo-historical context out of which Tokue's capacity emerges: the involuntary containment of Hansen's disease patients across Japan throughout the twentieth century. The following section explores how the film's dialogue with haptic visuality moves beyond the phenomenology of image, even if vernacular usage in non-scholarly accounts has grossly reduced Marks's concept to describing a particular affect elicited by certain codified and sensuous means of image production.

The World on the Tongue

The privileged stylistic devices of the haptic image—the blurry dissolve, the saturated tone, the pronounced texture—have become desirable ends in themselves as a multitude of glossy images permeates the contemporary mediascape, with glossiness itself enshrined as one aspect of mainstream standards of artistic evaluation. In a reflective essay published four years after *The Skin of the Film*, Marks cautions against the reduction of haptic visuality to erotic eye-candy. Art and popular cinemas, television commercials, music videos, video games—we can add to this list Instagram posts, TikTok cooking reels, digital photographs taken by cameras equipped with built-in filters, and more—all seem to have assumed "a haptic cloak that pulls us close sensuously in order to sell us clothing, hamburgers, life insurance." To rewrite the familiar story of avant-gardism turned into a profitable norm, and to reclaim the once-radical potential of her concept, Marks maintains that the production of haptic images "need[s] to be *motivated* by something radical."[25] This is why Marks returns to the deep connection between haptic visuality and intercultural cinema on

24 Smith, *The Body of the Artisan*, 82–93.
25 Marks, "Haptic Visuality," 82.

which her book insists: a kind of personal filmmaking driven by the urge to capture, preserve, and evoke an elusive memory that emerges out of "the encounter between different cultural organizations of knowledge"—almost always a hierarchical encounter between dominant systems of knowledge and minority cultures, which takes the form of a collision between the "hegemonic, white, Euro-American culture" and its sundry others. To be radical (again), haptic images need to operate on both stylistic and political fronts.

I have shown how *Sweet Bean* ties haptic visuality to Tokue's identity as a shamanic figure. Elsewhere, the film takes it a step further, contextualizing her animist capacity within the medical history of Hansen's disease in modern Japan on an institutional level larger and more abstract than any individual identity. Consider the sequence at the dorayaki store in which Wakana cannot help but hesitantly mention the elephant in the room: "Uh, Tokue, what happened to your fingers?" The question is not immediately acknowledged as Tokue happens to be coughing and complaining about the cold she has caught. It is unclear if Tokue has heard Wakana, though the film confirms the clarity of the question by cutting to Sentaro's reaction and asserting his awareness of the topic's sensitivity. Distracted from work and all ears now, Sentaro's expression betrays a mixture of surprise, unease, and curiosity, but he does not interrupt. Wakana poses the question again, leaving Tokue no room but to face a topic she has chosen not to discuss. While Tokue does not seem offended, she nevertheless circumvents a direct response by lamenting how her fingers "ended up crooked like this" after a childhood illness. The conversation ends abruptly as Tokue turns her back on Wakana and fans Sentaro with a paper fan. As the camera follows the air flow by swiftly panning left from Tokue's back through her moving right hand to Sentaro, the medium shot pauses for an extra beat in the middle of its trajectory to emphasize her slightly deformed hand and fingers. A small but clear lump on the joints of her wrist is also discernable. Later, with a friend's help at a bookstore, Wakana finds a collection of photographs devoted to the documentation of former Hansen's disease patients' lives in isolation. They flip through several black-and-white photographs before pausing to study one striking image in which an aged blind man reads a Braille book by deciphering each symbol with the tip of his tongue (figure 5.1).

This image is collected in Terashima Mariko's 2001 *Yamai ietemo: Hansen-byo kyosei kakuri 90nen kara jinken kaifuku e* [Even if cured: the recovery of human rights ninety years after the forced quarantine of Hansen's disease patients]. The accompanying caption in the book, not shown in the film,

Fig. 5.1. Tongue reading in *Sweet Bean* (2015).

reads: “Given that the perception of the fingertip is paralyzed, the Braille book is read with the tongue. Mr. Kim Ha-il said that during the six months when he learned tongue reading, his tongue kept bleeding.”[26] On its own, the image of tongue reading presents a common motif in the representation of Hansen’s disease patients in post-1996 Japanese visual culture. Similar images have circulated in media in the wake of a series of lawsuits and activist campaigns against the Japanese government’s violation of human rights, such as another photography collection published in 2002, Chō Konzai’s *Chō Konzai shashinshū: Hansenbyō o toritsuzukete* [The photography of Cho Konzai: photographing Hansen’s disease continuously], which features an untitled, black-and-white photograph of a man reading a Braille book with his tongue.[27]

While I fully acknowledge the impact and visibility of tongue reading as a motif in this historical moment of photographic activism, something specific about it beckons, particularly when considered in relation to haptic visuality. I cannot help but recall a similar image that twice adorns both the cover and the title page of Marks’s book: a still from Ming-Yuen S. Ma’s video *Sniff* (1996) in which the naked artist closes his eyes, crawling on his bed and tasting the sheet with his tongue. This image well exemplifies the thesis of Marks’s book, not only because it represents a man’s sensory engagement with his bed sheet in search of the lingering smell and residual taste that a lover has left behind (metonymically referencing a broader body of absence at the height of the AIDS crisis), but also because, through close-ups and the technique of analog dubbing, the video becomes unfathomable by

26 Terashima, *Yamai ietemo*, 12–13.

27 Chō, *Chō Konzai shashinshū*. There is no pagination in the book. The image referred to here is the fifty-ninth one.

instrumental vision alone and gradually "loses its coherence the way smell particles disperse, taking memory away with them."[28]

Perhaps no filmmaker has more thoroughly explored the potential of the haptic image in reciprocity with the recuperation of elusive memory and irreversible loss than Kawase, whose films span all possible locations on the ideological spectrum: from politically progressive to commercially lucrative. Both the privileged aesthetic devices of haptic visuality and the body's desire to touch (either another body or the surface of an image) lie at the core of Kawase's films since her early documentaries, several of which are intimate self-portraits of her family members, especially her missing father (*Embracing*, 1992; *Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth*, 2001) and her grandfather's older sister, who adopted her when she was a child after her parents' divorce (*Katatsumori*, 1994; *See Heaven*, 1995; *Sun on the Horizon*, 1996). These films thematize the act of touching a surface: as Kawase affectionately caresses the face of her great-aunt in *Katatsumori*; or when she painfully gets a tattoo on the entirety of her back in *Sky, Wind, Fire, Water, Earth* to reconcile herself with the passing of her estranged father. According to Adrian Martin's description of Kawase's physical presence in these films, "while the camera films, while the eye sees, a hand—the hand of the photographer-director herself—enters the frame. As if to verify by touch the reality of what is seen; as if to ground the body of the filmmaker right within that reality."[29] Reverberating with Marks's comments on the ephemerality of memory on which intercultural cinema reflects, Martin goes on to note that Kawase's "fingers never truly grasp what the eye sees or what the camera frames," resulting in the failure of realities at distinct levels to congeal. Unlike the mainstream's appropriation of the haptic image for profit, these documentaries uneasily reflect how spectatorial desires might be managed, insofar as they restrain the viewer from accessing the profound mystery of Kawase's filmed subject. Such a discrepancy that remains discrepant through and through, Martin argues, situates Kawase's work among "the resistant, political cutting-edge of today's most progressive cinema," which drastically differs from "a modishly New Age filmmaking, illustrating the comfortable, soft, quasi-mystical platitudes."[30]

This view tying Kawase's haptic aesthetics to a political gesture, however, gets complicated when we confront a basic question posed by *Sweet Bean*, itself a dead end for moralistic (film) criticism: is not having even the slightest

28 Marks, *The Skin of the Film*, 172.

29 Martin, "A Certain Dark Corner of Modern Cinema: Naomi Kawase's Self-portraits," 182.

30 Martin, "A Certain Dark Corner of Modern Cinema: Naomi Kawase's Self-portraits," 187.

curiosity about the taste of dorayaki after leaving the theater not only a reading against the film's grain but also a denial of our incited desire? Kawase seems to be aware of the power and challenge of the haptic image, especially when she, too, has mobilized it in her films that do not explore any marginalized subject positions, such as her 2016 short, *Seed*, commissioned to promote Miu Miu, a high-end Italian fashion brand of women's clothing and accessory. With its juxtaposition of the repression of modernity and the exuberance of a joy at once salivating and spiritual, *Sweet Bean* serves as a befitting case for us to reexamine the fraught tension between the aesthetics and politics of a given image in relation to our spectatorial desire and pleasure.

In the case of Terashima's photograph of tongue reading, its incorporation into *Sweet Bean* functions as a record of the traumatic memory at once personal and collective in the leper colony, which complicates Kawase's own proclivity for cinematic hapticity in her early documentaries. More than just an individual pursuit of an ideal familial unity, the attempt to make connection with the world through one's tongue carries much higher ethical stakes. The following section explores the film's imagined configuration of the haptic image, its subject matter, and the space of the leper colony: What is it about this space of isolation and marginalization that makes someone like Tokue discursively closer to nonhuman, natural entities? How does the identity of the Hansen's disease patient, forged in modern history by a set of cultural practices, epitomize the gap between systems of knowledges deemed as the driving force of the film's aesthetic? How has the film responded to this identity and endowed it with new significance in our contemporary moment, when its spatial configuration, i.e., the leper colony as a state institute, no longer stands legally?

When the Margin Disappears

A small detail in Tokue's resignation letter to Sentaro stands out for those familiar with the built environment of the leper colony: "the hedge of the holly" that the breeze has traversed. "Holly" refers to false holly, a species of flowering plant native to East Asia. As one passage in the original novel clarifies, given that the stiff and spiky leaves of false holly would harm those who attempt to escape, it was the very plant consciously chosen to grow into "a green demarcating line" enclosing the leper colony.[31] Even

31 Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 99.

though the film does not spell out this piece of architectural information, the letter's reference to the hedge as an obstacle that the wind-messenger must overcome testifies to the condition of forced isolation that used to separate Tokue's lived reality from the outside. That fact that a plant has been cultivated and arranged to hinder Hansen's disease patients' communication with other natural entities also reiterates the film's recurring interrogation of the categorical similarity, dissonance, and crossing between animist porosity and the lack thereof in an otherwise disenchanted world.

The history of the leper colony in modern Japan itself invites the film's dialectical treatment between openness and closure. According to Susan L. Burns, the welding of treatment with total segregation was a modern phenomenon in Japan, beginning in the late nineteenth century. The state's desire to present itself as a civilized, progressive society motivated the transformation of Hansen's disease patients from a physically visible and medically attended group that is part of society into a national abject whose presence must remain unseen and controlled, given that a dominant Western hygienic discourse identified Hansen's disease as one of the emblematic diseases of a backward civilization. By contrasting pre-modern leper communities in Japan, known as the *monoyoshi* village, with the modern system of institutionalized segregation, Burns argues that the ideological ordering of the Meiji government's public health policy was aimed at dismantling the former and creating a new culture of exclusivity, all while establishing a constructed genealogy between them. Officials attributed the origin of a modern invention to an early modern tradition, thereby legitimizing their policy even though the boundary between the interior and exterior of the *monoyoshi* village was rather permeable.[32] The ultimate ends of the creation of an institutional lineage was to eliminate, by force and legal regulation, any possible lifestyles and treatments for the patient, which had remained alternative to those privileged by the state. In this gradual process, "the inmate [of the leper colony] was 'colonised' or 'converted' into accepting that existence within the institution was in some ways better than life 'outside.'"[33] While this meant that compliance with the system was encouraged and rewarded, police enforcement was the chief agent that enforced public health laws; most of the patients thus arrived in custody. Japanese leper colonies, in this line, were modeled not so much after hospitals as prisons, and the same system of imprisonment, control, and rehabilitation would later be implemented in Taiwan, Korea, and others colonized regions under the rule

32 Burns, "From 'Leper Villages' to Leprosaria," 103.

33 Burns, "From 'Leper Villages' to Leprosaria," 105–106.

of the Japanese Empire. Considering the twofold colonialism—Western expansion and, later, Japan's intra-Asian invasion—that drove and guided this history of a modern state apparatus, it is most apposite to term this space "leper *colony*"—as this chapter has insisted on—rather than the understated "house," "hospital," or "sanitarium."

Against this historical backdrop, the conceptual intricacies behind the Hansen's disease patient as an identity and the leper colony as an ideological space in *Sweet Bean* emerge. In appropriating, recuperating, and revising these terms originally defined in relation to modernity, the film alters the logic of segregation. Aside from reconfiguring the Hansen's disease patient's body through the classical notion of corporeal porosity in relation to the wind in East Asian medicine, the film transforms the leper colony from a modern facility of autonomy into an animist sphere where connectivity between patients and, recalling Tokue's letter, "everything in this world" transpires. In an ethically daring move, the film complicates how we might typically view the leper colony: while there is no question that, historically, it has been a site of repression, could utopian potentiality emerge from the traumatic detritus of modernity and its violence? Indeed, towards the end of the original novel, the penultimate letter that Tokue writes to Sentaro before her death reiterates her shamanic capacity and identifies its deep groundedness within the leper colony: "I listened to the birds that visited Tenshoen, and the insects, trees, grass, and flowers. To the wind, rain, and light. And to the moon. I believe they all have voices. I can easily spend a whole day Listening to them. When I am in the woods at Tenshoen the whole world is there too. When I hear stars whispering at night I feel part of the eternal flow of time."[34] A kind of cosmic oneness, of space and time alike, into which those who open themselves up to the signs of nature are absorbed—such is the thick of the everyday where Tokue has dwelled for decades up to the historical moment of 1996.

The leper colony's embeddedness within a larger ecology becomes even more evident when we contextualize *Sweet Bean* within Kawase's artistic trajectory. From a thematic perspective, the film conceptualizes the leper colony as a reservoir of a non-alienated human-nature relation, which undergirds prominent tensions in almost all Kawase's feature films. *Sweet Bean* reflects on her sustained topoi and imageries, related to animism and its human agents, including none other than shamans. While most of the films explored in this book approach the shaman as a cinematic figure (except for Maya Deren's ethnographic commitment, discussed in chapter 4),

34 Sukegawa, *Sweet Bean Paste*, 164–165.

many of Kawase's films feature characters who are actual ritual leaders, among other participants of various textual traditions otherwise known as religions: Shinto, Buddhism, and the Ryūkyūan worldview (the belief system of the Ryūkyū Islands, including Amami Ōshima where Kawase's 2014 *Still the Water* is set).

To better understand how *Sweet Bean* dovetails the shamanic figure of the Hansen's disease patient and the shaman, it is worth noting some common features of Kawase's cinematic rituals, even as their scopes and functions vary from film to film. On the narrative front, these rituals are communal events where participants dance and chant together; afterwards, the protagonists are catharized as some individual and/or familial traumas come to be addressed and gradually worked through. Stylistically, the rituals are frequently shot in long takes with a handheld camera, which constantly travels and reframes to follow the participants' movements. The cinematographic fluidity, combined with a compositional strategy that tightly frames human figures from medium shots to close-ups, leaves viewers with an impression that they partake in the screen rituals as fellow participants on the ground. During or after the rituals, the transformations that the protagonists undergo are visibly signaled by the advent of a state of togetherness wherein they find themselves enfolded, immanently, into the embrace of the world. Recalling the martial artist's participation in the snow in chapter 4, Kawase's characters are similarly surrounded by natural elements. But if the former manages to control the snow down to the micro level of each snowflake, the entirety of the latter is immersed within the depth of nature, which literally cleanses them with water (such as rain or the ocean). A good example is the depiction of Nara's annual Basara Festival in *Shara* (2003), which culminates in a kind of ecstatic collectivity when an unexpected downpour undiscriminatingly wets and unites all the participants into one larger whole. Another memorable example appears at the end of *Still the Water*, when a young man and a young woman swim together, completely naked in the sea, after coming to terms with the fraught tensions in their respective family.

Given the prominence of nature's healing power, understood as a source of spiritual sustenance, across Kawase's films, it comes as no surprise that most of them are set in places where people's access to nature constitutes a crucial part of their everyday life. Notably, the mountains and forests of Nara, Japan's ancient capital where Kawase grew up, have unfailingly served as her principal setting, as seen in *Suzaku* (1997), *Firefly* (2000), *The Mourning Forest* (2007), *Hanezu* (2011), *Radiance* (2017), and *Vision* (2018). To be clear, Kawase has not presented Nara as a Romantic wonderland untouched by

traces of modernization; rather, it functions as a screen heterotopia where distinctions between the old and the new, the sacred and the profane, simply do not hold water. Kawase constantly fosters such an enchanted chronotope where the presence of nature—indexed by extensive shots of trees, flowers, and insects, among other natural imageries—is edited into an urban environment. Even as Kawase's films leave her favorite setting of Nara, they manage to find their way back to natural milieus, from the primeval forest in Thailand in *Nanayo* (2008) to the spiritual Amami Ōshima in *Still the Water*. The fact that *Sweet Bean* is filmed entirely in Tokyo and features a narrative driven, at least initially, by the capitalist system of enterprise and profit thereby situates it in a curious position within Kawase's oeuvre. How should we make sense of this incongruity on both spatial and thematic levels? In what ways do these choices speak to the contesting relation between first and second nature that Kawase insists on articulating through the cinematic image over a career that has now spanned more than twenty years?

I propose to contextualize the changes in *Sweet Bean* as reflections on pressing ecological concerns. The film poses questions crucial to the relevance of Romantic narratives to present-day environmental realities, not least the Anthropocene truism, by now widespread, that argues for the obliteration of the distance between nature and culture (not least regional culture). The film reproduces and continues such a distance in a dialectical fashion, before soon rendering it obsolete and intangible. No longer set in Nara or a remote island, the film relocates to Tokyo, one of the symbolic centers of global modernity's totalizing power par excellence; no longer featuring primeval forests or the Pacific Ocean, the film limits the traces of nature to the presence of trees on the street and carefully maintained parks. That said, *Sweet Bean* theorizes the leper colony in relation to nature and places the peculiar configuration of such a built environment within its imaginary Tokyo—a mini-Nara within this global city. What used to be a modern institute of state segregation, ironically, becomes a site of preservation, wherein the openness of the leper's body allows Tokue to follow, in reverse, the wind that has penetrated and forever altered her subjectivity. Indeed, the first time that Sentaro and Wakana visit Tokue in the leper colony, after getting off the bus they walk down a narrow path, flanked by lofty trees and nothing else. This lingering forest path to the residential area of the leper colony is filmed in a manner that recalls the default setting in which classical fairy tales routinely begin: an enchanted forest that grows and operates according to its own magical rules, uninterrupted by the changes and conflicts in the secular world outside.

While the leper colony curiously maintains an affinity with animism due to its secluded location in a forest, this affinity would soon turn nonviable, at least discursively, after the repeal of the Leprosy Prevention Law. If *Sweet Bean* redefines the leper colony from an animist perspective, it also destabilizes this redefinition by recounting a story set not during the period of absolute segregation but after its opening: an event that marks the conclusion of the kind of natural poetry that Kawase has been writing with her caméra-stylo. What the film thus portrays is an elegiac lament over the loss of this fantastical, if not escapist, security that once accompanied the exclusivity of the leper colony, imagined here as the last resort for the possibility of premodern magic. As the repeal of the segregation law propels, allegorically, the fading of differences between animist and non-animist realms, so the Hansen's disease patient's return to the metropolitan everyday comes with a price: spatialities between the center of culture and the margin of nature, and the associated temporalities between the teleology of global modernity and cyclical pastoralism, can no longer be kept apart, not even provisionally. This negation of coevalness enacts a formidable undifferentiation between nature and culture, which demolishes even the hedge of false holly behind which enchantment has hidden. When segregation of time and space stops sheltering Kawase's animist imagination, the illusion of power generated by her privileged natural imagery is put into question: What if this illusion is only an illusion and this power not total? What happens when Tokue's identity becomes just a casual worker?

Unlike Sentaro, Tokue does not live paycheck to paycheck. Remuneration—in fact, profit of any sort—does not constitute the primary aim of her labor. Her advent to the dorayaki shop not only represents the bounty of nature but also introduces it into modern life as an unconditional gift. As I have demonstrated, *Sweet Bean* departs from the original novel in allowing Tokue's animist mysticism to maintain an absolute singularity that cannot be appropriated, let alone commodified. To some extent, her unfitness to live with other human beings puts her in touch with nature in a discrete way, but by no means is she confined solely to the leper colony, either. Instead, her daily excursus to and activity at the shop, in and of themselves, generate a sense of fulfillment that distinguishes her from her fellow former Hansen's disease patients, who are never shown outside the leper colony throughout the film. Straddling the animist and non-animist realms, Tokue alone occupies a liminal space. Under her guidance, Sentaro is exposed to how the world can be similarly viewed once he, too, occupies the same position. The rest of this chapter dwells on this state of liminality and the sentiment of loneliness that Tokue has endured in the discriminative city of Tokyo

and that Sentaro will also endure as he transforms into a shamanic figure. This sentiment of loneliness that accompanies the structural singularity of being shamanic is best described as melodramatic.

All That Animism Allows

Distinct from such documentarian images in the early 2000s as Terashima's and Chō's activist photographs, several fictionalized accounts featuring Hansen's disease have recently appeared in Japan, recounting and testifying to stories about former patients' survival within the leper colony and beyond. Many of the creators of these narratives, including both Sukegawa and Kawase, have neither personally contracted the illness nor experienced the traumatic past that forms the subject of their depiction. This gap between text and reality has invited rethinking of the ethical license by which artistic representations approach this complex history, if not more straightforward critiques of their appropriation of others' plight for a combination of sensationalism and sentimentalism that sells. *Sweet Bean* surely is sentimental—and unapologetically so. It exhibits a catalog of melodramatic attributes: Tokue's physical suffering; verbal discriminations against former Hansen's disease patients; excessive expressions of depression and frustration; tears (both Sentaro and Wakana cry after Tokue's death); and Tokue's occulted, unrecognized virtues. As Kathryn Tanaka suggests, however, an easy critique of these narratives based solely on their sentimentalism "overlooks questions of how stories are borrowed, retold, and integrated into a broader, national discourse" involving such issues as gender and sexuality, the formation of family life, and transitional justice.[35] Echoing Tanaka's observation, I suggest the stories in both *Sweet Bean* and the original novel elicit more than cheap tears. Through mobilizing the language of melodrama, they address issues pertinent to both contemporary Japanese society and the late-capitalist world in general. Ultimately, the question that *Sweet Bean* poses is fundamental to any animist imagination: What meanings of life are we missing out on when we refuse to recognize nonhuman entities as animate beings and attend to their personhood?

Peter Brooks's canonical *The Melodramatic Imagination* has greatly inspired my thinking about this question, given its understanding of melodrama ties the imaginary quality of a textual tradition to the ideological

35 Tanaka, "Hansen's Disease and Family: Reflections on Reading and Teaching *Mugi baa no shima* (Grandma Mugi's Island) Part1."

task of proffering a moral compass, through which meanings can be located in an age of chaos. The melodramatic imagination emerges in the West, Brooks argues, in the wake of "the final liquidation of the traditional Sacred" where moral legibility—the Manichean presentations of innocence and guilt—confirmed previously by the Church's authority has been obfuscated after the French Revolution.[36] When all that is sacred melts into air, including the once secure standards of morality, confusion transpires. A persistent desire for order defines the primary ideological function of melodrama: a textual attempt to locate meanings and truths in a befogging world through the assignation of virtue and vice. Melodrama thereby aims at baring and decoding the sources of value, significance, and clarity hidden by a deceptive surface reality. Somewhat tragically, however, melodrama is also fully aware of the ultimate failure of its longing for transcendental moral principles, insofar as those principles have come to be atomized down to the level of the individual. Holy guidance to a once essential Truth has disappeared; the best one can hope for now are moralized persons and personified moralities that take up the form of specific characters in narrative fiction: those victims (who might or might not be their own heroes and heroines) and villains who occupy the center of melodrama on stage and paper.

I emphasize this aspect of Brooks's influential view because so often studies of melodrama that follow his account downscale its significance and dwell, instead, on the aesthetic devices and pronounced performances that articulate the victim's suffering/virtue or elicit specific spectatorial responses. Linda Williams's "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess" famously outlines a schematic account of melodrama organized by the type of bodily excess it displays ("emotion") and the presumed body it affects (passive women).[37] Insightful as this mapping of melodrama might be, a problem, which Williams retrospectively acknowledges in her monograph on *The Wire* (2002–2008), lies in its inability to go beyond the realm of the individual, into the clarity of structural morality to which Brooks's original concept aspires. "Might it be possible," Williams provocatively asks, "to forge a less self-righteous kind of melodrama, less dependent on wild swings between pathos and action, less a matter of cycles of victimization and retributive violence (whether based on inequities of race, gender, or class), and more a matter of reaching beyond personal good or evil to determinations of better justice?"[38] For melodrama to be relevant to issues at a systemic scale, the

36 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 15.

37 Williams, "Film Bodies: Gender, Genre, and Excess," 9.

38 Williams, *On* The Wire, 115.

conventional Manichean theme of good versus evil that manifests itself through individual characters' motion and emotion should likewise be elevated to a quest for moral legibility on an institutional level. William's move can thus be described as a return to melodrama's primary ideological function, which makes visible the structure of a post-sacred world.

What I am proposing is a recuperation of Brooks's oft-neglected metaphysics through Williams's emphasis on institutional illumination. Specifically, the beans in *Sweet Bean* enable melodrama to move away from its conventional individual, human-centered affairs to a higher register concerning the animist worldview. While Brooks specifies the historical context of the French Revolution as the starting point of the melodramatic sensibility, Kawase's emphatically melodramatic film advances an understanding of modernity beyond a single (Western) event. Indeed, Brooks's concept of "the melodramatic imagination" informs my coinage of the animist imagination because of the shared quest for a solution to onrushing crisis—whether any solution exists is a different story. Paralleling the split between the sacred and the post-sacred world, the animist imagination updates the melodramatic imagination; it grapples with the dialectical tension between forces of enchantment and disenchantment that plays a pivotal role in our ecological sensibilities. *Sweet Bean* redefines the post-sacred world as one in which people, except for shamanic figures like Tokue, have lost the capacity to attend to and communicate with specific nonhuman entities. The institutional justice that the film seeks to recognize encompasses not only issues related to transitional justice and the human rights of the former Hansen's disease patients but also the lost connectivity with the occulted animist realm: Tokue's personal virtue is bound up with her ability to recognize the personified virtue of every single bean—as indexed by each bean's suitability for production of the bean paste—and of everything in the world. That which has been clouded and unrecognized is not merely her personal virtue but the larger ecological situation, of which her relationship with every entity is paradigmatic. Accordingly, the film's aesthetics of melodrama is not oriented around her, or any individual, but a bygone relationality between the human and the nonhuman that this book has described as animist.

It is not arbitrary that the film resorts to the language of melodrama to present its quest for the lost animist order. Brooks himself has compared melodrama to Gothic literature, in which the Freudian notion of the uncanny, generated by the residue of archaic animist thought in modern society, plays a crucial role. What makes *Sweet Bean* melodramatic and not Gothic, borrowing Brooks's elaboration, is that it "demonstrates over and over that

the signs of ethical forces can be discovered and can be made legible."[39] Tokue deciphers these signs from nature through Listening; the film, then, makes them legible through the devices of haptic visuality. Such a unity of ideological pursuit and cinematic stylistics characterizes the film as an animist melodrama about structural issues that lie exterior to the general melodramatic emphasis on the individual.

One conceptual split between the lost animist realm and the disenchanted world through which we can situate and interpret *Sweet Bean* immediately comes to mind: the ecological condition of Japanese society after the 2011 Tōhoku earthquake, which triggered a massive tsunami on March 11 and led to the release of radioactive materials from the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant in the days that followed. That the film thematizes each bean's occulted virtue, its revelation based on its fitness to be made into bean paste, and said paste's eventual palatability speaks cogently to Japan's cultural and agricultural landscapes following the catastrophe. The historical intersection between the film and real-life incidents stands not only because, in Akira Mizuta Lippit's words, the sublimity of nuclear catastrophe has haunted Japanese cinema since the epochal events in Hiroshima and Nagasaki by transforming it into "a medium framed by disasters past and yet to come."[40] It also persists because Tokue's ability to recognize the goodness of culinary ingredients reflects a collective effort to examine each edible item as several food-monitoring programs across the country have attempted to discern the radioactivity in different agricultural regions after the nuclear disaster. For many, overnight, daily bread has become a matter of biosecurity; the ordinariness of eating a heightened thriller.

One could speculate how the collective anxiety bled into the creative processes of both Kawase's film and the original novel. As Kath Weston's ethnography notes, the post-3/11 earthquake was a period when "the language of protection—in both Japanese and English—seemed to pop up everywhere in public discourse on nuclear power."[41] Personified radioisotopes, not unlike frustrating harassers or obsessive suitors, brought about "unwanted intimacy" across all aspects of the everyday. The subject of protection included not only the human (especially children) but also the nonhuman—companion and economic animals (such as pets and livestock) and "trees, mountains, and streams that historically made veneration and protection in a wider sense possible"—as the former have always been in an

39 Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination*, 18–20.
40 Lippit, "Between Disaster, Medium 3.11," 4–5.
41 Weston, *Animate Planet*, 96.

inextricably interdependent network with the latter through the essential act of drinking and eating.[42] The allegorical assimilation of the other that operates at the orifice of orality becomes, in this context, urgently embodied. As the evil wind that has formed the etiological source of many diseases in traditional East Asian medicine now takes up the form of radioisotopes that physically circulate in the air, so the environment's inferential relationship to the human comes to be characterized by a mix of affective responses comprising suspicion, inimicality, and paranoia.

This biopolitical condition recalls the dialectics between corporeal porosity and closeness crucial to my previous discussion of Hansen's disease, further highlighting the relevance of what Derrida has proposed as an ethical imperative of "eating well." For the philosopher, the basis of all relations entails the subject's assimilation of the other, symbolic and physical alike. The specific example on which Derrida reflects is human consumption of meat; given the buccal nature of relationality, however, the moral question that human subjects should constantly pose to themselves when consuming the nonhuman is not "should one eat or not eat, eat this and not that, the living or the nonliving, man or animal, but since *one must* eat in any case and since it is and tastes good [*bien*] to eat, and since there's no other definition of the good [*du bien*], *how* for goodness sake should one eat well [*bien manger*]."[43] Derrida's open inquiry concerning not what but how to eat poses an extra challenge to our melodramatic shaman, tasked with illuminating the virtue of each bean. Not only is Tokue capable of discerning the good, unpolluted beans from those unsuitable for her confection, she also possesses the animist knowledge of precisely how that goodness can be preserved in the process of cooking. Insofar as she must eat and that she must respect the edible other at once, her non-recipe maintains an ethical commitment to the beans, even as she violates the ontological boundary between her and the beans by transforming them into bean paste and then interiorizing it.

Beyond the specific context of Japan, the contrast between temporalities that *Sweet Bean* dramatizes takes place, too, at another level that fundamentally stretches the limits of instrumentality. Unlike the task of eating-well, however, this time not even Tokue's skill can overcome the conceptual division between different registers of things created by such a contrast: exchange value, use value, or something that transcends the calculation of

42 Weston, *Animate Planet*, 97–98.

43 Derrida, "'Eating Well,' or The Calculation of the Subject: An Interview with Jacques Derrida," 115.

value altogether. To reiterate, Tokue's motivation to work at the dorayaki shop derives from a form of altruism that entails no reciprocity; she comes to "Listen" to the unrecognized virtue of the bean, bring joy to people, and generously share with Sentaro her method of opening up the self to the world. One could even say that, freed from the need to work for a living in the leper colony, Tokue is available to the world in a way that no one else is, even as she deals with the bean's use and exchange value on a daily basis—animism as a gift rather a use. That said, her return to the leper colony under social pressure and her eventual death there mark the failure of her utopian quest. In Williams's definition, melodrama "always offers the contrast between how things are and how they could be, or should be. This is its fundamental utopianism."[44] The contrast between Tokue's commitment to giving a gift that keeps on giving and the trenched social reality that her vision cannot alter constitutes a melodramatic sentiment of loneliness. If Tokue's yearning to communicate with and thus potentially enlighten her human fellows gives her the courage to exit the comfort zone of the leper colony at the dawn of her life, she remains largely alone as her Listening—and all the wonders it has received or enacted—proves to be uncommunicative, not entertained even slightly by the public.

Is there a way out of this prison of melodramatic affect? Does *Sweet Bean* allow Sentaro to rid himself of this solitude that has haunted Tokue when he finally masters her recipe, even though the learning and production process remains unsaid? The answers seem to be negative, unhappily. Consider the final sequence, which effectively demonstrates the animist realm's opacity and privacy. In a park full of cherry trees in full blossom—a nod to the novel's depiction of Tokue's hometown in Sentaro's dream—where numerous families are picnicking, Sentaro stands next to a small food cart, making pancakes and soliciting people's attention by shouting, repeatedly, "Dorayaki! Come and get them!" He first appears in a long shot that begins by slowly panning down from treetops to where he stands. He reappears, two shots later, in a medium shot that gradually reframes into a close-up. Despite the various shot scales at which he is filmed, none of these shots captures the presence of surrounding picnickers. When we hear a little girl finally approach him to purchase ten pancakes, the film has already cut to the white credits, rolling against a pitch-black background. That is, when Sentaro finally makes contact with someone who recognizes and responds to his calling, the interlocuter is revealed to be an acousmêtre—a specter like the young Tokue he dreams of in the novel. Might this little girl be

44 Williams, *On* The Wire, 84.

the shamanic figure of the child, discussed in chapter 2, whose presence indicates a hopeful future for animism's revival in an alienating metropolis? The film implies such a possibility but refuses to grant us an insight—in fact, not even a sight—into just what the child looks like or what this future might hold.

The ending therefore marks a major difference between *Sweet Bean* and the other animist imaginations examined throughout this book. Most of the films I have studied are pedagogical to the extent that the shamanic figures' animist capacities are translated into methods of viewing, through which spectators can engage with the moving image: an understanding of images, across material surfaces, as portals to a past-oriented future (chapter 1); a retelling of the founding myth of cinema by approximating childlike spectatorship (chapter 2); the extreme attentiveness to mise-en-scène, down to insectile scale (chapter 3); or, the intense frame-by-frame looking without which natural wonders remain imperceptible (chapter 4). Although *Sweet Bean* is largely optimistic in tone, it nevertheless casts doubt on the translatability between the fashioning of an animist realm on screen and spectatorial participation in this realm. Against the backdrop of splendid weather and a gorgeous park, a sense of cruelty hovers over the final sequence, quietly restraining Sentaro from any possibility of interpersonal connection in a public space populated by one cheerful family after another (figure 5.2). Framing Sentaro alone under the cherry trees and in close-up, the last shots witness his transformation into Tokue. One recalls how Tokue is similarly framed under blossoming cherry trees in the opening sequence. A year has passed; the cycle of Sentaro's transformation is complete. As a result of this transformation, however, Sentaro begins to pay the same price of isolation that Tokue paid. Occupying a position structurally close to hers, he now lives a life incompatible with his potential customers outside of the frame. But as opposed to Tokue, who has not been subject to relations of exchange, Sentaro needs to sell dorayaki for a living, even if he might aspire to a world governed by qualitative values in which what matters most is not maximum profit or efficiency but those things that supposedly matter in an ideal world: the value for life, pleasure, beauty, enjoyment, meaning. The ambivalent position in which Sentaro, the newly initiated shaman, finds himself is reflected in his final invitation: "Dorayaki! Come and get them!" Although he certainly intends to sell his products for livelihood, there is a pronounced difference from his earlier involvement in commodity culture—a sense that he, too, might be offering the dorayaki as a gift to the world.

The false holly hedge of the leper colony might no longer deliver its intended blockage and harm, but the animist sphere once contained within

Fig. 5.2. Framed solicitude in *Sweet Bean* (2015).

does not subsequently open up to visitors. Segregation persists in a different form. At the end of the day, *Sweet Bean*, which most explicitly dwells on the existence and mechanism of animist capacity among all the films this book has examined, is also most brutally honest about the animist imagination's limitation. Gently, it reminds us of animism's mysticism and impenetrability and of the cruel fact that the animist imagination is, sometimes, nothing but imagination. Estrangement does not disappear as one embraces the animist worldview, at least not in any facile way. To slightly modulate Douglas Sirk's renowned take on the title of his 1955 melodramatic classic, *All That Heaven Allows*: animism is stingy. To those who long for an animist utopia wherein the human's relation with the environment no longer remains alienated, *Sweet Bean* asks whether they are ready to bear solitude even in the crowd, accompanied only by the acousmatic voices of wandering souls in the wind.

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Coda

A really good detective never gets married.
– Raymond Chandler, "Casual Notes on the Mystery Novel"

The recollection of an unexpected encounter with a wooden sculpture on a sweltering July afternoon in 2017 often recurs in my thoughts. Nestled at the center of a prolonged corridor bridging Exhibition Rooms 2 and 3 at Tokyo's National Hansen's Disease Museum, a figure of the eponymous forest spirit from Miyazaki Hayao's *My Neighbor Totoro* (1998) held its ground on a low pedestal. Adjacent to the grinning Totoro was a photograph featuring its creator, an amateur sculptor named Sasaki Matsuo, proudly cradling another Totoro figurine, presumably of his own crafting as well. A profound sense of relief enveloped me as the whimsical creature extended its welcome in the narrow corridor, flanked on one side by glass walls through which the piercing sunlight cast its glow. The relief was a response to the visceral impact left on me in Exhibition Room 2, where a reenactment of the segregated life within Tama Zensho-en, the leper colony adjoining the museum, unfolded. Archival photographs, film clips, worn objects, lifelike mannequins adorned in period costumes, and partial architectural reconstructions came together to narrate a collective trauma—the most haunting element was a claustrophobic detention cell for disobedient patients. The weight of this history, imprinted in each frame of the documentary images, the moldy scent wafting from the objects, and the uncanniness of the vivid yet motionless mannequins, was starkly contrasted by the cheerful Totoro. Standing against a backdrop of the museum's beautiful courtyard, the sculpture provided a respite, a momentary escape from the heaviness lingering within the recreated scenes of bygone suffering.

The placement of the wooden Totoro in this precise locale was no mere coincidence. The corridor, guiding visitors into the subsequent exhibition room, cradled a collection hailed as "the proof of survival" in the museum pamphlet and accompanying wall text. The assembly comprised artworks in diverse mediums, birthed by the former denizens of Japan's leper colonies—those

Tang, Pao-chen. *The Animist Imagination in East Asian Cinema*. Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2025.
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wholesome human beings whose identities had been callously tethered to a sole pathological affliction. Could Sasaki's repeated carvings of Miyazaki's divine creature, known for its capacity to tame the forces of nature and soar through the sky despite its corpulence, bear a significance beyond happenstance, I wondered? After all, Miyazaki, in a candid revelation at Tokyo's International Leprosy/Hansen's Disease History Symposium in 2016, openly affirmed that the portrayal of the Iron Town workers in his film *Princess Mononoke* (1997) drew inspiration from a visit to the residents of none other than Tama Zensho-en. Considering the thematized circulation of vitality through the wind and one's mastery over it across Miyazaki's body of work, Hansen's Disease, in a sense, attested to the adverse consequences of this vitality's fluidity, as explored in chapter 5. As the museum's myriad displays overwhelmed my senses, my thoughts wandered freely, weaving an admittedly sentimental projection: could the figure of Totoro serve as a mediation of desire, modeling a realm of freedom and solace elusive in a space where mobility languished in restraint and sociality lay threadbare?

To varying degrees, the films explored in this book likewise whisper of a saddening contrast between the yearning for togetherness and the poignant solitude that haunts the shamanic figures portrayed. Sentaro's eventual isolation within the frame in *Sweet Bean* is not an exceptional incident but a reflective echo: Nozomi inadvertently ends her lover's life; Simon's sister lives faraway from him; Suzanne grapples with the weariness of single parenthood; Yoko is on the precipice of navigating the same solitary path during pregnancy; Koichi opts for the vast expanse of the world over the reunion with his father and brother; Gong Er's affection for Ip Man remains unrequited; Tokue, yearning for public connection, suffers from discrimination until death. In the final sequence of *The Assassin*, Hou Hsiao-hsien perhaps offers the most compassionate treatment of his shamanic figure, as the narrative concludes with the companionship of Nie Yinniang and the mirror polisher, strolling into the distance. That said, a subtle sense of cruelty still lingers. For we know that, in a version of the film exclusively screened in Japan, an additional sequence shows the mirror polisher's wife patiently awaiting his return. Regardless of any sentiments they may harbor for each other, Nie is only escorting the mirror polisher back to the arms of his lawful spouse.

Much like the supreme detective as per Raymond Chandler's principle of characterization, quoted in the epigraph, the shamanic figures piece together fragments of evidence hinting at the concealed nonhuman realm. However, their yearning to coexist with fellow humans—through friendship, romance, family life, or other forms of connection—invariably falters. The intersection

of the human and the nonhuman realms, framed in the films at the core of this book, raises questions about the sacrifices demanded by those dedicated to ecological harmony and the role of human aspirations within the broader cosmic narrative. Why does it seem to be the case that the shamanic figures, positioned at the crossroads between the human and the nonhuman, find it consistently easier to develop collectives with the latter rather than the former? Somewhat paradoxically, those gifted and forceful in transcending human boundaries into the more-than-human world, against their own wishes and desires, struggle to forge meaningful connections within their respective human societies. Simultaneously linked and isolated, is this the inevitable toll for those navigating the present in pursuit of an ecological future? On what grounds, if any—and not without a tinge of melancholy—do humanist longings find a place in the cosmic polity of togetherness?

As if prescient of these inquiries, Kawase Naomi offers some tangible responses in her subsequent film following *Sweet Bean*, *Radiance* (2017), in which renowned photographer Nakamori Masaya (Nagase Masatoshi, who also played Sentaro) grapples with his diminishing eyesight. He joins an expert panel consisting of visually impaired individuals who convene in an intimate screening room. Their purpose is to provide commentary on the latest work of Misako (Misaki Ayame), a young audio description writer. Things have gone smoothly until Misako delivers live narration to the climax of a bittersweet romance, in which an elderly man bids farewell to his departed partner on a sandy beach amidst the amplified sounds of crashing waves and a somber gray sky.

The initial interaction between Nakamori and Misako is fraught with tension. Nakamori sternly rebukes Misako, asserting that her subjective emotions have tainted the description of the film's final scene. Her approach, he argues, inundates the audience with intrusive information, leaving no space for the trial "listeners" to cultivate their own imaginative interpretations. Their professional clash does not simmer down during the second trial screening, either, where Misako attempts to eradicate any vestiges of her personal sentiments in the revised narration. What she perceives as a meticulous rendering of objectivity is met with Nakamori's harsher critique, dismissing it as a timid evasion, a refusal to grapple with the essence of the image. In response, Misako accuses Nakamori of emotional petrification, robbed of the capacity to connect with the world through his imagination as his eyesight fades away. In a storm of offense, Nakamori abruptly exits, bringing the awkward session to an abrupt and unresolved end.

Following the trajectory of Kawase's work, one might not stretch too far to perceive Nakamori as an extension of Sentaro—older, yet no less

sanguine about the communicative potential of the shamanic mediator to speak on behalf of the moving image. (The fact that they are portrayed by the same actor encourages this parallel.) But the ineffable, unrepresentable wisdom about the world—not unlike what Sentaro once imbibed from Tokue—has not only eluded his attempts to translate and disseminate it through photography but also gradually slipped away, particularly as his vision deteriorates. Consequently, he, too, struggles with the burden of being misrecognized by fellow humans as a cranky old man, merely fussing about the hard work of a younger woman. Could Nakamori's critiques during the panel sessions represent his final endeavor to democratize the endangered animist worldview? For he sees Misaki, fervently striving to master a particular form of moving image description, as his surrogate to advance what the animist imagination envisions on the screen, even for those who literally cannot see.

Nakamori's methodical intervention in the two trial screenings thus becomes a form of self-interrogation, probing not only Kawase's own positioning of the cinematic medium but also the animist imagination in general: For those of us yearning for intimacy with various nonhumans yet lacking the shamanic mediation to achieve it, does our understanding perpetually remain clouded by wishful projection of the pathetic fallacy? How can we authentically recognize the nonhuman without succumbing to an all-or-nothing logic of personification? At this juncture, the answers seem to lean toward the negative. The affective entanglement of the characters' disparate ways of seeing becomes an insurmountable hurdle in their antagonistic encounters, underscoring the challenge of forging interpersonal connections between shamanic figures and ordinary individuals. The ability to *truly* access the thickness of the image—and of the world—emerges as a source of agony not only for Nakamori but also for Misaki, who grapples with a lack of understanding of his worldview.

The dynamics of their relationship soon undergo a profound shift through a series of serendipitous exchanges. As Nakamori's vision gradually succumbs to total darkness, Misaki becomes his pillar of support. Simultaneously, she embarks on diverse experiments aimed at delving into the essence of the elusive final scene she has failed to describe: traversing the streets guided only by tactile tiles to perceive the city like a blind person, seeking an authoritative interpretation through a direct interview with the film's director (only to receive a disappointingly abstract response), and immersing herself in Nakamori's photographs, hoping to grasp what his camera-eye has preserved. A form of identification finally emerges when Misaki requests Nakamori to accompany her to one of the settings of his works, capturing

a magnificent sunset. The location triggers a poignant memory for Misaki, harking back to her own childhood—the magical time when animism is more the rule than the exception, as chapter 1 and 2 explore. Standing beside Nakamori at this significant spot, she gazes into the distance and, in a distinctly animist manner, expresses her profound longing: "I knew I could never catch it, but I used to love running after the setting sun. I wish there was some way to reach this blinding light. I'd run after it until it disappeared."[1] In this moment of complete openness and vulnerability, Nakamori shares a confession that echoes Misaki's sentiments: "Me too. I did the same thing. A long time ago." An ecstatic rupture occurs, reshaping their spacetime as both unveil their thwarted dedication to the film's titular energy—a force that breathes vitality into the world, offering a metacinematic commentary on the material foundation of film projection. In the heat of this revelation, Misaki impulsively kisses Nakamori. He responds in kind, yet a wave of hesitation quickly envelops the moment. Gently pushing her away, he reintroduces a subtle distance between them. Backlit by the twilight, their silhouettes dissolve within the realm of a haptic image, characteristic of Kawase's signature aesthetic. Lens flares and iridescent lights enchant the frame, bathing it in an orange haze. Without words, the scene leaves us uncertain about the fate of their romance, metonymic of Misaki's potential succession of Nakamori's animist vision.

But in contrast to the melancholic ending of *Sweet Bean*, this time optimism is embraced. *Radiance* concludes in a spacious movie theater where a diverse audience, including both visually normal and impaired individuals, gathers for a screening of the film accompanied by a live narration based on Misaki's final audio description. Standing at the rear of the theater, Misaki oversees the backs of her fellow spectators, among them Nakamori, as they collectively immerse themselves in the moving image she has intricately deciphered. As everyone focuses on the climactic scene, a series of close-ups capture the varied facial expressions of the audience. Though distinct from person to person, each visage reflects a deep engagement with the image, described and further elevated through Misaki's language. A range of emotions—sadness, contemplation, fixation, and more—sweeps through the theater, particularly when the male protagonist onscreen, following his lover's demise, strides toward a sunset view as warm and dazzling as the one that previously enwrapped Misaki and Nakamori in its multicolored rays. A graceful cut then transports us from Misaki's perspective in the theater to a

1 All English translations of the film's subtitles come from the ones provided by the official streaming of the film on the platform of Prime Video.

high-angle shot of a street, captured from a second-floor apartment. On the corridor outside the apartment Misaki stands again, gazing downward, as if anticipating the events about to unfold. From around the corner, Nakamori approaches slowly but steadily, guided by his walking stick. Something in the final version of Misaki's description seems to have touched him, dispelling any lingering doubt about his commitment to their relationship. Before Misaki rushes downstairs to assist him, Nakamori insists she stay still. This time, he will come to her, now the beacon in his darkness. As he advances up the stairs to her apartment, the camera seamlessly returns to the movie theater, offering glimpses of additional spectators' reactions to the male protagonist's similar ascension to the twilight. Both Misaki and Nakamori shed tears, joining the multitude of others also moved by this inexplicable moment of cinematic experience.

Disrupting the chronological order of the story, the deployment of parallel editing here underscores the intertwining of Misaki's personal revelation and the public space of the cinema. By identifying Misaki's insight into the film as the pivotal moment when her connection with Nakamori solidifies, the technique intricately weaves the private realm of individual romance into the broader tapestry of collective film-viewing. Misaki's diligent endeavors to comprehend and articulate the film in her own words finally transform her into a structural equal to Nakamori—or, at least, who he used to be before the vision loss. Her translation of the moving image into words—neither a complete projection of her subjective feelings nor a full withdrawal from them—resonates with the heart of the beach scene. Her rendering signifies a mastery in capturing the dazzling radiance—of sunlight, life, or cinema—before it inevitably fades. What Misaki can now convey to others, and more importantly touch them with, is the secret of the specific nonhuman entity known as the moving image. In (literally) this light, perhaps her learning process exemplifies the emergence of a new category of the shamanic figure: the film critic.

Unlike the four shamanic figures I have introduced, Misaki's animist capacity does not develop in solitude; instead, it blooms within a community of fellow film enthusiasts and listeners, with whom she shares her observations, thoughts, and feelings. They, in turn, contemplate her interpretations, both spoken and written, offering encouragements and challenges that propel her to ever refine her insights by comprehending the entirety of the image and its intricacies, all while retaining a distinctive voice of her own. The intimacy inherent in all these interpersonal collaborations, essential for a focused and sustained exploration of any filmic world, not only highlights the communal nature of film-viewing and criticism but also illuminates a

path to break free from the shamanic figure's perennial loneliness. In this shared endeavor, Misaki locates connections and resonances that transcend the isolating nature fatefully bound up with the shamanic figure: a detective adept at discerning and describing the marvels of cinema can never be alone.

Immediately the film confirms such an air of collectivity with a hopeful undertone that includes the active participation of Misaki, Nakamori, and all their fellow viewers in the theater. Following a close-up of Nakamori closing his eyes, the ending title sequence begins to roll. However, as though *Radiance* is reluctant to depart from this magnificent unity exclusive to the cinema, a minute into the running credits, white against a black background, the camera returns us to the filmic world. Across eight shots, it offers glimpses of the smiles and satisfaction on the faces of many joyous viewers, notably several children, who cannot tear their eyes away from the screen. Given the differences in mise-en-scène, particularly the varied seating that contrasts with what was shown in the movie theater before the credits, it becomes apparent that the film viewers in these eight shots do not occupy the same temporospatial coordinates as the key screening that congeals the relationship between Misaki and Nakamori. Rather, these shots likely portray the afterlife of Misaki's audio description as it travels to other exhibition sites. Or, viewed allegorically, they capture the sheer joy that cinema brings to people, forming its own community irrespective of age, gender, physical abilities, and other markers of identity—though, recalling chapter 2, one might consider that a general transformation of all viewers into a childlike state is not a bad idea, after all.

What better encapsulates the ambition and scope of the animist imagination? If my heuristic has explored the location of wonder and meaning in alienating urban environments or the ways in which humans might approximate animals and natural landscapes, it does so through the mediation of individual films, with my interpretations being, undeniably, collective efforts. As this book has itself followed the lead of many people—from texts and in reality—a method of criticism emerges. At the end of the day, if the animist imagination holds any pedagogical value, it is not merely a call to recognize nonhuman interiority or subjectivity by learning from various human subjects structurally marginalized in one way or another. More importantly, it asks us to attend to the image in its singularity—one character, one film, sometimes even one frame, at a time—and the multiple subjectivities folded within. Certainly, by the sheer act of seeing the animist imagination unfold, no one would acquire the ability to translate animal languages, move floating snow nearby, or produce a supreme confection that touches both the palate and the soul. However, one could indeed get

intrigued by a peculiar style of acting, a digital visual effect at once elegant and uncanny, or the processual production of a daily object long taken for granted. A portal to the image reciprocally opens, inviting those who are willing to follow these subtle, defamiliarizing clues into a transformative experience that alters how we perceive cinema and the diverse forms that its intersection with reality could take up.

Such attentiveness to the screen, I must emphasize, dreams not the old, comforting formalist dream of immediacy where one dissects cinematic elements or patterns in a sociocultural vacuum. Rather, this process of learning is conducted in the realm of the public, crystallized in our engagement with the documented visions of sundry writers, artists, and filmmakers. It further extends to other critics and scholars' perspectives, the insights of interlocutors around us that reach their profundity most effectively through face-to-face dialogue, and the anticipated responses from potential readers with whom any act of criticism should hope to converse. The physical and intellectual involvements of all these flesh-and-blood participants form the necessary conditions of the animist imagination's vitality, which, as a return gift, serves as an audiovisual archive where their wisdom and grace are preserved. To follow the grain of the image alongside the leads of these individuals constitutes what I take to be the consummate form of object-oriented inquiry. As my exploration of an aesthetic vision of human-nonhuman relations occurred during, and concluded after, a lethal global pandemic—personified by many as nature's revenge on humanity—such reciprocity, underscored by the onscreen seclusion of the shamanic figures, comes all the more impactful and felt. Perhaps the ultimate reminder of the animist imagination is that our connection with either human or nonhuman others should not be sacrificed at each other's expense. To view films with this in mind is to prevent the belated realization—that it could take layers of cinematic mediation for such common sense to register—from becoming the greatest irony and regret of our time.

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Pao-chen Tang is Lecturer in Film Studies at the University of Sydney.

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