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## Echo and Resonance in *Farewell My Concubine* and *Happy Together*

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### ABSTRACT

Melodrama has been conceived as a mode of storytelling and a state of mind. Since the 1990s, the discourse of melodrama has gained much currency with its development in queer films. This study suggests that Chen Kaige's *Farewell My Concubine* and Wong Kar-wai's *Happy Together* are contemporary reflections on narcissism stemming from the myth of Narcissus and Echo. Mobilizing two important accounts of self-love, Julia Kristeva's "imaginary third/other" and Jacques Derrida's "hospitable narcissism," this study interprets the intertwined relationships of the films' lead couples in light of "Narcissus-as-Echo" and "Echo-as-Narcissus." It also demonstrates how the two *auteur* directors adeptly incorporate musical and auditory elements from the ambient Beijing opera and the Argentine tango, respectively, to reinforce the imagery of the melodramatic setting. Identifying queer subjects suppressed in specific sociocultural milieus, the directors strategically re-envision these milieus in relation to the melodramatized motif of the self-other amalgam.

**KEYWORDS** queer melodrama, hospitable narcissism, imaginary other, echolalia, self-othering, death

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## Introduction

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This article discusses the catastrophic and morally dubious sexuality in Chen Kaige's (陳凱歌) *Farewell My Concubine* (1993) and Wong Kar-wai's (王家衛) *Happy Together* (1997) in light of the Narcissus-Echo relationship. In Ovid's *The Metamorphoses*, Narcissus seeks love in his own reflection. Consequently, narcissism in psychology is usually treated as a phantasmatic return that unleashes a virulent debate between the self and the other. However, a postmodern reading of the myth, provided by Jacques Derrida and Julia Kristeva, elevates the nymph Echo's silent position into a locus of empowerment. Derrida and Kristeva criticize the common condemnation of narcissism as a pathological and moral failure; narcissism, instead, could be treated as a declaration to pursue an alternative pattern of thought. This study draws on this postmodern psychological approach to the self-love debate and situates the dialogue about queer otherness in new Asian queer cinema within the framework of melodrama.

Melodrama is a form of narrative that melds "melody," derived from the Greek *melos* (ᾠδή), with "drama." Since the 1970s melodrama is drama accompanied by music and various media to reinforce the effectiveness of stereotypical characters and exaggerate conflicts and emotions. Peter Brooks defines melodrama as a "moral occult" that includes "extreme states of being, situations, actions; overt villainy, persecution of the good, clarification of the cosmic moral sense of everyday gestures" (9-10). Affect and meaning are entangled to express secularized conflicts between good and evil, salvation and damnation. Rather than a discrete genre, melodrama is conceived of as a mode of storytelling and a state of mind. Thomas Elsaesser detects "problems of style and articulation" in melodrama (50). Christine Gledhill defines melodrama as "a mental framework that went beyond simply a dramatic practice in the theater and became a way of seeing how the world worked" (297). What is more, melodrama has also become a cultural mode and psychological framework through which the effect of social alienation is remediated. Adopting a definition similar to Elsaesser's, Jonathan Goldberg persuasively re-examines the homo-aesthetic in melodrama because it "summons up aesthetic existence, living by and as music, as a way to figure this other life" (150). At its deepest level, melodrama is usually fashioned with a nostalgic feeling by the subject returning to the time of origins when gender is not to be viewed as a stereotype. Thus, as a popular mode of storytelling that relies on an affective melding of music and drama, melodrama is amenable to themes of sexuality as it can transcend temporal uncertainty and create a queerness that appears trendy.

B. Ruby Rich coined the term "New Queer Cinema" in her seminal article

published in a 1992 issue of *Sight & Sound*. Later, in her 2013 book *New Queer Cinema*, Rich restates that the new queer cinemas in the 90s have created “a space of reflection, nourishment, and renewed engagement. . . . An invention. A brand. A niche market” (xix). Films from this period were characterized by their sense of defiance. A similar radical aesthetic could be found in the second wave of Taiwan New Cinema in the 1990s epitomized by films like Ang Lee’s *Wedding Banquet* and Tsai Ming-liang’s *Vive L’Amour* and *The River*. Ang Lee’s pioneering film portrays queer characters in a straight way whereas Tsai Ming-liang tends to present an urban character’s sense of hopelessness with a philosophical meditation hinging on a postmodernist poetics. Both Lee and Tsai were the quintessential *auteurs* of a wave of queer films that proposed to set up a renovated visual language in the representation of LGBT people. Framed within the rubric of Sinophone cinema, this new trend of queer films not only was well received in Taiwan, but also expanded to Hong Kong and mainland China. Chen Kaige’s *Farewell My Concubine* and Wong Kar-wai’s *Happy Together* are two subsequent gems in the crown of Sinophone New Queer Cinema: Chen’s work was the first Chinese-language film to win the Palme d’Or at the Cannes Film Festival in 1993, whereas Wong was awarded Best Director at Cannes in 1997.

By using stylistically daring visuals to queer their movies, the two *auteur* directors have advanced Sinophone cinema to a different horizon. First, both apply the transformative effect of performative arts—Beijing opera and Argentine tango, respectively—to portray a form of transsexuality and self-other discourse on gendered bodies crafted to denote a hidden melancholy. Second, manipulation of double-gendered relations is also carried out to disturb the boundaries intended to demarcate heterosexuality from queer attraction. With the queer relation superimposed upon their main characters, namely Ho Powing (played by Leslie Cheung) and Lai Yiufei (played by Tony Leung Chiuwai) in *Happy Together* and Chen Dieyi (also played by Leslie Cheung) and Duan Xiaolou (played by Zhang Fengyi) in *Farewell My Concubine*, both films become spin-offs of the Narcissus and Echo narrative. They rework queer melodrama conventions by unsettling assumptions about relations of image and self, fantasy and bodily reality, surface and depth. While the protagonists are explicitly queer, they suggest a theme that is larger than their identity, one primarily about a moment of epiphany as the lovers’ seemingly intimate bond of masculinity is shattered by a sense of defiance that inscribes “an impossible history, a story of desire in an impasse” (Brooks 22).

## An Ear Can See

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As a cinematic pattern, queer melodrama revels in ambivalent sexual identity, sociocultural transgression, and a singularly queer sensibility. Melodramatic films provide a self-other queer discourse regarding paralyzed sexual relations. With distinguished authorial expression, Wong and Chen have created, in *Happy Together* and *Farewell My Concubine*, respectively, effective visual articulations addressing the aesthetic form of queerness. Their lead characters subvert a narcissistic mirroring of the mythical Narcissus-and-Echo pair. From various Echo images and stories in the Ovidian tradition, a different Echo emerges at the end of the twentieth century when she becomes a spokesperson for topics concerning gender and language. Derrida and Kristeva have proposed a postmodern analysis of the relationship of Ovid's couple, their reformulation giving birth to a new Echo. Kristeva believes that "primary narcissism" is a psychological protection mechanism that cannot be ignored. There is another "imaginary third/other" between "I" and "not I," which is the echo of self-othering (*Tales* 22). Derrida proposes a similar "hospitable narcissism" that emphasizes the ethics of being friendly to the other without sacrificing the self (*Points* 199). He rereads Echo's echolalia as a predicated sign receding before Narcissus's speech. It is only by beginning from the other, an original point of self-renunciation, that Narcissus can listen to Echo's response of love. In this way the imaginary communion reaches its full realization.

In the interpretation of Echo's passivity, Derrida argues that Echo is "repeating the last words, or rather the last syllables, in order to obey and at the same time disobey the law, that is, in order to say something in her own name by playing with language, she manages to produce a totally unforeseeable event for Narcissus" (*For Strasbourg* 64). Transforming her reiteration of Narcissus's words into a sonorous reply that offers a postmodern discourse of the other is a giant step for Echo. It emphasizes the importance of the other fighting back to gain power over the self in order to balance an unequal self-other relationship in intimacy. Likewise, Kristeva takes Echo rather than Narcissus to be the model of subjectivity by valorizing the words of the other. In *Tales of Love*, Kristeva suggests:

It should not be conceived as simply visual but as a representation activating various facilitations corresponding to the entire gamut of perceptions, especially the sonorous ones; this because of their precocious appearance in the domain of neuropsychological maturation, but also because of their dominant function in speech. (40)

Paying attention to the theme of sonority, Kristeva refers to an inner ear and its ability to respond to the other with speech. The narratives of the self are only meaningful when part of a dialogue becomes sharable with others. Transforming the nature of seeing to hearing is a way to open a new psychic space shown in the sound and rhythm of the semiotic, which means that the preverbal region of the imagination prevails. Indeed, the opening of a new psychic space is shown in the sound and rhythm of the semiotic, which means the preverbal region of the imagination prevails. Love promises that there is the other for the other.

### *Labyrinth of Refrain*

By engaging readings of narcissism from Kristeva and Derrida, this section offers an investigation of the relationship between Powing and Yiufei in Wong's film and attempts to uncover a plurality of narcissuses that simultaneously play Narcissus and Echo and even reverse the pair's stereotyped personification of the visual and the auditory. *Happy Together* depicts one of the major features of queer melodramas: the complicated relationship of same-sex lovers and their conflicting entanglement with home and family. Sometimes, the "returning home" motif is pitted against the theme of "exotic wandering," and even sets up a hurdle in the representations of gender. Within the aesthetics of queer melodrama, formal features are effectively linked to the narrative strategy. "Starting over" is deployed as the dominant narrative rhythm instantiated in refrains and voice-over; it serves to trace the reception of the gender concern. Wong's postmodern variations of Narcissus and Echo can be seen in the lead character and his interaction with other characters in an arc of transformation: Yiufei's initial passive position toward Powing, who proposes "starting over," and his later shift to an empowered role in initiating "starting over" with Chang, a new male friend, and his own father respectively.

In the first *mise-en-scène* of *Happy Together*, there is a line that Powing repeats to Yiufei: "We would start over." His affective phrase "starting over" becomes a curse pinned on Yiufei's heart; it is what makes Yiufei attached to Powing's love without remorse. Responding to the line, Yiufei's voice-over states: "Ho Pong-wing always says, 'Let's start over' and it gets to me every time. We've been together for a while and break up often, but whenever he says, 'Let's start over,' I find myself back with him. So we left Hong Kong to start over. We hit the road and ended up in Argentina." This refrain is irresistible to Yiufei, who is always under the spell of love to be renewed. The exchange of echolalia between Powing and Yiufei suggests the route that maps their narcissistic bond. They have repeatedly intended to reinvent their love relationship, and they do so by taking

the brave step of migrating from their homeland Hong Kong to Argentina, where they hope to refresh the opportunity of “starting over.”

Counterpointed by Yiufei’s inner monologue, Powing’s “starting over” refrain is passive and responded to with no shared dialogue. Against the audial voice-over, there is a dramatic visual change from color to black-and-white when Powing and Yiufei make love in a physically violent manner. Their corporal combat is a gesture that contradicts the submissive tone heard in Yiufei’s voice-over. The thematic conflict between the visual and the auditory suggests discordance, yet the voice-over serves to downplay the emotional excess, softening the intensity by explaining the on-screen action. The erotic scene of these two men having sex, according to Rey Chow, features “a moment of erotic passion, but it is also what [one] may call a moment of indifferentiation, a condition of perfect unity that was not only (perhaps) chronologically past but also seemingly before difference and separation” (34). The nostalgic black-and-white images juxtaposed with Yiufei’s voice-over manifest the binocular effect of closeness and distance, the conflation of the past with the present. The disjunctive relationship of sound and image is registered here to uncover an aesthetic frisson that actualizes a split from the body of its possessor, diffusing the immediate image with a dual temporality. With this bifurcation of the speaking voice and the coupled bodies bathed in a nostalgic color, the narrator declares an ambivalent love discourse oscillating between he “is having love,” he “used to love,” and he “would have love.” The revisionist feature negates the melodramatic excess in the expression of emotion. In addition, the black-and-white cinematography, credited to Christopher Doyle, conveys a nostalgic ambience and documentary appeal by connecting the film to realist aesthetics that restricts the “present” vehement love to “past” memory.

The second “starting over” *mise-en-scène* begins in a hospital where the wounded Powing utters again the magic sentence. This time the film’s cinematography changes from black-and-white to color tinged with golden yellow in order to bring back Powing and Yiufei’s happiest time together. Yet Yiufei’s “disappeared” voice-over at this time indicates a warning sign of him being lost in a narcissistic vortex. Basking in his role as a maternal caretaker, Yiufei surrenders to Powing’s strong demand for love, which edges on hysterical abuse. The discordance between sound and image featured here embodies a compelling message regarding love’s ambiguities, the thin line between submission and abuse. When the magic refrain is reinitiated, the color changes from black-and-white to golden-yellow. Their love seems to be lighted up again with the color reinforcing love’s warmth even during the cold Buenos Aires winter. Yiufei’s body language at this moment seems to be posing a passive protest and resistance to Powing’s mantra, though

ultimately he submits to the charm once again. Yet the mood of the refrain here is different from before, as Yiufei's attitude is more detached and the disappearance of his voice-over evinces their lack of connection.

The most intriguing refrain is the third "missing" one. After their separation, Powing calls Yiufei up but hears nothing from the other end of the phone; instead, Yiufei's murmuring voice-over is revealed to the audience when he says, "Powing called soon after. His excuse was he wanted his passport back. I don't mind returning it. But I don't want to see him. I dread hearing what he always says." In this scene, the "starting over" refrain becomes a marked "pause" that dares not speak. Reinforced by the huge silhouette of a telephone booth blocking the screen, the void hidden behind "what he always says" bespeaks a point of departure, the opposite of a new beginning. "What he always says" is coupled with the fourth scene, in which Yiufei makes a real resolution to deal with "Powing's words" even though they still hurt, and he decides to walk out of Powing's life.

The last mention of "starting over" is crucial as Yiufei transforms the echo-like mantra into a resonance that rekindles his relationship with his father. In a scene where he writes a letter to his father, his voice-over goes, "I tell him things he's been wanting to know. In the end, I say I hope he treats me as a friend, and gives me a chance to start over." It is a dramatic reversal that grants Yiufei the position of speaker who pleads a "starting over" mantra to his father. We can say that the trigger of Yiufei's transformation is the emergent subject, as defined by Kristeva, one that is neither monadic nor fusional, but has a complex and malleable structure that responds to "the entire gamut of perceptions, especially *sonorous* ones" (*Tales* 40). Following Kristeva's rethinking of Echo, Oliver Kelly in "Psychoanalysis and Deconstruction" suggests that "Echo becomes a self, a 'little narcissist,' through an address from and to the other, through the appropriation and ex-appropriation of the other's words" (36). Yiufei's voice-over has this effect of rebounding at the heart of his transference of loving identification from himself to his father. This double self, Narcissus-and-Echo, is endorsed by the third imaginary father figure. Derrida advances a similar line of thought when, in his book *The Ear of the Other*, he offers a metaphorical association for ear: "The ear is uncanny. Uncanny is what it is; double is what it can become; large or small is what it can make or let happen . . . ; large or small as well the manner in which one may offer or lend an ear" (33). The mirror-ear is uncanny since it is given a double nature of receptivity and unresponsiveness, like the transgressive refrain of "starting over."

Apart from the mantra, the deployment of voice-over, which is one of the trademarks of the director's authorial expression, constitutes the rhythm of the whole film and penetrates the viewer's heart. According to Wong, monologue is

“an interesting device” because it “is always helpful in providing information that we don’t get to see on screen” (qtd. in Lalanne 96). In the film, Yiufei’s voice-over plays a critical role in expressing, commenting on, and declaring his suffering in the triangular love relation, the latter a typical feature of queer romantic melodrama. The voice-over that the audience hears is not only Yiufei’s speaking voice but also his mind’s voice. Kaja Silverman argues that voice-over dominates “a different order from the main diegesis,” and that it is “semi-diegetic,” in the sense that such sonorous representation occurs both inside and outside of the world in the film (48). The disconnection between body and soul imbues the voice with a rather gendered authority and undisputed power due to “its irreducibility to the spatiotemporal limitations of the body” (Doane 370). The voice-over device exteriorizes interiority and resurfaces the sound’s lightness and detachment. At the critical moments in the film, the voice-over works with the visual images to create an ambience tinged with sorrow.

Visual images both complement and counter Yiufei’s voice-over, yet there is no room left for Powing’s voice-over. While Chang’s voice-over shows he is drawn to Yiufei’s voice, their voice-overs reveal their inner thoughts in tandem, so interlinked that the film sounds like an intersubjective dialogue. Chang’s first voice-over appears when he notices Yiufei’s sound. In his voice-over, Chang distinguishes himself from others because of his sensitivity to hearing, effectuating the shift of narrative momentum. In this new relationship, no longer considered a shadow or echo, his voice-over returns “in the sounds of the Other” that are interlinked with Chang’s (Beardsworth 17). The two continue to communicate in their voice-overs. However, while Yiufei praises Chang for “the liveliest voice” and his “seeing better with ears,” Chang eventually leaves with Yiufei’s “voice of sadness to the end of the world.”

Yiufei’s identification with Chang, who enters the scenario after Yiufei’s breakup with Powing, confers on the submissive Yiufei the power of echolalia as depicted in the Ovidian myth. Yiufei’s relation to a new love interest amounts to a calling for dependence as it announces a preliminary separation from Powing, then a declaration of love for Chang, who duplicates the echo-like sounds as an archaic gesture from the myth to sign the name of love. In light of Kristeva’s “imaginary other/third,” we may say that this return is confirmed by the loving third that supplements “the interiorization of the gaze of the other with the interiorization of the voice of the other” (Beardsworth 17, 21). The power of Yiufei’s voice-over prevails in the film to give the audience affective empathy for him since he is echo-like and constantly abandoned by the narcissistic Powing. After their repeated separations, a crucial moment occurs when the director reverses



the roles of Powing and Yiufei because of Chang, who acts as a reflection so that Yiufei and Powing can see their relationship from the mirror of a triangular love.

The metaphoric Iguazú Falls, in this context, become an interface between self and other, reality and illusion. A truly narcissistic mirror makes the plot's reversal possible. When rejected again by Powing, Yiufei takes a solitary trip that dissolves his suffering and he is henceforth intermingled with the Iguazú Falls, the final destination of their love, into which he has retreated, like a child returning to a mother's womb. This Falls, like Narcissus's pool where he sees his reflection and dies for it, shows Yiufei to himself. In this *mise-en-scène* (*Happy* 01:25:57-01:28:26), a close-up of his face splashed with tear-like drops stimulates a thought of revival from a living death. Yiufei's voice-over shouts, "I finally reach Iguazú, I feel very sad, I feel like there should be two of us standing here. I think of Ho Powing." Approaching the water, Yiufei immerses himself in his narcissism and exposes the inevitability of its being breached. In effect, showing love for an other from whom one is separated, he teaches love of self in his reflection on the "two of us." The echo from the voice-over is the auditory equivalent of the Falls reflecting back defective sound, just as the Falls reflected back a defective split image of the self.

The crucial symbol of water, according to Derrida, is "drenching oneself with water, the story of women drenched in water with a view to reappropriating, putting on, but finally, the naked body, the true body, the woman's body proper, clean" (*Pregnances* 8). For Derrida, the double meaning of "the woman's body proper" is reflected through water to elaborate not only the meaning of washing a restricted female body from historical stains and containment but also the implication of a space of self-erasure that refreshes a female's mind with freedom to see her true self without confinement. Deriving a variant version of Narcissus and Echo, Derrida opens a sympathetic space to approach the feminine other. By appealing to the voice of the other, he thus brings the self back to the plea to start over through a ritual of cleansing and rebirth. Afterwards, Yiufei repeats the words "starting over," the refrain first initiated by Powing, appropriating them for himself in order to say something else to his father and Chang.

Iguazú Falls, an uncanny site of shocking violence, is a psychological place embedded with mirror-like reflection that symbolizes the reflected/reversal zone of Yiufei's love for Powing. Therefore, when he declares the death of this love, Yiufei outlives Powing as he has outlived himself. The Echo-as-Narcissus Yiufei survives without Powing since he has learned something from the Falls where he detected a sense of illusion creating contradictory love between men. While Yiufei sees a mirror reflected in the Falls, Powing at the same time returns to Yiufei's

rented house and, watching the vicissitudes on the lampshade of the Falls, bursts into tears. If Powing is melancholic after the separation, it is because his realization of Yiufei's echo-like shadow is imprisoned within; simultaneously, adrift in exotic Buenos Aires, his former blindness is crucifying him on a cross of despairing love. The fake Falls lampshade, a contrast to Iguazú Falls itself, comprises a distance between the copy and the authentic. Like the mobility of self-other identity, a huge gap between the two Falls opens up a discourse of differential reversal to highlight the emergence of renewed identity.

### *The Transgender Mantra*

The epic melodrama *Farewell My Concubine* features a handsome male opera singer Dieyi who falls in love with his onstage partner Xiaolou, yet his lover eventually betrays him by marrying a prostitute called Juxian (played by Gong Li). In the romantic queer love between a man and a man disguised as a woman, Dieyi's "emasculatation" functions as an account of a problematic gender formation that teeters on patriarchal fantasy. The rhythm of repressed anxiety prevails since it is at once a film that combines elements of self-actualization and self-destruction, but also a film through which narcissistic drives and sexual differences are acted out. It is a poetic, performative meditation on the nature of being and on the possibility of sexual transcendence, as well as a psychoanalytic argument about queer romance and its anxieties. To be specific, a symbolic transformation indicates that Xiaodouzi (Dieyi's childhood nickname, played by Yin Zhi) has resolved to play his role, which demands the gender disguise and androgyny of an effeminate female impersonator. Unable to deny his maleness by nature, he faces a huge obstacle in the theatricalization of the feminine self onstage.

There are three significant *mise-en-scènes* that constitute a gradual gender-transformation process from resistance to recognition and, finally, to identification. The abject situations of narcissism are manifested through the recurrently voiced line "I am, by nature, a delicate woman not a masculine man," a line from the Chinese opera *Dreaming of the World outside the Nunnery*. In the opera within the film, Dieyi repeatedly articulates his biological sex instead of delving into a performative world of fiction to internalize his role as a female. He psychologically negates the imposition of such a cross-gendered role. Yet in this stage of abjection, a precondition of narcissism, he faces conflicts that nourish his narcissistic imagination, such that the powerful development of his hearing is transformed into empowered enunciation.

The first "Gender Restriction" *mise-en-scène* (*Farewell* 00:17:18-00:19:20) describes a teenage Xiaodouzi who stubbornly recites the line based on his male gender, totally oblivious to playing the fictional role of a female nun. This

leads him to being thrashed mercilessly by his opera instructor. In the second “Tear and Blood” *mise-en-scène* (*Farewell* 00:21:17-00:34:39), due to the death of his best friend Xiaolizi and Xiaoshitou’s cruelty, in a symbolic transformation Xiaodouzi has resolved to play the role in the gender disguise and androgyny of an effeminate female impersonator. The death of Xiaolizi (played by Yang Yongchao) has caused tremendous distress for him and casts an ominous shadow on his psychological life. The gender recognition is doubly reinforced when Xiaoshitou (played by Zhao Hailong) puts the cut end of an opium pipe into Xiaodouzi’s mouth and violently stirs it so that blood exudes from Xiaodouzi’s mouth, and he mistakenly interchanges the word *woman* with *man* as he sings the line “I am, by nature, a delicate woman not a masculine man.” The instructor’s maltreatment suggests castration, and Xiaodouzi’s juvenile symbolic response suggests that the incident has imprinted the potential for reversal of gender identification upon him. After that, Xiaodouzi is no longer obsessed with his manhood pride but is rather infatuated with the notion of playing the role of a female impersonator. He truly makes himself qualified to enact the opera role of Yu Ji, a concubine of the king in the opera within the film.

In the final *mise-en-scène* (*Farewell* 02:39:04-02:42:03), the line is recited again, but this time it is not in Dieyi’s monologue but a dialogue initiated by Xiaolou. After eleven years, they are again in the middle of rehearsing the bidding farewell scenes. Onstage, the king is supposed to refuse to give his sword to his beloved concubine who is to take the sword to end her life. However, removing his king’s artificial full beard, Xiaolou starts to complain about his worsened physical condition, which makes him no longer eligible to be the masculine king. Something in the air reminds him of the childhood days when Xiaodouzi always got confused about gender while reciting the nunnery line. Like an eternal charm, Xiaoshitou begins to utter the line that used to trouble his stage partner, “I am, by nature, a masculine man,” and Xiaodouzi immediately responds, “but not a delicate woman.” When Dieyi then drastically commits suicide on the stage, a close-up of Xiaolou’s painted face is highlighted with his voicing of two names: he first cries out the offstage name Dieyi, and then he murmurs the childhood name Xiaodouzi, the last two sounds echoing Dieyi’s names in different phases of his life, a progression that contributed to his ultimate life in the stage role of Yi Ji.

There are two intricate devices to be underscored: Xiaolou’s smile after his naming ritual and Dieyi’s irrevocable absence. Xiaolou’s separate calling of both Dieyi and his childhood name is a resounding reclamation of what is at stake in the loss of a significant other who had been his life companion since childhood. After calling out the names, he wears a smile to signal his generosity toward the

departed devotee. He finally understands how to respect precisely what has made the dead other an other. Thus, Xiaolou's call and smile symbolically formulate a renewed dialogue with Dieyi even after the latter has passed away. To that extent, it is a sign to showcase an exchange with the other. Miraculously, Xiaolou transforms himself into a Narcissus-as-Echo who initiates an invitation to build up a new dialogue with Dieyi, "the very breathing of the dialogue of the dialogue, of the dialogue in the world or of the most interior dialogue" (Derrida, "Rams" 140). Meanwhile, Dieyi's irrevocable absence reinforces his invisible otherness and his refusal to be closed off. Moreover, his absence from the screen creates an imaginary communal space echoing his voice with that of the man he has cherished all his life.

The subtle gender reversal displayed in Dieyi's suicide supports Derrida's postmodern reinterpretation of the myth of Echo-and-Narcissus. Xiaolou's "blind" repetition of Xiaodouzi's childhood words constitutes a declaration of Xiaodouzi's true and natural voice. And this transforming voice, thus, becomes theirs. It is not merely a borrowing of the opera line: that would echo the words returning to Narcissus-as-Echo Xiaolou. The sounds unconsciously reach his ear are not just his own physical voice but both of their voices imprinted with the mutual trace of their love and suffering over the course of half a century. Consequently, the recalled line is "an allegorical metonymy" that inspires the initiation of a romantic relationship and is "something other than what it says and manifests the other [allos]" (Derrida, *Mémoires* 37).

The nunnery line has been invoked to form a cycle repeating Xiaodouzi's teenage obsession with his male nature. It reveals a new "Narcissus-as-Echo" by orchestrating a dramatic self-cocooning process that witnesses Xiaodouzi's man-to-woman gender metamorphosis and the grafting of one character upon another. That is, Xiaolou has grasped the reflection from Dieyi, and his voice is rendering his own from an other: "Echo-as-Narcissus." With respect to the analogous invocation of the Xiaolou-and-Dieyi line, it is pertinent to cite Derrida's reversal of the conventional stereotype involving Narcissus-and-Echo:

Echo thus lets be heard by whoever wants to hear it, by whoever might love hearing it, something other than what she seems to be saying. Although she repeats, without simulacrum, what she has just heard, another simulacrum slips in to make her response something more than a mere reiteration. She says in an inaugural fashion, she declares her love, and calls for the first time, all the while repeating the "Come!" of Narcissus, all the while echoing narcissistic words. (*Rogues* xii)

It is finally Xiaolou who harks back to Dieyi's call to "come" and echoes Dieyi when he tried so hard to finally succeed in catching the "end of a sentence that she sends back and makes another sentence with it" (Derrida, *Mémoires* 15). In the real world the possibility of Dieyi's queer voice is erased, surrendered to a heterosexual identity recognized by the traditional Chinese society. He realizes that he loves Xiaolou deeply but cannot utter the name of this love. Only in the fictional opera world is he able to realize his homosexual love and gender identity. In this crucial moment of transformation, the transgressive nunnery line is finally meaningful when Xiaolou appropriates his lover's words. This sonorous response gives Dieyi the ability to speak in such a way that the words become his. Their queer love, thus, is made possible by the repetition of each other's words. It is in such a context that the line becomes a metaphor for a "communion" that declares its love from the closet.

Wong Kar-wai subtly engages the magic refrain "let's start over" as a secret self-other code to initiate a refreshing queer love and family bond between the leading characters. Eventually, we perceive a repeated breakdown of the relationship between Powing and Yiufei since they fail to reach a consensus that would allow their little narcissus and echo to become a fluid intersubjectivity that would transcend the restriction of self and other. Their reciprocal love only exists in their imagination; "starting over" is only an excuse to separate again. Yet when it comes to Yiufei and Chang, Wong intentionally juxtaposes two voice-overs to empower both characters' equal position and propel their dialogue. This transformation forces Yiufei to take an enunciative position which will amend the broken relation with his father with the refrain of "starting over." If "starting over" is a wishful dream-like charm to realize Wong's mapping of Greater China's identity via a straight/queer love story, Dieyi's nunnery line is Chen Kaige's restrained conception of gender masquerade and androgyny in the disguise of Beijing opera, where the *dan* female character is usually played by a delicate male character. Through the psychological development of resistance, recognition, and identification, the couple Dieyi and Xiaolou take turns reciting the line "I am, by nature, a delicate woman not a masculine man," joking by reversing the gender. Finally a mixture of intersubjectivities is achieved that finds a balanced locus, accommodating the self with the other. All in all, the idea of renewal and transgressive "Narcissus-as-Echo" and "Echo-as-Narcissus" models is established through the intertwining relationships of the leading couples in both Chinese melodramas. However, the possible communion is only realized respectively in a temporary stopover destination or in the fictional world of opera.

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## The Imaginary Other

Apart from the repeated phrases of echolalia and audio voice-overs as voices only heard in the imagination, another suggestion of the characters' narcissistic reversal is highlighted in the performance arts of the two films. Argentine tango music and dance and Beijing opera symbolize a semiotic other/third. Being fantasized and voiced, they offer up heartbreaking backdrop narratives for the unrequited love between the narcissistic couples. The tango discourse in *Happy Together* and the opera discourse in *Farewell My Concubine*, respectively blending Chinese cultural resources and the globalized perspective of homosexuality as a sexual uniqueness, are art forms that raise questions of hybridized gay identity.<sup>1</sup> This section will investigate the way the Argentine tango and the Beijing Opera bring the imaginary lovers into play as they reverse the roles of the other and make the resounding echoes evolve into a position of enunciation.

### *Heart with Body*

*Happy Together* brings together the affective and artistic form of the Argentine tango, the "heart" with the "body," to nourish the imaginary other. In the film, there are four interrelated tango *mise-en-scènes* that radically reverse the stereotypical model of the myth of Narcissus and Echo. First, in the exotic city of Buenos Aires, where the tango was created, a pair of professional tango dancers perform at Bar Sur. This scene prefaces the conventional tango discourse of lead-and-follow. Subsequently, Powing, as a leader, teaches Yiufei how to follow the basic steps of the tango in the bedroom in a scene that announces in advance their intimate relationship and the dominant/submissive mode of their future love partnership. Yiufei and Powing kiss and embrace while dancing a third tango scene in the kitchen, and this is a declaration of their reunion. The first three tango scenes thus set up a progressive trajectory to explain the tango's lead-and-follow discourse. Yet the most intriguing is the fourth tango scene that occurs only in Powing's imagination since it reverses Yiufei's passive narcissistic position. While returning to dance at Bar Sur, Powing imagines that he is dancing with Yiufei after their separation, and his realization of Yiufei's refusal to respond to his love represses him, making him more like a Narcissus-as-Echo figure.

This quartet of tango scenarios make up a tango discourse that proposes male/female and lead/follow binaries. They not only raise concerns about gender

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<sup>1</sup> *Farewell My Concubine* is based on the novel of the same title by Lillian Lee, a Hong Kong-based novelist and journalist. Cooperating with the screenwriter Lu Wei and the director Chen Kaige, Lee adapted her novel into a film script that is quite different from the original novel.

equality in the “lead-and-follow” mode, but also compose an “endless gliding” between self-other differences. In the Argentine tango, in intimate contact, a leader and a follower embrace and change their gravity and balance at the same time, even sometimes reversing their roles to create a theatrical visual image. In Wong’s film, the tango duet repeatedly appears to address the motif of the imaginary other assumed to be a mediator between a narcissistic leader and echolike follower. Playing the role of the leader in a love duel, Powing’s self-indulgent narcissism leads Yiufei into a chaotic state of depression, since it is hard for Yiufei to erase Powing from his mind. They remain inseparable and unable to enjoy personal breathing space.

It is useful here to apply Derrida’s notion of “hospitable narcissism” before we further analyze the tango scenes. Derrida suggests that human acts do not deserve the status of the noun “hospitality”; hospitality can only be achieved under the circumstance of placing the adjective “hospitable” in front of the noun “narcissism.” Thus, “hospitable narcissism” implies a horizon of hospitality and a horizon of narcissistic appropriation, where the first word uncovers a realization toward openness to the other and the second term reveals an appropriation of the otherness of the other. The two concomitant horizons indicate an irreducible need for self-preservation as they approach the status of hospitality. Derrida writes,

What is called non-narcissism is in general but the economy of a much more welcoming and hospitable narcissism. One that is much more open to the experience of the Other as Other. I believe that without a movement of narcissistic reappropriation, the relation to the Other would be absolutely destroyed. It would be destroyed in advance. The relation to the Other—even if it remains asymmetrical, open, without possible reappropriation—must trace a movement of reappropriation in the image of one’s self for love to be possible. Love is narcissistic. (*Points* 199)

To Derrida’s credit, a residual narcissism can be seen as connected to the deconstructed notion of hospitality. Varying degrees of narcissism are detectible in Powing, whose most uncharitable narcissism is shown first in the couple’s first separation on the way to Iguazú Falls. Open-ended hospitable narcissism is then demonstrated in a cycle of tango *mise-en-scènes* in which the notion is successively constructed. Initially, the communal I-thou<sup>2</sup> tango is so bewitching that it forces

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<sup>2</sup> I-thou, meaning I-you, is a term coined by Martin Buber in his book *I and Thou*.

the couple to cling to each other as they become a twin embryo of love about to be reborn. The suffocating tension between leading and following becomes more dramatic with the appearance of Chang, who dramatically reverses Yiufei's supposed position from an echo-like follower to that of an active, hospitable Narcissus who, having recuperated from the earlier broken relationship, becomes empowered. In the last tango *mise-en-scène*, dancing with an imaginary Yiufei, Powing becomes defenseless and vulnerable, expressing an irreducible desire for an attachment, an illusory reunion with his former lover.

With this scene, Yiufei is demonstrably released from his former narcissistic dependence on Powing. He has survived possessive love and is preparing to start over. The release from the narcissistic moment is defined touchingly by Kristeva as "a melancholy moment (an actual or imaginary loss of meaning, an actual or imaginary despair, and actual or imaginary razing of symbolic values, including the value of life)" (*Tales* 128). Kristeva emphasizes the notion of melancholic beauty here as a crucial moment of the imaginary that usually occurs between intermittent spontaneous modes of depressive falling. When a symbolic destruction of meaning is reached, Yiufei turns toward a renewal bringing psycho-cultural rebirth.

The fascination of the fourth tango *mise-en-scène* lies in the play between presence and absence: Powing dances with a professional dancer who is replaced by an imaginary Yiufei who embraces him to tango. The absent Yiufei, who has assumed a ghostly presence, is now a haunting image of lost love deeply implanted in Powing's memory. It resonates with Rey Chow's statement that "[e]ach man has, it seems, internalized the other to the point of changing places with each other" (44). The provocative music played here is the "Prologue" from the versatile tango musician Astor Piazzolla's *Tango Apasionado* (*Passionate Tango*). Piazzolla composed this piece to accompany a brilliant 1987 musical adaptation of Jorge Luis Borges's short stories.<sup>3</sup> Luxuriantly weaving the ambience of the scene into the film, the music captures a labyrinthine world of love full of erotic and bloodthirsty desire. As the complexities multiply with the tango dance and music, they present a character tragically thrust into an unrequited love in Borges's labyrinth. The fourth tango scene in Wong's film is just such a dramatic point: it complicates Powing's persona, who is transformed into Narcissus-as-Echo through his involvement with Yiufei. The latter's enigmatic character has certainly changed Powing. The expression of the same-sex partnerships in this

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<sup>3</sup> Adapted from Borges's "The Intruder" and "Streetcorner Man," the theatre-music-dance presentation was directed by Graciela Daniele.



queer tango scene signals a crossing of gender and self: the scene constitutes a subversive act because it is believed to undermine the prescriptive and heteronormative gender stereotypes with which the traditional tango has been branded.

#### *Farewell My King*<sup>4</sup>

Gender as a category essentially underscores the fantasy and the theatrical melodrama of opera. *Farewell My Concubine* confirms gender performativity, a repetition compulsion, namely the notion that the self is completed through the other. Dieyi's ability to recite his lines from the Beijing Opera before the audience is a twofold method that uses the treatment of voice to complement the use of the ear. The ear of the "other" is a strangely dismembered ear, aligned with the audience who hears his story based on the fictional construction of acting out the past. The ear hears Dieyi's own speaking voice, yet it also eerily gives him a chance to hear his partner-lover's words from the stage in the course of their long-lived theatrical partnership performing *Farewell My Concubine*. In this hit opera within the film, Dieyi plays the concubine Yu, and Xiaolou plays the king; it is like an opera duet that opens up an ear that hears and an other ear which can answer in response. Offstage, Dieyi's love for his fellow actor remains the same, but Xiaolou's involvement with another woman, the prostitute Juxian, makes the story more alluring. All these performances in onstage and offstage rehearsals coalesce under Chen Kaige's direction as he adeptly blurs the line between reality and fiction to create a productive synergy between an opera within the film and the same-title film. Even though the narrative is complicated, its focus follows the four major characters and their intricate interrelations based on their connections to a famous sword. Focusing on the king's sword as a major motif that interweaves the opera story with the film occasions a broader discussion of the psychological transformations in the relationships between characters.

The sword has a double-edged interpretation in queer discourse: it is a phallic symbol and an "emasculatation" weapon at the same time. Only by explaining the sword's fate interconnected in the opera within the film can this contradiction in the sword's signification be elucidated. The sword is first exposed in the palace of the powerful eunuch Chang, a retired authority of the declining Qing Dynasty; he is the one who has taken Xiaodouzi's virginity. When the sword emerges for the second time, it has become a love token to Dieyi from the owner Yuan Siye, played by Ge You). In Siye, the director Chen displays the image of the decadent

**Echo and  
Resonance**

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<sup>4</sup> This section title mimics and inverts Chen's film title *Farewell My Concubine*, suggesting a subversive gender shift, grafting not only a concubine's viewpoint onto a king's perspective, but also creating mutuality in the dialogue between these two characters.

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aristocrat, a pretentious opera house patron who bought the sword from the eunuch Chang. Yet Siye proves himself a fake king who only wants to protect himself when Dieyi is later accused and punished for being a Japanese spy. For Dieyi, Siye plays a narcissistic double, similarly obsessed with the fictional role on the stage. Tacitly, their meeting suggests not only the importance of playing an androgynous mind in the opera but also the tragic essence of the Yu Ji impersonation as acted out by an effeminate male. Femininity in the traditional Beijing opera is tied to its conventional performance by a man since the opera has traditionally excluded actresses. Siye's sword represents the masculine weapon of a king, used by Dieyi to practice the predestined suicide of a concubine who eventually understands that this is also a sword to bring him/her betrayal, as he realizes that love is an illusion that can only be reached on the stage.

If Siye, who lacks the ability to make faithful commitments, lives by betrayal, abandoning his beloved and, finally, his country in a way that condemns him to moral perdition, by contrast, Juxian, Xialou's loyal wife, suffers due to her relentless love for her philandering husband. Although not the owner of the sword, she playacts as a powerful mediator who manipulates it sophisticatedly and assumes a morally superior position to its possessors, Siye and Dieyi. The first glimpse of her holding the sword is when she proposes that Siye be persuaded to rescue Dieyi from the KMT's imprisonment. Moreover, she assumes the role of a compassionate substitute mother, especially in the way she bravely saves Dieyi's prop sword from the bonfire. Returning the sword to Dieyi, she pathetically turns her face back to look at him twice, yet she says nothing. It seems that Dieyi is her last comfort after she has been abandoned by her husband. Her heartbreaking suicide is associated with Dieyi's eventual death, both of them destined to sink under an unbearable moral burden. That Juxian's tragedy presages Dieyi's farewell to his "king" is underscored by the sword that will be used by Dieyi to emasculate himself for his desire to retain an eternal queer love. The sword is a silent bond between these two individuals who have dedicated their lives to Xiaolou.

Symbolically double-edged, the sword can also be understood as an "eye" in which the surrounding nature is reflected: it doubles itself in seeing itself. As in the Ovidian myth, Juxian impersonates Dieyi's feminine other, whom he seeks to avoid but to experience a sense of maternal belonging. Only through his identification with the imaginary archaic other, the mainspring of faith, can he convert the "unspeakable" oneness into an overwhelming version of self. Thus, Juxian enacts Dieyi's "narcissistic seeming" in a mimetic situation that depicts his attempt to gain subjectivity prior to the mirror stage. He must undergo the process of separating himself from the m/other Juxian, who represents a maternal world

he feels detached from because his mother abandoned him at the opera school. Imprinted with his love, Dieyi sends the sword as a gift to Xiaolou, who should protect it from harm. Yet his pride is wounded by this reflection of his unconditional love for Xiaolou when Juxian, his rival, returns the sword to its owner. They both have fallen in love with a Narcissus who loves only his own reflection; the saved sword, therefore, creates an echo-like bond along the tragic routes of their marginalized effeminate/feminine destinies.

A seemingly exuberant character, Xiaolou is a riddle. As the king in the opera, he deserves to have the stage sword given to him by Dieyi three times. Dieyi's obsession with the sword originates in the dictum according to which an unparalleled sword must be possessed with grandeur by a brave swordsman. Once becoming the owner of the sword, Dieyi proclaims his love on Xiaolou's wedding night, but Xiaolou has totally forgotten his childish promise to be Dieyi's king once he has the sword. This denial cuts into Dieyi's mind, making the sword a weapon of "emasculatation" associated with the motif of abuse and hatred suffered by the effeminate male in the opera convention. In the primary youthful identification, Dieyi's psychic space was metaphorically nourished by the opera, and initially he imagines Xiaolou to be a person representing it. This idea remains embedded in his mind until he realizes the significance of being an individual subject distinct from the opera world that Xiaolou stands for.

In Chen's film, the meditation on the imaginary other is not only based on Kristeva's ternary structure of the self but based on a quadripartite formation. In the quartet of love, the sword passes down from the eunuch's mansion to the possession of Siye, who admirably offers it to Dieyi, who in turn gives it to Xiaolou as a souvenir for the opera king who once promised to treat her as his most favored concubine. Although Xiaolou completely ignores its existence, his wife Juxian, realizing its significance, takes the sword back to Siye to remind him of his former attachment to Dieyi. Then, when Siye sends the sword back to his favorite king, the king's wife, Juxian, gives the sword to the concubine, who ends up dying on the stage using "the king's" sword. Dieyi, Xiaolou, Juxian, and Siye thus constitute a love quartet, each one influenced by the others, each bonding with the others to reshape their destiny, to the effect that each one shares a part of himself or herself with the others. The double-edged sword creates the mirroring effect of a watery surface that, in turn, divides the film into four major leads who dynamically mirror each other. The four characters are invented to live under two mythic figures, Narcissus and Echo. Eventually the audience may detect that the film is twisting the figure of Narcissus (or its female version Narcissa) and the figure of Echo into empowering symbols and using their multifaceted encounters to

explore gender questions.

In an interview, Chen Kaige comments: “the character I was most focused on was Cheng. He blurs the distinction between theater and life, male and female. He’s addicted to his art. He’s a tragic man who only wants to pursue an ideal of beauty, to become Yu Ji, the concubine in the opera.”<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the film’s prominent voice belongs to Dieyi, who represents a revisionist version of transgender performer to broach a reinterpretation of Echo-as-Narcissus. His transformation can be clearly seen in the above-mentioned scenes, shaped and transformed by the imaginary other against the political backdrop of the Republican Period, the war of resistance against the Japanese, and three periods of postwar China. Dieyi is so enchanted by the love for Xiaolou that he follows his footsteps into the world of the Beijing Opera. At first he feels no attachment but later is absorbed by it. In order to win Xiaolou’s love, he appropriates the language of the opera to inscribe his name on it. His sacrifice is based on the mimetic desire to track Xiaolou’s every move at the cost of his own will and life.

The chaotic dyadic-dismemberment reaches a climax for Dieyi when he realizes that Xiaolou is determined to end their long-time onstage partnership. Being treated like the other, Echo, Dieyi decides to return to the opera world where he can be seen and heard as Yu Ji for the first time. It is precisely on stage where Dieyi performs his death, confirming the notion that “the ‘within me,’ and the ‘within us,’ acquire their sense and their bearing only by carrying within themselves the death and memory of the other” (Derrida, *Mémoires* 33). Dieyi’s task is to develop a strategy of response, a kind of writing performance. His death onstage and in reality simultaneously reinforces the marking of an alterity that cannot be conquered.

Cross-dressing performance is more than a sign of abnormal psychosexuality: it is an empowering strategy. Dieyi’s suicidal performance at the end does not harmonize opposites; rather, it brings an infinite deferral of reversals and substitutions in which the lines between actress and partner-lover, fiction and reality, gender and sexuality fail to be reconciled. This leads to tragic catharsis. Michael Naas’s “Echoing Sentiments” links the ephemeral to Echo to develop a new thinking about empathy. As Naas explains, it is “Echo who gives back even when it sounds as if she has nothing to give, Echo who not only has her own Narcissus but her own narcissism” (76). Within Derrida’s context, Naas points out that an insightful relation to “other” is beneficial to the understanding of self and narcissism. Thus, Echo’s passive position in expressing her love to Narcissus

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<sup>5</sup> See Chiao and Chua.

takes a dramatic turn if she learns the self-love from Narcissus and becomes a “little narcissist.” As an echo-like partner, Dieyi completes his/her true self with a “little narcissism” through an address from Yu Ji’s performance on the stage and through the appropriation and ex-appropriation of her words. In doing so, he acknowledges his love for Xiaolou in both the real and fictional worlds.

Through Dieyi we see the transient nature of narcissism embedded in the narcissistic illusion. In his last performance, dressed in full period costume and make-up on an empty stage, Dieyi emerges as a fully-fledged transvestite with his face painted white and the refined ruby lips of a concubine. His partner/lover Xiaolou, wearing black-and-white paint on his face and yellow robes as the concubine’s beloved king, accompanies her to practice the exquisite opera after a long period of retirement from the stage because of the political upheaval. The vanished audience, missing in the minimal stage scene, seems to have betrayed the true opera diva, who faithfully clings to the narcissistic persistence of love and art. At this crucial moment, to complete her tragic death, she decides not to take off the symbolic costume and accessories worn for her role as the concubine Yu.

This narcissistic spectacle of death amazes his stage partner, situated in the position of the viewer as he hears for the first time the voice that truly uncovers homosexual love and obsession with an operatic role. The scene reminds us of the aesthetic narcissism mentioned in Elaine P. Miller’s “Echoes of Beauty.” Even its fragility prevails, such that it is associated with the illusion of impossible infinity: “this doubleness in time, simultaneous transience and apparent eternity, finitude and a beautiful mask that protects us from our anxiety in the face of this finitude, characterizes both beauty and narcissism” (68). Miller’s statement confirms that a defensively checking psyche makes sure of its responsibility for the self’s withdrawal from a loving relationship, but, at the same time, self-love needs itself to be totally immersed in the other. Even when facing death, narcissism does not abandon its right to leave a mark on the process of dying since it proposes to defend its integrity with a signature. In the same way, Dieyi has rewritten his own death as a signature like the opera role he has played throughout his life. There is no other way for him to live, but, like the concubine in *Farewell My Concubine*, he would have preferred to die along with a beloved king. What the director offers, therefore, is an aesthetic meditation on both self-referentiality and self-subversion, a fantasy about crossing the boundary between fiction and reality.

The way Dieyi turns his fictional “other” into reality could be seen as an epiphany—based on his discovery that Yu Ji is none other than himself. Kristeva’s work advances an understanding of how symbolization is shaped on developing the self’s ability to shift from reality to fantasy. Her “metaphoric sense of phantasy”

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lays a foundation to discover a true self; without it, the self will be buried under narcissistic repression. Through a process of regressive inertia, Dieyi touches on the illusory liberation achieved through the Kristevan primary narcissism, which seems to believe that “the risk would consist precisely in under-estimating the metaphoric sense of phantasy; to hear only the reality of named objects, without the metaphorised part; in short, in denying imaginary metaphorisation and settling for a form of psychological realism” (Kristeva, *Chinese Women* 239). Dieyi’s emerging proto-subject, like Echo, catches the mother-actress Yu Ji’s words as his primary identification. By imitating the patterns and sounds of the maternal other, he employs a playful and primordial echoing. The ensuing enlightenment entails a self-destruction that exhibits the one as “other,” yet it also provides the illusion of a unified but missing self. The “imaginary metaphorisation” of death is completed through a mirror-like sword that forces Yu Ji to perform Dieyi rather than have Dieyi perform Yu Ji. The imaginary other, Yu Ji, is the one who makes Dieyi lose himself in the “other” and find himself in and through the other. And this love of the other is inextricably bound up with a love for the self. Dieyi asserts himself by putting forth the voice of the fictional Yu Ji, who seems to invite him to the seeming proximity of the self-same. Dieyi, thus, becomes a “little narcissist” through an utterance from his enacted role, through the appropriation of the other’s words. No longer mimicking a voice, he becomes the other.

### **Coda: *Auteur* Queer Melodramas**

Released near the end of the twentieth century, the queer melodramas *Farewell My Concubine* and *Happy Together* anticipate a “blind Echo,” the Derridean double-directionality of narcissism. The reiterated refrains, respectively “let’s start over” and “I am a man,” as well as the artistic forms of the tango and opera, express the motif of “Narcissus-as-Echo” and “Echo-as-Narcissus.”

While both films affirm the symbiotic bond between personal romantic saga and popular epic, *Farewell* in its use of melodrama is representative of Brooks’s “fall’ from tragedy,” which is the trademark of the epic struggle for liberation amid different political forces. In the urge to re-sacralize national identity, the film adapts melodramatic rhetoric to press for a moral universe whose similarity approaches the one it seems to replace. That constitutes a cycle of infinite struggle where reconciliation is endlessly postponed since there is no ultimate value or code to cling to. Xudong Zhang discusses the distinguishing element in Chen Kaige’s film, which is to “share the postrevolutionary assumption and seek to deconstruct the ‘grand narrative’ of social revolution and idealism by construct-

ing a counternarrative of national trauma and traumatized individual life” (269). In the background of the narrative, there is the basic aesthetic ideology that emphasizes the inevitability of Dieyi’s tragic destiny of expulsion from the opera world. However, a refreshing twist is added to reflect his faithful devotion to the love shown in the performed opera at the cost of his life. In an interview, Chen Kaige points out, “In my film, society and politics occupy a secondary role. The blurred distinction between life and stage and the confusion of identity is most important.”<sup>6</sup> The politicized environment makes private life intolerable and minimizes aesthetic productivity. The film’s hidden aesthetic ideology resents the interference of politics in daily life as it shifts, via Dieyi, to concentrate on the tragic essence of the opera as art. Such a shift is not escapist. It is a transformed aesthetic representation to mark Chen Kaige’s authorial expression. The meaning of “nation” in the 1990s, embedded with queerness, was “an aggressive re-coding strategy based on the sheer impossibility of imagining a world in which queerness could be a culturally productive force” (Schoonover and Galt 23).

This is also true for *Happy*, in which aesthetic presentation aims to dominate politics. It is what Gary Bettinson called “an aesthetic of disturbance,” meaning “an aesthetic that roughens existing norms in ways that both nourish and nonplus the eye, posing obstacles to the viewer’s perception and understanding” (24). Whereas Chen Kaige displays five decades of changing political regimes and upheavals as a backdrop to a triangular love of an epic scale, Wong Kar-wai uses only a single image of inverted Hong Kong and the speeding Muzha Metro in Taipei to manifest his Asian origins. The film displays an enhanced ambition to transgress, going to the other end of the world in order to express the far-away-from-home motif. Consequently, the dominant city in the film is exotic Buenos Aires, a place extraordinary for the director, who has often attempted to share Hongkongers’ experiences linked to the complex life of the city. In contrast to the mores of his homeland, Wong Kar-wai portrays Buenos Aires as a glamorous and queer city with an otherworldly quality premised on the tango, which reveals the art’s nostalgic origins in a homosexual ambience. In a remarkable scene, the *Obelisco* in Buenos Aires is juxtaposed on the screen with a fast-forwarding clock to remind us of the approaching year 1997. Song Hwee Lim, in *Celluloid Comrade*, notes that the scenes do not “evoke a sense of nostalgia and longing for home; rather, they serve to disorientate and defamiliarize Hong Kong and even by their inversion, subvert (as it is, from below) Hong Kong to the point of no return” (122). Taiwan is a stopover, the place where Yiufei could meet Chang before

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<sup>6</sup> See Chiao and Chua.

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his final destination of home. This homelessness corresponds to the ironical resonances of being “happy together” as Yiufei is torn within a cycle of infinite struggle for his authentic identity, an identity confused by the political takeover.

For both directors, what gives their films authorial expression is their insistence on experimenting with the cinematic language of narcissistic obsession to touch on sites of cultural enlightenment. Each of the places represented serves as an aesthetic meditation where culture is imaginatively experienced in an artistic ambience. These two 1990s films explore narcissistic-oriented themes related to the arts, identity, and infidelity by presenting a stylized cinematography, audio devices, and theatrical maneuvers to create an ethereal atmosphere based on the imaginary. Both films, above all, succeed as art and melodrama. The emphasis on detached aesthetic morality and the use of devices of ambiguity usher the films into the arthouse world imprinted with authorial expression. With bodily desire being a basic narrative mode of melodrama, these two films offer a spectacularly visualized inner conflict. But they also present an articulation of fundamental moral sentiments realized through the suffering protagonists’ expressive enunciation of their selves living in a world that seems to contradict their desires.

The postmodernist strategy applied in this article is based on a psychologically complex character analysis of “Echo as Narcissus.” From this perspective, the self-other relation of an emergent subject is doubled: the sonorous features correspond to a reflection of the visual, as seen in Yiufei-as-Powing or Dieyi-as-Xiaolou. Rethinking and reinscribing narcissism by reversing Narcissus’s relation with Echo, this article reconfigures a self-other dialogue that is accessible to the other as other. As an amazing visual stylist, Wong has established himself as a poet of unrequited love and a master of voice-overs. His spontaneous narrative affirms the delicacy of homosexual oppression without critically questioning the ideology of its politics and dealing with its aesthetic implications. Likewise, subverting realism as transported through conventional norms, Chen’s authorial influence and directional vision help render his epic narrative through the complex psychological momentum of the characters. Each of these art films, whether considered a poem or an epic, resorts to a visual ontology that reinvents cinematic language as queer melodrama.



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