

# The Transmutation of Essence: The Evolution of Ang Lee's Film Field

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## ABSTRACT

**This paper takes the decomposition of the essence of Ang Lee's film as the starting point of elaboration, and analyzes the iconic content that essence should contain from the perspective of film philosophy. Through the active exploration and subjective innovation of the essence of film and technology, and the in-depth exploration of the representation of the picture using the reconciliation theme that is full of east-west cultural collision and human ethics, it clarifies the evolutionary process and practical latitude of Ang Lee's film field. Taking the field model of the fusion of bit and mind as a brand-new form and starting point, the paper also initiates questions and reflections on the future process and philosophical reconstruction of the film.**

*Keywords: Ang Lee's film, image representation, film philosophy, field*

## I. INTRODUCTION

In 2019, Ang Lee's new film "Gemini Man" was released globally. This is Ang Lee's new attempt on his film road, and it is also his in-depth exploration of the essence and technical representation of the film. Throughout Ang Lee's career as a director, as one of the most talented and diverse directors in the world's film industry, what made him famous is that he can shoot exciting and creative works with any theme. He has won Oscars, Golden Globe Awards, and British Academy of Film and Television Awards for many times. Although he has covered extensively in his past movie themes, Ang Lee's movie style has gradually shifted to a technical context in recent years. To clarify the process of the changes in his film field requires to find the starting point of the essential change in Ang Lee's creative thinking first.

## II. THE TRANSMUTATION OF THE ESSENCE OF FILM

Ang Lee's films have various themes, but they all share one common feature, which is to show the complex and controversial essence of the film with content. The establishment of this essence is embodied in the process by which the director externalizes the content of realistic thinking and personal speculation. Ang Lee's exploration of the essence of the film mainly focuses on the following three aspects:

### A. *The humanity field that mixed east and west*

Ang Lee's long and tortuous study and film experience in the United States in his early years gave

him a deep understanding of the philosophy of self-identity. And in many of his films, he presented the essence of expression of the collision of eastern and western cultures. This can be seen from his early works such as "Pushing Hands" and "Wedding Banquet". And this part of talent stems from an important fact: Ang Lee's individual itself is the product of the combination of Chinese and American cultures. Therefore, the eastern and western cultures and philosophical traditions that he absorbed during his creation evolved into his diverse cultural performance and mixed attitude, release complex and full dialectical philosophical thinking into the expression of the film.

In the movie "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon" released in 2000, the roles' nature of Li Mubai and Yu Xiulian were extended to the Confucian way of self-cultivation as noble gentleman's doctrines. The noble sentiment made the two suppress their love for each other and actively led others towards good. At the same time, they had a strong sense of responsibility for the needs of others and their own mission. On the contrary, Yu Jialong's unruly survival mode confirms the western culture's longing for freedom and human liberation. The philosophical contrast between these two personalities reflects the unity of contradictions in the interweaving of film fields. At the same time, it also projects the causal advancement of the personal field in the film context — Yu Jialong eventually became a "poisonous dragon" under the corrosion of human nature of Jade Fox. At the end of the movie, Yu Jialong and Li Mubai had a grand and magnificent duel in the green bamboo forest. This move is also the ultimate expression of the film's philosophical proposition in the collision of field. The rich tension

given to the human field in the interweaving of mixed culture has become the cornerstone of the content of Ang Lee's film expression.

#### *B. The emotional field of the "father" complex*

The role of father in Ang Lee's movies always has different connotations and meanings. From the early "family trilogy" to the many later works, "father" has become a symbol of the movie. Because of the impact of western emotional ethics, the father image in "Wedding Banquet" quickly and straightforwardly challenged traditional self-awareness and values, and finally realized continuous self-digestion and sublimation in the emotional abnormality and transformed its own value system into a more tolerant and fraternal emotional acceptance. Both "Pushing Hands" and "Eat Drink Man Woman" reflect the conflict between the autonomy of the individual subject and the Confucian patriarchy. It is not only manifested in the field of emotional evolution of the theme of "father", but also in the chemical reaction of emotional fusion between the protagonists. In the works after the "family trilogy", the father complex gradually evolved into a more ubiquitous and broad expression, which was extended to the conceptual categories of "kinship" and "self", such as the split and rebirth of the dual unity of self-consciousness between the protagonist and the tiger in "Life of Pi" (hereinafter referred to as "Pi"), and the subtle biological bond between the human subject and the cloned subject in "Gemini Man", which are the extension of the role of "father" in the film field. In the later period, Ang Lee's expression of family affection became more and more ingenious and mature, which also provided a prerequisite for the contextual shift of his film practice.

#### *C. The cross-border field of film philosophy*

After directing a series of "mind" films, Ang Lee continued to reach a long peak in the exploration and pursuit of complex human emotions. He casts his sights on a more brand-new field: combining the philosophy of film with the philosophy of technology, centering on technology, and embarking on the path of visual feedback to the soul. He no longer simply expresses the tension between modernity and traditional values, nor is he obsessed with creating harmonious meaning through the philosophical extreme contradiction of identity, but explores broader film philosophical issues and opens up new frontiers with the help of questioning the essence of the image and the mediating effect of communication.

Most audiences questioned and puzzled the changing styles of Ang Lee's films, mainly because they ignored the fact that if film practitioners only renovate on the basis of previous achievements and stick to the development model of continuous deconstruction and reconstruction of image elements,

the evolutionary trend of the essence of film will always slow down and become blurred in the next century. As an important projection of art and life, as an important medium for philosophical inquiry, the film bravely and vividly challenges people's thinking, and prompts people to reassess and absorb every new hypothesis and attempt. The fundamental appeal of film development is to break the law and seek change. The mashup of technology and soul developed by Ang Lee is actively blowing the clarion call for reform to historical and traditional film thinking.

### **III. THE TRANSMUTATION OF THE ESSENCE OF TECHNOLOGY**

Starting from "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk", 120 frames have become the new label of Ang Lee's films. These ups and downs of bit journey that breaks through the traditional shooting mode include three key nodes in the evolution of the essential field of Ang Lee's film technology.

#### *A. "Giant" was also unacceptable*

"The Hulk", released in 2003, was Lee Ang's first electrocuting visual action blockbuster in Hollywood, but it encountered double Waterloo at the box office and word of mouth. Faced with the impact of Hollywood's commercial interest-driven model, the "giant" of the "mind" works presented a contradictory state of thinking from the stage of the script to the later completion. At that time, Ang Lee completed the production of "family trilogy" and "Crouching Tiger, Hidden Dragon", which were well received. The fully commercialized production combined with his fascination with the expression of film philosophy made "The Hulk" a weird combination of art. Even with a large number of digitally produced special effects scenes, "The Hulk" is still the lowest rated film in Lee's films after "Gemini Man". The unfavorable technical teaching made Ang Lee's thoughts of integrating science and technology into the soul in the field of Ang Lee's film into confusion and chaos. As a result, Ang Lee remained obsessed with exploring the complex and dialectical world of film philosophy for the following ten years. With the collision and precipitation of multiple thinking modes, mature nodes emerged.

#### *B. "Youth" drifting on a new shore*

The film "Life of Pi", which won Ang Lee's second Oscar for best director in his life, is a film masterpiece that has been dormant for ten years after "The Hulk". It not only discusses the grand theme of life consciousness and human ethics, but also shows the audiences a large number of strange and magnificent visual effects scenes, leading people to experience a full-content and superb movie feast. Ten years ago, the "boy", who first tried technical production, used the

protagonist Pi's self-seeking journey to reach a new shore. And this other shore triggers Ang Lee's in-depth thinking on film technology, which makes him expand the crisscross latitude of the film field, fully absorb the philosophy of science and technology into the paradigm expression of film philosophy, and accept and master the coexistence of art and technology. "Pi" is another peak and demarcation point of Ang Lee's film creation. The Oscar for best director undoubtedly gave Ang Lee the courage to explore technology and innovate the film. In the post-production process of special effects for "Pi", the use of traditional frame rate to trigger screen flickering and frame skipping caused Ang Lee to have new and urgent questions about the transformation of the film itself. It also provides a wealth of action suggestions for the follow-up adherence to the creative practice of image ontology. As a result, the collision and interweaving of technology and soul is settled in the field of Ang Lee's film, and it is a matter of course.

### *C. New representation of 120 frames*

After "Pi", Ang Lee began to try to use the 120-frame movie shooting technique to make his works. Being a finished image that exceeded the standard movie frame rate by 5 times did not make Ang Lee immediately recognized, on the contrary, it made him bear the technical difficulties and the impact of word of mouth. The audiences did not quite understand the ultra-high-resolution images that Ang Lee had broken through many obstacles. "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk" continues Ang Lee's usual movie style: inner conflicts are sharp, but the ending is intriguing. Many audiences recognized the protagonist's full self-field evolution, but had no feeling for the main selling point, 120 frames, of the movie. If this film can still maintain and reflect the level of Ang Lee's movies, then "Gemini Man" once again made Ang Lee encounter the double Waterloo of global box office and word of mouth. Ang Lee himself was puzzled about the root cause of the major gap between work considerations and market demand. From a theoretical point of view, the ontology of film art is the starting point for all research thinking, and externalization penetrates into the comprehensive system of film creation, film production and film aesthetics, and shows the director's personal and universal expression of views. As a commercial film, "Gemini Man" still possesses the essential characteristics of film art. Judging "Gemini Man" from the framework of film theory, it can be seen that it still bears the deep imprint of Ang Lee. It has excellent shot scheduling and processing, and the plot is well laid out and relaxed. The only shortcoming is that compared with the previous works, the connotational content lacks a little complex speculative meaning. The audiences' experience modality has an aesthetic deficit compared with the previous works, so that the film has not paid enough attention to the meaning of the film beyond its representation. In the current field of world

cinema, "Gemini Man" may not reflect enough comprehensive value as a film. But for the field of Ang Lee's film, it is a stage work statement that explores the fundamental changes of the film, which is an important bridge and link between "Billy Lynn's Long Halftime Walk" and future works.

The proposition of the future movie is whether to pack old wine in a new bottle according to the rules built on a century-old cornerstone or a debate on the image itself. This makes "Gemini Man" a contradiction that does not escape the traditional image paradigm expression and the exploration of the essence of the image. It may become the starting point of change is not yet known, but as Ang Lee said in the press conference: "The movie tells me that it is about to change."

## **IV. FIELD COLLISION**

The story structure of "Gemini Man" is relatively superficial and reasonable in Ang Lee's works so far, the appeal to the audiences' ability to understand is relatively shallow and reasonable, and superficial interpretations are also everywhere. However, its thinking on the essence of film goes far beyond the meaning of the film itself. It is an indispensable link in the evolutionary chain of Ang Lee's film field.

### *A. Reflections on the film*

The theme of "Gemini Man" continues Ang Lee's conflict and reconciliation between humanity ethics and different cultures, supplemented by high-tech means to complete its development process towards globalization and cross-cultural communication. The 120-frame shooting once again realized the fission and reflection of his personal style and film rules for Ang Lee's films. Different from the magnificent scene design of "Pi", "Gemini Man" will focus on returning to the essence of the movie — the image. Ang Lee adopted the shooting method of 120 frames + 3D + 4K, abandoning the habit of viewing movies with the usual frame rate curing, making a qualitative leap in the picture quality. The picture details are all clearly visible under dynamic conditions, and complicated and accurate picture analysis and presentation have achieved a restoration that is close to reality. At the same time, it drove the actors' performance to a new standard. Traditional performance methods in the ultra-high-definition shooting is no longer natural, but deliberately and obvious. The actor's carelessness will cause the picture effect to "excessively". And 120 frames also put forward new requirements for the cinema projection standards. Although Ang Lee's team produced 60-frame and 24-frame regular movie versions to achieve large-scale normal screenings around the world, new screening requirements have been born, and the

popularization of technology will be just around the corner in the future.

From "Pushing Hands" to "Gemini Man", the essential innovation created by Ang Lee has formed a unique closed loop of the field, and entered the current generalized film capital market like a "heterogeneous", challenging the foundation and aesthetics of film creation for a century basis. And it continues to ask questions about the movie world that has never come, and impacts the methodology of movie theory and practice through field integration. Opening a new corner of the film window for mankind is the inner driving force of Ang Lee's contradictory and unified film philosophy to the essence of the film, and it is also the all-round ideal cry of "Gemini Man".

### *B. Reflections on technology*

Another surprise in "Gemini Man" is the breakthrough effect of CG special effects technology on character creation. Unlike the previous use of visual effects to realize the sci-fi positioning of scenes and characters, this is the first time in the history of film that the synthesis and production of real people have been realized through full CG technology. Which in charge of this work is the Weta Digital team that has produced "Avatar" and "The Lord of the Rings". They combined the past video data of actor Will Smith to analyze and extract the dynamic information of his facial muscles, skin, expressions and limbs when he was young, and constructed a huge real-life dynamic database. Then they used dynamic capture technology to fit and adjust the face and limbs. In an image with 4K resolution and 120 frame rate, any tiny detail will be infinitely enlarged. For this reason, Weta Digital has specially developed a "procedural pore system" to define the surface of digital young characters according to Smith's own pore growth rules, and produce a convincing skin condition from the pore level. In order to make the presentation effect infinitely close to reality, the team also needs to resist the "uncanny valley theory"<sup>1</sup> that must be faced because of excessive reality. The efforts made by Ang Lee's team for this purpose are no longer limited to computer science, but also introduce the category of biological science. The operating latitude of technology in the film has been extended again. The philosophy of identity and cultural reconciliation of Ang Lee's film has completed the evolution from creation to production, and the integration of concepts from in-play to out-of-play is a profound technical reflection in the process of film

<sup>1</sup> Uncanny valley theory: When the similarity between humanoids such as robots and humans exceeds 95%, humans will have positive emotions towards humanoids because their appearance and actions are very similar. But until a certain level, they will suddenly become extremely disgusting, the more they are similar to humans the more disgusted and fearful humans will feel, until the bottom, called the uncanny valley.

development. Just like the theme pointed to by the cloning plot: whether the physical reproducibility of the human subject will come in the future; whether the copy subject has the same expression of consciousness, perception, and emotion as humans. Whether human beings who have entered the era of intelligence, while enjoying the subtle convenience of technological expansion, have given up the freedom to think about dignity as human beings? This is the grand and tragic anthropological proposition that Ang Lee uses in the "Gemini Man" to use the most realistic "rejuvenation" in history. It is his new perspective of spectacle thinking to attack the aesthetic boundaries of the film. The persistent enthusiasm and hard work that Ang Lee poured into the evolution of technology still faithfully serve his unchanging and calm thinking about movies. He may have seen the future of film, and maybe the future of film will not happen in Ang Lee's era, but its awe and forward-looking vision of the fate of film and the destiny of mankind has already attracted the attention of the world.

## **V. CONCLUSION**

The transmutation of Ang Lee's film from style to technology embodies the evolution of the field from the mind to the bit, and then the bit feeds the mind back. And through film works that are still "not favored by the outside world", a closed loop of the field of fusion of philosophy and technology is realized, for Ang Lee, the determination of the film has never changed since the beginning of creation. Whether it is the innovation of the essence of the film or the reflection on the integration of technology, Ang Lee always grasps the sharp edge of its content in unlimited film expression, leading the development goal of multiple evolution of the field with the deep accumulation of film philosophy, and practicing the value orientation of the humanistic feelings with the overall view of film development.

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