Chinese Censorship, Genre Mediation, and the Puzzle Films of Leste Chen

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The censorious film industry of the People's Republic of China (PRC), though mercurial and mutating apace, has elicited a fixed set of critical axioms. According to standard accounts,[1] mainland cinema is inimical to creative free expression. State regulations on screen content, curbing depictions of crooked cops, demonic ghosts, and homosexuals (among sundry other phenomena), severely curtail the filmmaker's choice of subject matter. A second claim holds that Beijing censorship stymies narrative innovation. Since deviation from accepted practice is risky, filmmakers cling to "safe formulas" and cookie-cutter plotting (Anon 2019); moreover, because China has no film rating system, scenarists rely on simplistic narratives easily grasped by viewers of all ages. Then there is the thesis that China's film culture nullifies genre experimentation. As censorship squeezes out certain "vexing" categories (horror, science fiction, violent *policiers*, ghost tales), filmmakers find themselves confined to a knot of officially sanctioned genres (bombastic main-melody epics, inoffensive youthpics, chaste romances).

This chapter aims to redress these entrenched fallacies. Taking as an exemplar Leste Chen Cheng-tao's *The Great Hypnotist* (PRC, 2014) and *Battle of Memories* (PRC, 2017), I try to show that film censorship – until recently under the aegis of the China Film Bureau and the State Administration of Press, Publications, Radio, Film and Television (SAPPRFT)[2] – neither precludes nor vitiates dynamic storytelling and inventive genre engagement. Far from embracing narrative simplicity, the two Chen films exemplify puzzle film plotting. As per the puzzle-film category,[3] both movies generate a radical play with filmic narration and viewer

[1] Bono Lee, for instance, contends that China's film industry denies Hong Kong filmmakers "the fertile ground of creative freedom that they experienced in 1990s Hong Kong" (Lee 2012, 191), while Zhou Yuxing asserts that mainland censorship "creates an unfavourable environment for cultural creativity" (Zhou 2015, 239). Cognate claims abound within the literature. I provide an overview and critique of the standard perspective in Bettinson 2020.
[2] SAPPRFT was abolished in 2018, whereupon the Communist Party's publicity department acquired regulatory control of the mainland's film releases.
[3] Seminal studies of this mode of narration include Buckland 2009 and 2014; and Kiss and Willemsen 2018.

cognition, throwing into disarray the spectator's sense-making procedures. Apt to be violated are the primacy effect (the viewer's durable first impressions about the story world, as cued by the text), the person schema (the viewer's default ascription of humanoid traits to fictive agents), and paradigm scenarios (prototypical situations that orient the viewer to the action). No less typically, puzzle films muster their complex effects by deforming genre norms in unpredictable ways. In all, these fictions seek to engage the viewer in strenuous cognitive effort, arousing the "knowledge emotions" (confusion, curiosity, interest) and provoking the viewer's desire to subdue cognitive dissonance (Berliner 2017, 27; Kiss and Willemsen 2018, 106). The payoff is an "exhilarated pleasure" at encountering both cognitive challenge and aesthetic novelty (Berliner 2017, 17).

The Great Hypnotist and *Battle of Memories* launch bold forays into proscribed genre territory as well. The former openly plumbs supernatural horror, yet China's film culture notoriously spurns ghost tales. Why do Beijing censors balk at such stories? One impetus for suppression stems from the ghost's political potentiality. As Laikwan Pang (2011, 461) observes, "A ghost can be highly allegorical, and its representations might be encoded and decoded in ways over which the state has no control". Ghost tales harbour the potential for political subversion, and even innocuous genre plots carry the risk of political appropriation by radical factions. To impel the policing of ghost films, then, is a continual mission for the Chinese Communist Party (CCP). Similarly, futuristic science fiction – the genre to which *Battle of Memories* ostensibly conforms – typically falls prey to authoritarian censorship. Particularly thorny are those dystopian sci-fi plots whose Chinese settings suggest a world off-kilter, as if, by some innate deficiency, Communist governance could eventuate in social catastrophe.

It is common for critics to argue that film censorship hobbles a genre's evolution. "Sometimes external factors stunt a genre's development," as one writer asserts (Berliner 2017, 194).[4] Yet this amounts to a teleological perspective, whereby a genre progresses "naturally" and inexorably toward an ideal state of fruition, except when external forces retard its growth. We find here an echo of the fallacies sketched above. China's censorship system, critics claim, has led genres to stagnate and storytelling to ossify (Baptista 2019; Sala 2016). Yet one need not be an apologist for censorship to recognize that Beijing's cultural controls, hobgoblinized by critics for good reason, have nonetheless provoked filmmakers like Chen to probe genres both vetoed and approved, testing the limits of permissibility. Chinese genre cinema *is* developing, but not along a simple, linear, deterministic path. Nor is it stymied or stunted by censorship. To the contrary, Chen and his peers – chafing at SAPPRFT constraints – circumvent state proscriptions by deploying genres in striking ways.

Chen also averts censorship by riffing on Hollywood models. He cites as influences the American puzzle films *Inception* (2010) and *Source Code* (2011) (Jung 2014, 68). Detractors dismiss *The Great Hypnotist* and *Battle of Memories* as "derivative" of these prototypes, but Chen exploits intertextuality to navigate the minefield of mainland censorship. In what follows, I try to show that the "derivative" tag is unjustified. Larger questions guide my inquiry too. How does Chen negotiate mainland censorship? How does he generate narrational complexity? Why is genre integral to these twin endeavours? Why does Chen foreground allusionism? I aim to demonstrate that, far from acquiescing to SAPPRFT dictates, Chen finds adroit ways to mobilize genres, stories, and ideologies officially anathema in mainland cinema.

[4] Echoing Berliner, Stephen Teo (2012, 293) observes: "The banning of the wuxia genre in the Chinese cinema [in the 1930s] stunted the genre's development in the Chinese film industry in Shanghai". Of the 1930s Hollywood gangster film, Thomas Shatz (1981, 40) suggests that "external pressures" – notably government censorship – "disrupted the genre's internal evolution".

The Great Hypnotist

Dr. Xu Ruining (Zheng Xu) is a hypnotherapist specializing in supernatural delusions. His mentor, Professor Fang (Zhong Lu), assigns him a new patient, Ren Xiaoyan (Karen Mok), an enigmatic woman who claims to be plagued by ghosts. Do the ghouls exist? Xu contends not. Seeking the source of Ren's apparent phantasms, he sets out to hypnotise Ren and unlock her repressed memories. Under hypnosis, Ren recollects several past encounters with dead spirits, but Xu remains unconvinced. Over the course of a long night, Xu's mastery of the situation dissipates. As power shifts from therapist to patient, doubts emerge as to who is mesmerizing whom. The final plot phase delivers two pulverizing revelations. In the first, Xu undergoes a startling *anagnorisis*: it transpires, to his surprise and ours, that he has spent most of the film under Ren's hypnotic control. Ren, in actuality a psychiatrist (and the de facto "great hypnotist" of the title), has conspired with Professor Fang and a coterie of medical colleagues to surreptitiously hypnotize Xu and thereby cure him of "post-traumatic stress disorder" (PTSD). This malady stems from a tragic event suppressed in Xu's memory: Xu's wife and dearest friend have recently died in an auto accident, a calamity for which Xu was culpable. Bereft, Xu attempted suicide before succumbing to PTSD. The elaborate hoax staged by Ren and Professor Fang is a last-ditch effort to bring Xu back from the brink. A final thunderbolt soon follows. The culminating twist identifies Xu's best friend, who perished in the auto-wreck, as Ren's beloved fiancé. At the film's end, Ren marshals the fortitude to forgive Xu.

The Great Hypnotist begins *in medias res*. On a pitch-dark night, a willowy woman prowls outside a vast, desolate building, peering in through the windows. Inside are a middle-aged woman and a young girl, huddled in abject terror. With surprising vigour, the ethereal stalker forces open a barricaded door, and pursues the petrified females through the building's corridors. The middle-aged woman and child dive into an adjacent room. There

they encounter Xu, sitting at a desk, bright daylight inexplicably pouring in from a rear window. Hysterical, the woman pleads for help: a stalker intends to kidnap her daughter. Xu demurs: "How do I know this girl is your daughter?" The woman fumbles for her wallet, produces a family snapshot, and then recoils in shock – the photograph shows the stalker and the child together, beaming happily. Xu calmly demystifies the situation: the stalker is the middle-aged woman's younger self; the child *is* her daughter but was killed twenty years ago, a result of maternal negligence. Now the bamboozled woman must reconcile her past and present identities, and jettison the long-lived guilt that consumes her. ("Time to let go," Xu tells her.) This self-revelation prompts the stalker and child, vestiges of a suppressed past, to vanish. Suddenly the diegetic world judders and dissembles, ushering in a new realm of reality. The narration shifts gears into objective reality, as Xu awakens the middle-aged woman from a trance. A new situation now shimmers into focus: Xu is a hypnotherapist, the woman his patient, and the foregoing action a subjective trance state. But now the ontological and temporal specificity of the action morphs a third time. The present situation, it emerges, *is* objectively real but it isn't a *present* situation – the hypnotherapy session turns out to be a pre-taped video recording, projected onto a lecture screen to an audience of psychology students.

From the outset, *The Great Hypnotist* radically scrambles the viewer's comprehension of story events. Such complexification typifies puzzle film narration, to be sure, but it also draws impetus from a cunning play with genre cues. The wispy stalker – lank-haired, eerily silent, prowling the corridors with predatory zeal – recalls innumerable J-horror wraiths, so it is small wonder that the viewer misidentifies this figure as a baleful, even preternatural, agent. The viewer's initial grasp of the dramatic situation, too, crystallizes around genre elements. While a host of sinister devices (musical stings, ambient whispers, lurching camera movement) conveys the funk of terror, the woman-in-peril drama conjures a paradigm

scenario familiar from horror fiction – a terrified woman guarding her child from a skulking, devouring predator. Subsequently, the scene performs a sudden volte-face, exposing the viewer's confusion of predator and victim. Aside from genre cues, the scene's narration preys upon the viewer's basic cognitive proclivities. Without cues to the contrary, the viewer naturally but erroneously ascribes objectivity to the opening phase of action. And, thanks to suppressive exposition, the viewer does not know better than to apply the person schema to the "two" grown women, individuating two discrete agents rather than a single entity. In toto, *The Great Hypnotist* mounts a startling opening gambit, so thoroughly does it disarray textual cues (the reality-status of events; the primacy effect) and the viewer's activity (the mapping of paradigm scenarios; the individuation of characters).

This opening scene hints at the film's wider strategies too. For one thing, it inducts viewers into the correct viewing strategy for the film as a whole; to this end, the scene provides a microcosm of the narration's global tendencies. The scene primes its viewer to expect an untrustworthy and strategically gapped narration; an unreliable focalizing agent; an ontologically ambiguous diegesis; a mise-en-abyme structure; subjective access to characters' dreams and trance-states; temporal deformations; misleading paradigm scenarios; surprising twists and reversals; and a vacillating, not to say shape-shifting, genre identity. In *The Great Hypnotist*'s opening scene, as in the film at large, genre services both comprehension and complexity. Though the tropes of supernatural horror provide the viewer an initial orientation, their subsequent equivocation sows doubt and bewilderment. (The viewer is led to wonder: What type of film is this, if not a ghost film?) Lastly, the opening scene betrays another goal besides clarity and complexity: namely, to avert PRC censorship. Skewering its ghost-genre setup, the scene's progression – like that of the larger plot – builds to a definitive repudiation of supernaturalism. In this regard, *The Great Hypnotist* errs, at least ostensibly, toward political correctness. Yet the film will canvass various strategies by which to probe its

supernatural premise, no matter Beijing's prohibition on ghosts and horror. Chief among these strategies is a judicious engagement with popular genres.

Across the whole film, supernatural horror will be mediated by three interlocking tactics: equivocation; allusion; and "stealth". All three tactics fulfil a dual purpose, one artistic, the other economic: to prolong the central plot enigma and to forestall censorship. Consider equivocation first. From the start, Ren and Xu convey opposing beliefs about the paranormal. Ren insists that the phantoms she beholds are palpably real, but Xu – the textual avatar of CCP ideology – disdains ghosts as sheer hokum, a figment of psychic disturbance. Much of *The Great Hypnotist*'s plot will hold in tension this clash of hypotheses. Not incidentally, the film mobilizes Tzvetan Todorov's "fantastic hesitation" (Todorov 1975), suspending the viewer between mutually exclusive possibilities: either the supernatural exists (the marvellous) or it can be explained as an imaginative or illusory real-world phenomenon (the uncanny).[5] Not until the denouement does *The Great Hypnotist* invalidate the marvellous hypothesis and thereby resolve the fantastic hesitation.

Under Xu's hypnotic control Ren mentally revisits the spooky encounters from her past, and the narration plunges us into her trance-state. These mesmeric flashbacks, recounted by Ren, embody action that promotes the marvellous hypothesis: in one flashback, Ren is requisitioned by a forlorn schoolgirl who seeks posthumous justice against the jittery bus driver responsible for her death. This flashback, however, is punctuated by shots from the present-day situation in which Xu holds Ren in a trance, the hypnotherapist slighting Ren's account as fundamentally delusional. In effect, Xu editorializes Ren's marvellous flashback *as it unfolds*, interpolating sceptical commentary, and recasting putatively paranormal events as uncanny imaginings. Another filmmaker might have preserved the structural integrity of Ren's flashback, but Leste Chen chops it up, the better to intensify the fantastic hesitation,

[5] See Todorov 1975. The locus classicus of fantastic literature is Henry James' *The Turn of the Screw* (1898).

certainly, but also to frame the supernatural in ways that will pacify the Film Bureau. In Chen's hands, the fantastic furnishes *strategic ambiguity* not only in the aesthetic sense theorised by Todorov, but also as an economic measure to negotiate the industrial and ideological constraints of PRC filmmaking.

How else to equivocate on the supernatural? Chen discovers narrational ploys that promote, but refuse to certify, the marvellous possibility. Thanks to shrewd ellipses, Ren possesses – or seems to possess – an unnerving ability to navigate space in ethereal fashion. Early in the plot, Xu briefly departs his office, leaving Ren sitting in a chair. Upon returning, Xu (and the viewer) is surprised to find the chair empty. A whip pan, denoting Xu's optical point of view (POV), now locates Ren standing in a remote region of the office. Director Chen underscores this swivelling camera gesture with a horror-genre motif – a screeching violin sting – that at once conveys Xu's disquiet, triggers the viewer's startle reflex, and endows Ren with an ominous aspect. This flurry of cues bolsters the marvellous hypothesis. By eliding Ren's physical trajectory, the narration not only disrupts the viewer's sense of Ren's spatial location; it also confers upon Ren the kind of amorphous mobility unique to many cinematic revenants. Consequently, the scene prompts a tentative (and marvellous) hypothesis: perhaps Ren herself is a spectre. One should note, too, that although the scene conjures a compelling sense of the supernatural, it does so almost wholly through stylistic devices (whip pan; POV; musical stinger; visual ellipsis). Supernatural horror, though forcefully implied, remains oblique. Chen eschews any explicit imagery of ghosts or physical horror that might clinch the viewer's marvellous hypothesis and antagonize Beijing's film censors.

These latter two concerns shape the film's other equivocating tactics as well. Take the following scene. Alone in Xu's office, Ren casually surveys the surroundings. Her eyes suddenly light on something or someone excluded from the camera's field of vision, and the

intensity of her look compels the viewer's desire for the "deictic" gaze – that is, an irresistible urge to follow Ren's transfixed gaze to its target.[6] What or whom has so riveted her attention? Naturally, given the plot's premise that Ren possesses a sixth sense, the viewer surmises that a supernatural spirit lurks off screen. But the narration vexingly refuses to supply a reverse-angle shot yielding Ren's POV, instead shifting away to a separate locale. The viewer's desire for the deictic gaze is aroused only to be thwarted. Here again a restricted narration both sustains the fantastic hesitation (do ghosts haunt Xu's workplace?) and skirts the Film Bureau censors (suggesting but not showing the supernatural).[7]

While the narration refuses to validate the supernatural, Xu advances psychological explanations for Ren's ghoulish visions. "Your ghost stories have to do with your own life," he tells his distressed patient. Ren, he posits, actively resists being cured of her belief in ghosts, so acutely does she lament – and yearn to reconnect with – her dead fiancé. Xu's uncanny postulations honeycomb the central ghost plot, eroding the marvellous possibility in Jamesian fashion. Not only does the fantastic ambiguity mitigate *The Great Hypnotist*'s supernatural tale in ways acceptable to Beijing censors; it also contributes to the narrative's complexity. Subjected to prolonged ambiguity is the reality-status of the diegesis, the credibility of the central protagonists, and the trustworthiness of a slippery, even flagrantly deceitful, narration. The fantastic topos, therefore, lends *The Great Hypnotist* all the structural equivocation of a puzzle film plot, not only sustaining but augmenting the drama's fundamental indeterminacy.

As the film wends toward its climax, the equivocal plot lurches almost conclusively toward a marvellous explanation of events. Now Ren's spectral visions attain greater

[6] For deictic gaze theory and cinema, see Chapter 2 in Persson 2003.
[7] *The Great Hypnotist* spins a variation on this POV schema later in the plot. Insisting that she can see ghosts lingering just yards away, Ren exhorts Xu to look in their direction. The narration furnishes a two-shot showing Ren and Xu looking at the camera; in other words, the scene ostensibly furnishes a ghost's POV. Leste Chen tantalizes the viewer with the imminent prospect of a reverse-angle shot from Ren or Xu's optical perspective, which could thereby corroborate or discredit Ren's claim…but again the narration teasingly denies the viewer a disambiguating vantage point.

credence: the ghosts of Xu's lover and friend, killed in an auto accident, manifest themselves to Ren (though they are visible to neither Xu nor the spectator), and Ren is able to relay their posthumous testimony to Xu. To Xu's astonishment, Ren recounts intimate details apparently beyond her ken, details only Xu and his departed loved ones could know. Consequently, Xu – until now a mouthpiece for rational scientism, as espoused by the CCP – becomes briefly convinced of the afterlife. It is here that the narration springs its *deus ex machina*, a cascade of fragmentary flashbacks coalescing into a lucid revelation. Xu, it is now revealed, has been hoodwinked by a conspiracy forged by his colleagues; the entire ghost premise was apocryphal, an elaborate canard cooked up by well-intentioned workmates. Just when it seems to verify the marvellous hypothesis, the narration performs a volte-face validating the uncanny. The fantastic doubt is henceforth dissolved. In this moment, *The Great Hypnotist* discards its vacillating approach to the supernatural, decisively exploding superstition. This climax, needless to say, wholly aligns with Communist Party doctrine. The film judiciously asserts its political correctness.

Or so it seems. Ostensibly *The Great Hypnotist* cleaves to Communist tenets (and so evades censorship), but the film harbours a veiled critique of the Chinese state. From the standpoint of censorship, Leste Chen deploys Xu tactically: throughout the plot, as noted above, Xu stridently denounces superstitious belief. If Xu thus personifies CCP ideology, it is significant that Chen presents him as the most delusional and deranged of all the film's characters. By the plot's final act, Xu has been utterly discredited: stripped of his cocky armature, he is exposed as wrongheaded and incoherent, even psychotic. He suppresses, indeed displaces, traumatic guilt and memory. Even his personal convictions ring hollow, as when he briefly abandons his non-belief in the paranormal. In effect, the film's *deus ex machina* does double duty, outwardly affirming but covertly critiquing the status quo. Critics insist that mainland movies quash social criticism, but *The Great Hypnotist* gives the lie to

such claims. If only as structuring absence, subversive rhetoric can dwell within even the most innocuous of Chinese genre films.

We have seen that Chen mediates and mitigates supernatural horror by means of equivocation. Two other modifying strategies – allusion and stealth – deserve attention. From the outset, *The Great Hypnotist* makes allusionism highly salient. Indeed, so flagrantly does the film invoke *The Sixth Sense* (1999) – another work of supernatural horror, and a puzzle film to boot – that detractors castigated *The Great Hypnotist* as derivative.[8] But simply to dismiss this allusion as parasitic is to ignore how it contributes to narrative complexity, how it frames and misdirects the viewer's hypotheses, and how it deters state censors. Apropos censorship, *The Great Hypnotist* embraces what we might call horror-by-association. By making overt references to *The Sixth Sense*, *The Great Hypnotist* can piggyback on the earlier film's host of genre associations, and eliminate the need to depict supernatural horror explicitly. Perforce, *The Great Hypnotist*'s exact borrowings from *The Sixth Sense* exclude contentious material (e.g. macabre and lurid content).[9] There is literal quotation of innocuous dialogue ("I see dead people") and of motifs unlikely to needle the censors (e.g. a bridal ring). Even the "ghosts" perceived by Ren are benign. Though startling at first sight, they seek neither to terrorize nor to possess; as in *The Sixth Sense*, these sympathetic spirits simply crave help. In sum, the critics' charge of plagiarism misses its target. *The Great Hypnotist* rides the coattails of *The Sixth Sense* not opportunistically, scavenging from a former success, but strategically, as a kind of shorthand for the horror genre, enabling Chen to mount a supernatural tale without coming athwart of mainland censorship.

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[8] For critic Yvonne Teh (2014, 33), *The Great Hypnotist* "is derivative of other films, notably *The Sixth Sense*". In *Variety*, Maggie Lee (2014) asserts that the film "blatantly steals from *The Sixth Sense*", while Edmund Lee (2014) notes that "*The Great Hypnotist* bears more than a passing resemblance" to M. Night Shyamalan's film. Another critic contends that *The Great Hypnotist* "suffers heavily from Shyamalan Syndrome" (Anon 2019). Indeed, Xu's profound fear of water gestures toward another Shyamalan intertext, *Unbreakable* (2000), whose idiosyncratic hero develops aquaphobia.

[9] Chen opts against quoting, for instance, Shyamalan's gruesome image of a teenage boy whose skull has been ravaged by a shotgun blast.

Allusion functions as a misdirection device as well. Quoting *The Sixth Sense* in its opening plot phase, *The Great Hypnotist* primes the viewer's hypotheses about the action to come. Most schematically, the viewer forms predictions germane to the supernatural genre: the plot will likely be peopled by otherworldly beings, along with a smattering of clairvoyants, sceptics, and nonbelievers. Viewers familiar with *The Sixth Sense* will frame more fine-grained predictions. These "competent" viewers might expect (a) the psychiatrist hero to be conversant with the dead, or to be dead himself; (b) the narration to furnish a highly surprising twist; and (c) the plot, following a long stretch of retardation, to validate the marvellous (a supposition held in tension with Beijing's proscriptions on ghost fiction). Significantly, many of these cued predictions will be scotched: Ren is no clairvoyant, Xu no ghost, and the plot does not substantiate the marvellous possibility. *The Great Hypnotist* taps *The Sixth Sense* not only to evoke the horror genre in oblique ways (and so parry the censors), but also to foster puzzle-film diversions, luring the viewer down inferential cul-de-sacs. Here again the "derivative" epithet is misplaced. *The Great Hypnotist* purposively invites comparison to *The Sixth Sense*, but it winds up veering quite sharply from its imputed prototype. In fact, *The Great Hypnotist* furtively hews to another intertext besides *The Sixth Sense*, and to another genre besides supernatural horror. This brings us to Chen's third major tactic of genre mediation: stealth.

The Great Hypnotist's prologue foregrounds the horror genre, but the film will soon hint at another generic structure underpinning the story action. Though early scenes establish a milieu populated by psychiatrists and patients, the setup recalls that of classic noir fiction. Xu, like many a detective hero, is assigned a "case." This labyrinthine assignment, the kind that other psychiatrists do not care to tackle, involves an attractive, neurotic, morally opaque woman whose real motives remain inscrutable. If Ren fits the mould of femme fatale, Xu calls to mind the fallible sleuth. Sagacious yet myopic, circumspect yet cocksure, Xu

resembles the flawed gumshoe of Hollywood noir. The film's tweak on generic formula posits an investigator not of crimes but of disturbed minds. Orbiting the protagonists, meanwhile, is an ensemble of eccentrics – Xu's skittish secretary, a tremulous bus driver, the cryptic Professor Fang – all vividly etched in the traditional noir manner. The film's mise-en-scène encompasses noir iconography: low-key lighting, venetian blinds, ringing telephones, scattered timepieces, cigarette cases, items of décor thrust into the camera's foreground. As in classic noir, time becomes a salient motif.[10] Just as it does in Otto Preminger's *Laura* (1944), an antique clock serves as "a locus of duplicity" (Telotte 1990, 3), while Xu's pocket watch provides an apparatus for hypnotic induction. *The Great Hypnotist*'s tropes of mesmerism and amnesia, two long-standing fixtures of noir fiction, further indicate a debt to the genre.[11] And, of course, a highly restricted, purposively gapped narration is a mainstay of detective plotting, as well as of puzzle film storytelling.

One film noir schema, however, is not ported over to *The Great Hypnotist*. Classic noirs often posit a sexual attraction between detective and femme fatale, but *The Great Hypnotist* ducks this facet of the central relationship. As ever, Chen's wrinkle on generic formula springs from two overarching concerns: to maintain the central plot imbroglio and to circumvent censorship. The chasteness that exists between Xu and Ren is integral to the plot's surprise twist: as will be retroactively disclosed, Xu and Ren each mourn the recent death of a romantic partner. Across the plot's duration, they must learn to (in the film's motivic phrase) "let go" of the partner to whom they are still emotionally pledged. Suggesting a sexual frisson between the protagonists, therefore, would undermine the film's thematic raison d'être. As for censorship, SAPPRFT routinely bowdlerized films that

[10] Among the many examples enumerated by J.P. Telotte (1990) are *The Stranger* (1946), *The Big Clock* (1948), and *Kiss Me Deadly* (1955).

[11] For a lively discussion of these pervasive motifs in 1940s noir, see Bordwell 2017. Contemporary puzzle films also employ hypnotism as an alibi to dive into the murk of characters' unconscious minds; see for instance *Trance* (2013) and *Stir of Echoes* (1999).

portrayed mainland "authority figures" – including medical workers – as anything less than beacons of moral rectitude. Here is one precedent: Beijing censors purged *New Blood* (Soi Cheang, 2002) of an entire subplot in which a romantic bond between doctor and patient was merely *implied*.[12] Rather than trigger a taboo, Chen prudently forgoes a romance plotline and nullifies the prospect of SAPPRFT intervention.[13]

My argument runs as follows. Beneath *The Great Hypnotist*'s surface genre (supernatural horror) lies a subordinate genre (detective noir) that operates by stealth, tacitly shaping the film's explicit story and style. When the film's horror elements recede, as they periodically must, the noir mode supplies the text's structuring logic. At times, as well, the film's overt and discreet genres intermingle. Narrational complexity springs partly from a clash of genres: in unobtrusive fashion, Chen mitigates horror conventions by meshing or juxtaposing them with the norms of noir, generating the unpredictable genre deviations characteristic of puzzle film narration.

The Great Hypnotist's oblique treatment of the detective genre extends to its strategies of allusion too. A furtive intertext hovers behind the primary action, hinting at *The Great Hypnotist*'s detective-genre complexion. This intertext, I contend, yields still greater influence upon *The Great Hypnotist*'s aesthetic than does *The Sixth Sense*, though critics failed to notice it. Not that Chen didn't furnish breadcrumbs: "I revere Hitchcock," he told *Time Out* magazine. "There are many shots in [*The Great Hypnotist*] that were inspired by the way Hitchcock framed his suspense films" (Jung 2014, 68). Chen doesn't specify particular Hitchcock models, but one logical candidate is *Spellbound* (1945) given its story

[12] Interview with Soi Cheang, 31 March 2008; and Bey Logan, 26 March 2016.
[13] Ostensibly, then, Chen is obliged to attenuate the seductiveness of the femme fatale archetype. Yet, as the plot twist reveals, Ren *is* seductive, not sexually but psychologically: wielding hypnosis as a form of seduction, she masterfully brings Xu under her thrall.

material (psychotherapy, amnesia) and noir affinities. Yet, I submit that Chen draws most extensively from *Vertigo* (1958), and we can itemize the ways.[14]

Like *Vertigo*'s male hero Scottie (James Stewart), Xu plummets into a psychological abyss. Feelings of guilt and failure seize both men, triggered by the death of a female object of desire; in both cases, the protagonist's dysphoria results in mental fugue. A neurotic disorder is assigned to Xu (aquaphobia) as to Scottie (acrophobia). The professional roles of both men, moreover, are fungible: Scottie is a detective who becomes a de facto therapist, obsessively trying to "cure" Madeleine (Kim Novak); Xu is a therapist who acts like a detective, his therapeutic methods akin to forensic investigation. Parallels unite Madeleine (aka Judy) and Ren too. Both women affect a spectral aura, a kind of perpetual distractedness; and both tend to periodically elude the camera's gaze (and that of the focalizing male hero). Stylistically, the debt to *Vertigo* is inscribed in *The Great Hypnotist*'s production design and cinematography. At times, the walls in Xu's office seem bent into steep curves, as if the whole building has been twisted into a giant spiral, vacuuming the protagonists into a vortex that is as much physical and spatial as it is psychological. Compounding this conceit, a rotating camera sweeps across the edifice's swirling contours, and visually taps one of *Vertigo*'s primary motifs (think of Saul Bass' poster design, in which a vast, annihilating maelstrom engulfs Scottie). A host of other allusions to *Vertigo* penetrate *The Great Hypnotist*'s surface. Parallels manifest through the film's visual motifs (exfoliating flowers; a brooch necklace bearing otherworldly significance), tonal mood (a vaguely subjective, oneiric atmosphere), mise-en-scène (a framed artwork depicting a vortex; a mirror motif hinting at fractured or duplicitous psyches), and staging (as when the heroine is first glimpsed by the male hero – and the viewer – from the back, a sure marker of mystique).

[14] Over recent decades, *Vertigo* seems to have cast its own mesmeric effect on Chinese filmmakers. For discussion of further cases, see Marchetti 2018; and Silbergeld 2004.

Not least, Hitchcock's influence manifests at the level of narrative construction. Initiating the investigative line of action, Professor Fang shares a plot function with *Vertigo*'s Gavin Elster (Tom Helmore). Both figures assign the incredulous male hero to a paranormal investigation; and both conspire with the femme fatale to gull the protagonist, albeit for divergent ends. Indeed, the scheme hatched by Elster and Judy carries malicious purpose, whereas Professor Fang's ruse is wholly benevolent. Here again we can detect a corollary of SAPPRFT strictures: as a fictional specimen of mainland China's medical establishment, Professor Fang must be in all respects unwaveringly virtuous. One final plot affinity should be noted. Like *Vertigo*, *The Great Hypnotist* launches a major plot twist that jams a congeries of subjective flashbacks into a revelatory, exposition-packed montage; divulges the heroine's scheme (masquerading in an adopted identity; professing to be hounded by dead spirits); exposes the male protagonist as the dupe of a conspiracy masterminded by a trusted ally; and marks a narrational shift away from the discredited male hero, focalizing action squarely (if temporarily) around the female protagonist.[15]

Why does Chen crib so liberally from *Vertigo*? Being tacit, the *Vertigo* allusions do not actively steer the viewer's hypotheses. Nor do they openly misdirect the viewer's expectations, as do the conspicuous nods to *The Sixth Sense*. What purpose, then, do these allusions serve? For one thing, the *Vertigo* template bolsters the detective framework that I have argued subtly undergirds *The Great Hypnotist*. This detective structure, in turn, both subdues and sublimates the film's horror elements, packaging a ghost plot in ways tolerable to mainland censors. Then there is Chen's urge to satisfy a cinephile impulse, paying tribute to a revered master. Above all, *Vertigo* is a *pertinent* intertext: as a precursor to the modern-day puzzle film, it dovetails with Chen's fascination with complex plotting; and in

[15] As critics have noted, *Vertigo* is a forerunner of the contemporary puzzle film. See for instance Panek 2006 and Perlmutter 2005.

foregrounding guilt-ridden protagonists, *Vertigo* anticipates themes that will surface pungently in *The Great Hypnotist*.

These themes crystallize at *The Great Hypnotist*'s finale. Following the coup de théâtre, Xu and Ren tentatively reach a rapprochement. Xu admits that he "didn't want to be cured" – this betrays an earlier bit of psychological projection, when he accused Ren of resisting therapy – adding, "I didn't feel that I deserved forgiveness." Now Xu is able to "let go" of guilt and embrace self-forgiveness; Ren, meanwhile, haltingly learns to forgive *him*. Both characters, albeit reluctantly, will come to emotionally let go of their dead partners ("I'm frightened you'll slip away," sings Ren at a karaoke bar) and of the feelings of grief and guilt associated with their loss.[16] *The Great Hypnotist* will discredit its ghost premise, but the supernatural genre is neither gratuitous nor incidental. Rather, it is thematically apposite: Ren and Xu are protagonists haunted, indeed possessed, by past trauma. Likewise, the film's primary intertexts, *The Sixth Sense* and *Vertigo*, are wholly germane at a thematic level, organized as they are around topoi of bereavement, guilt, and potential rebirth.

We have seen that *The Great Hypnotist* sets in tension two genres, alternately intermingling and oscillating between supernatural horror and detective noir. Horror tropes are pronounced from the start, but noir conventions drive the action in mostly subliminal ways. Similarly, two intertexts inform *The Great Hypnotist*'s narrative and style, one flaunted by the narration (*The Sixth Sense*), the other largely camouflaged (*Vertigo*).[17] Hovering over these structures is a twin goal: to carpenter a complex artwork, and to respect censorship regulations. Detractors might perceive Chen as self-censoring, but this would be too simplistic a conception of his craft practice (and that of many directors working in mainland

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[16] The lyric comes from "You Must Love Me," written by Tim Rice and Andrew Lloyd Webber.

[17] A more proximate intertext is Hong Kong ghost thriller *Inner Senses* (2002). Leslie Cheung's psychiatrist, a nonbeliever in the supernatural, tries to cure a female patient who "sees dead people." Unlike Xu, however, this psychiatrist scoffs at hypnosis as a therapeutic method. Plainly inspired by *The Sixth Sense*, *Inner Senses* springs a late-arriving twist that discloses its male hero's deep-rooted amnesia and overwhelming self-denial. Given their shared reference point, *Inner Senses* and *The Great Hypnotist* naturally display some cosmetic affinities, chiefly at the plot level.

China). The PRC filmmaker's lot is hardly one of artistic capitulation. In not a few cases, directors operating in the mainland refuse to abandon taboo subjects, genres, and ideological viewpoints. Instead, they activate sidelong strategies (equivocation, allusion, stealth) as a means of broaching forbidden content and imparting covert critique. This tacit mode of resistance is indissolubly linked to an inventive play with popular genres and the pliable norms that govern them.

This is to say that Chen is not a lone case. A Taiwanese national, Chen shares with Hong Kong filmmakers working with/in China both an outsider's irreverence for Beijing's ideological policies and a homegrown commitment to authorial agency. Like *The Great Hypnotist*, Gordon Chan's *Painted Skin* (2008) successfully flouted the Film Bureau's proscription on supernaturalism; Wilson Yip's *Paradox* (2017) and Soi Cheang's *SPL 2* (2015) broke the taboo on organ harvesting; Peter Chan's *Dearest* (2014) dramatized the forbidden subject of child trafficking; and Johnnie To's *Drug War* (2012) frankly portrayed gun violence, the drug trade, and police corruption, the latter of which also figures in Chen's *Battle of Memories*.[18] In each case, the Hong Kong filmmaker found canny ways to circumvent objectionable genres and subject matter. Not that resistance is solely the province of the cultural interloper. The mounting instances of banned or suppressed films directed by Mainland-born filmmakers – think of Jia Zhangke's *A Touch of Sin* (2013) and Zhang Yimou's *One Second* (2019) – indicate an industry-wide effort to challenge Beijing's draconian content controls. Chen himself would further contribute to this groundswell of ideological resistance with *Battle of Memories*, both advancing the puzzle-film category and encroaching on forbidden generic and thematic terrain.

Battle of Memories

[18] I explore the plight of Hong Kong filmmakers navigating the PRC coproduction system in Bettinson 2020.

In the near future, Jiang Feng (Huang Bo), a mild-mannered novelist, visits the "Master of Memory Centre," a high-end purveyor of memory extraction. Jiang wants to expunge memories of a marriage now on the rocks. Following the procedure, Jiang – as per all the organization's clients – is given a digital chip on which are stored the deleted memories. When a skirmish breaks out at the facility, Jiang's memory chip gets switched with one belonging to a serial killer. Inadvertently, the killer's memories are implanted into Jiang's brain. Henceforth Jiang sees dead people: his memories are flooded with murders he did not commit. He begins to scrutinize these memories for clues to the criminal's identity. Believing he can help hunt down the killer, he resolves to assist the police investigation. But his intimate knowledge of the crimes renders him a prime suspect, and the cops arrest him. The supervising officers – Detective Shen (Duan Yihong) and his brash protégé, Deputy Lei (Patricio Antonio Liang) – believe that Jiang may be innocent, so they probe other suspects, including Chen Shanshan (Yang Zishan), a nurse who befriends Jiang's wife, Zhang Daichen (Xu Jinglei). Under the tyranny of the clock, Jiang grows desperate; he must find the killer within 72 hours, lest the memories he has inherited become permanent. He effects a prison break, but the gravity of his dilemma, along with the memories of murder that plague him, curdles his mind. A surprise twist identifies Detective Shen as the killer. When Shen tries to kill Jiang, Daichen, and Shanshan, he is shot dead by his young partner.

Battle of Memories springs from the same creative team as *The Great Hypnotist*, so it should not surprise us that the films share certain structural affinities.[19] Both movies pivot on puzzle film dramaturgy, rolling out climactic twists and reversals, fragmentary flashbacks and cunning ellipses, unreliable heroes and baffling conundrums. *Battle of Memories*, like its predecessor, ventures onto risky genre terrain; even in broad outline, its plot flaunts genre elements likely to nettle the Film Bureau. The PRC lacks a strong heritage of science fiction

[19] The two screenplays are credited to Leste Chen and Peng Ren (aka Ryan Ren).

filmmaking, largely because Beijing censors bristle at depictions of future societies.[20] A futuristic Chinese dystopia implies the failure of Communism, a *fin de régime*. Sci-fi dramas peddle pseudoscience, an affront to CCP empiricism. And sci-fi plots, like ghost stories, might harbour seditious material. Leste Chen embraces the genre, but he knows to sanitize its more contentious features. Equivocation, allusion, and stealth will again prove effective tactics in mediating genre.

Is the future society of *Battle of Memories* dystopian? Several reviewers infer that it is,[21] but Chen equivocates on the matter. Nowhere in the film is it suggested that totalitarian forces govern the masses. The milieu is plagued by neither environmental calamity nor abject poverty. And though its aesthetic is synthetic and sleek, the city is not obviously dehumanizing, nor its ambience particularly miasmic. The Film Bureau was alert to narratives that could be allegorized to contemporary China, so Chen establishes an imaginary metropolis ("Nation T") as the film's locale. And if censors were uneasy about futuristic settings, Chen would throw emphasis on the narrative past. Hence the film's mise-en-scène teems with anachronisms (and allusions): the police station is a throwback to cop precincts of 1940s Hollywood noir, while the detectives' antiquated cars, far from the majestic flying machines conventional in possible-world fiction, here sport manual windows and portable roof beacons. A frequent supply of flashbacks, meanwhile, deflects the locus of narrative interest onto past events. Onto the sci-fi plot, as well, are grafted detective genre norms, the

[20] Following China's vaunted moon landing in January 2019 – a lunar mission bound up with national self-esteem – the mainland film industry launched a string of domestic science-fiction blockbusters including *The Wandering Earth* (2019) and *Shanghai Fortress* (2019). As in *Battle of Memories*, these films enlist a host of tactics to pacify the Beijing censors. In *The Wandering Earth* – widely heralded as China's first science-fiction blockbuster – the threat to humanity is cosmic rather than institutional, emerging from without rather than from within (the band of heroes must divert the Earth from a collision course with Jupiter). In no sense, then, is national cataclysm due to a malfunction of Chinese Communism. Dystopia afflicts the globe in toto, hence is not attributable to China alone. Time travel is nowhere invoked, while the genre's customary embrace of pseudoscience is largely subdued (the filmmakers recruited scientists from the Chinese Academy of Sciences to consult on plot details). In all, the film is politically innocuous, and valorises a Confucian ethic of teamwork above go-getting individualism. By such strategies, China's film industry seeks to cultivate a tradition of mainland sci-fi extravaganzas to challenge Hollywood counterparts such as *Gravity* (2013), *Interstellar* (2014), and *The Martian* (2015), all of which proved hugely popular at the mainland box office.
[21] See for instance Adlakha 2017.

better to temper the plot's "pseudoscientific" reverie (e.g. its memory-wiping conceit) with respectable appeals to forensic science. In all such ways, Chen packages science fiction into a form palatable to mainland censors.

Battle of Memories risks another controversial schema. The film's final twist violates a purportedly inviolable taboo: it fingers a mainland police detective as the rampaging serial killer. In PRC cinema, moral valour defines mainland cops, as it does other representatives of the status quo. (As producer Nansun Shi acerbically puts it, "There are *only* good cops in China.")[22] How, then, does Chen break the immoral cop taboo? It helps, for one thing, that the psychopathic Detective Shen is snared by another cop. Indeed, the film nowhere suggests that immorality is systemic within the police ranks; this detective-killer is simply one bad apple, an anomalous case. More significant, I suspect, is the film's futuristic and imaginary locale, safely "displacing" the action from present-day China. The film's sci-fi premise, then, shields the corrupt-cop twist from expurgation, much as the detective genre's appeal to empirical science pacifies censors disturbed by sci-fi pseudoscience. So it is that each of the film's two explicit genres – science fiction and detective noir – attenuates the censorable aspects of the other.

Whereas *The Great Hypnotist* activates noir obliquely, *Battle of Memories* promotes it to the textual foreground. As I've suggested, this overt fusing of forms is partly tactical: meshing science fiction and detective noir enables Chen to assuage Beijing's censors. But it also allows him to engage in a ludic play with genre, defamiliarizing established norms. For one instance, consider the amnesiac hero of classic noir. A clunk on the head triggers memory loss; now the protagonist strives to recover his memories while surrounded by putative "strangers" whose recollection of him is intact. *Battle of Memories* refreshes this noir motif by means of its science fiction premise. In a future epoch where memory erasure is big

[22] Interview with Nansun Shi, 23 March 2016.

business, amnesia is both voluntarily induced and endemic among the populace. (Again, Chen desists from casting this scenario as unequivocally dystopian.) In Chen's hands, one genre thus deforms – and renews – the time-worn tropes of another.

In *Battle of Memories*, as in *The Great Hypnotist*, Chen's genre strategies serve two needs: to elude censorship and to amplify complexity. I've described how *Battle of Memories* achieves the former aim. How, then, does it deploy genre to complex effect? Like *The Great Hypnotist*, the film summons genre-based schemas to skew the viewer's hypotheses off track. One instance is the *policier*'s "odd couple" prototype, whereby a lead detective – world-weary but empathetic, cynical but morally admirable – partners with a junior cop, a hubristic, hot-headed greenhorn tagged as a liability. *Battle of Memories* invokes, sustains, and at the climax inverts this schema. Furthermore, this tart reversal packs genuinely surprising force, partly because the primacy effect has been so radically undercut, and partly because, thanks to SAPPRFT strictures, heinous cops are seldom to be found in mainland movies. Other genre tactics abet the film's duplicitous narration. Scattered across the plot are "lying flashbacks," motivated by the film's noir construction (Bordwell 2017, 398). One flashback shows Jiang to be the killer; a subsequent iteration of the crime pegs Shanshan as the villain. Only at the climax does a third replay identify the murderer as Detective Shen. In the interim, a farrago of flashbacks thwarts the viewer's default cognitive routines. The person schema, for instance, is disrupted when mental imagery renders Jiang in duplicate, a flourish motivated by the film's science-fiction premise.

Among the genres that *Battle of Memories* exploits for misdirection is the puzzle-film genre itself. Not incidentally, several such films (including *2046* [Wong Kar-wai, 2004], *Secret Window* [David Koepp, 2004], *Stranger Than Fiction* [Marc Forster, 2006], and *Nocturnal Animals* [Tom Ford, 2016]) assign their chief protagonist a noteworthy profession – that of novelist. The hero's proclivity for fiction-making subtly casts doubt on his reliability

as a focalizer of the action: perhaps he possesses too keen an imagination to grasp events accurately. Films such as *Secret Window* ultimately disclose the novelist's psychic descent into fantasy, but in Jiang's case the viewer's scepticism is cued only to be assuaged at the climax. Much like other genre norms, puzzle film tropes send the viewer's hypotheses awry.

Further undermining Jiang's reliability are the subjective flashbacks that depict the killer's crimes. Some of these flashbacks, harnessed to Jiang's subjective (and inherited) memory, are infiltrated by Jiang himself, snaking through the crime scene as an invisible observer. This narrational idiosyncrasy finds a precedent in Chinese puzzle films: *Wu Xia* (Peter Chan, 2011) and *Blind Detective* (Johnnie To, 2013) brandish precisely this offbeat device, as does *The Great Hypnotist*.[23] But since an early flashback visualizes Jiang as the killer, this gambit only compounds the viewer's uncertainty – is Jiang sleuth, criminal, or both? Thus, just as *The Great Hypnotist* suspends the viewer between rival (marvellous/uncanny) possibilities, so *Battle of Memories* nourishes binary hypotheses: either Jiang is a murderer, as his memories indicate, and hence suffers from self-denial; or, as will be confirmed, he has acquired the grim recollections of the actual killer. Like *The Great Hypnotist*, *Battle of Memories* holds its twin hypotheses in abeyance until the elucidating climax.

Chen also manipulates the convention of the late-arriving flashback montage, a disambiguating sequence found in virtually all puzzle films. Such scenes have become codified as truth-telling manoeuvres: they expose the narration's foregoing deceptions, and concisely crystallize the story's true complexion. Yet *Battle of Memories* unfurls a premature montage that implicates Shanshan in the crimes, before discrediting this "revelation" as specious. From this angle, Chen innovates on popular genre not only by means of inventive hybridization, but also by subjecting generic norms to disarming, even radical, revision.

[23] In one hypnotically-induced flashback, Ren materializes as an unseen witness and observes her younger self.

In all, *Battle of Memories* matches *The Great Hypnotist* for intricate plotting. Critics allege that China's film industry enforces formulaic storytelling,[24] but Chen's puzzle films make this axiom look utterly feeble. Indeed, Chen's adventurous plotting is far from anomalous. Contemporary PRC cinema has keenly embraced complex storytelling, sometimes boosted by Hong Kong or Korean input.[25] Examples include *Suzhou River* (Lou Ye, 2000), *Hero* (Zhang Yimou, 2002), *2046*, *Perhaps Love* (Peter Chan, 2005), *Wu Xia*, *Mystery* (Lou Ye, 2012), *Blind Detective*, *Control* (Kenneth Bi, 2013), *The Precipice Game* (Wang Zao, 2016), *Tik Tok* (Jun Lee, 2016), *Project Gutenberg* (Felix Chong, 2018), and *Integrity* (Alan Mak, 2019).[26] Drawing impetus from Hollywood models such as *The Usual Suspects* (Bryan Singer, 1995), *The Game* (David Fincher, 1997), *Fight Club* (David Fincher, 1999), and *Memento* (Christopher Nolan, 2000), these elaborately-plotted films marshal the unreliable narration, densely woven flashbacks, and jolting denouements ingredient to the contemporary puzzle film genre.

In *Battle of Memories*, as in *The Great Hypnotist*, cinematic allusions hint at a furtive genre identity. To be sure, there are pertinent references to other puzzle plots (e.g. *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* [Michel Gondry, 2004]; *Vanilla Sky* [Cameron Crowe, 2001]) and to noir-sci-fi hybrids (*Minority Report* [Steven Spielberg, 2002]; *12 Monkeys* [Terry Gilliam, 1995]; *Paycheck* [John Woo, 2003]). The shadow of Hitchcock again looms large: Jiang, falsely suspected of serial murder, personifies the "wrong man" archetype mined in *North by Northwest* (1959), *The 39 Steps* (1935), *The Wrong Man* (1956), et al. But *Battle of Memories* also alludes to a host of Hollywood horror films – *The Silence of the Lambs*

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[24] For a representative view, see Anon 2019.

[25] The mainland film industry's uptake of Hollywood-style puzzle-film narration is symptomatic of a wider industrial shift toward commercialization, a shift initiated in the mid-1990s and intensified following China's admission to the World Trade Organization in 2001. The commercial success of Hollywood imports, China's own rapidly expanding film market, and the concomitant spread of multiplex theatres throughout the mainland, has prompted the domestic industry to emulate (and to some extent compete with) Hollywood's high-concept mode of production. Nevertheless, domestic filmmakers must still operate under the purview, and within the parameters, of the PRC's censoring authority.

[26] For further discussion, see Bettinson 2016.

(Jonathan Demme, 1991), *Se7en* (David Fincher, 1995), *Misery* (Rob Reiner, 1990), *Rosemary's Baby* (Roman Polanski, 1968) – that signals the film's stealth genre. Chen lets these allusions perforate the film's surface, as when Jiang is locked into a plexiglass cage reminiscent of Hannibal Lecter's dungeon cell. Horror allusions cue puzzle-film misdirection too: is Jiang actually a monster in the Lecter mould, or is he an innocent man falsely accused? The film will confirm the second hypothesis, but not until it has led the viewer to strongly favour the first.

More diffusely, the horror genre pervades *Battle of Memories* through thematization. As a fusillade of misfortunes befalls Jiang, his moral fibre crumbles, and he gradually transmogrifies into a monster (figuratively speaking). His face contorts with rage; his voice grows guttural; he subjects his wife to physical aggression. Has injustice kindled an innate monstrousness? Or have circumstances – not least the unwelcome memories of a murderer – made Jiang a monster? Detective Shen grows concerned for Jiang's sanity: "For the sake of catching a monster," he warns his protégé, "we can't risk creating another one [in Jiang]." But Shen here indulges in a bit of craftiness, for the viewer (and the dramatis personae) ought to be alert for signs of monstrosity in *him*. Once the final twist is sprung, the nature-or-nurture theme will cluster around Shen, a murderer from childhood. The film tilts heavily toward the nurture thesis: reared in an abusive family, Shen becomes an abuser himself. Evoking horror by stealth, *Battle of Memories* implies that domestic abuse, prevalent throughout the action, constitutes nothing less than an act of moral horror, of depraved monstrosity. Domestic abuse also *begets* monsters, as personified by Shen.

By mounting a lucid denunciation of domestic violence, *Battle of Memories* flies in the face of the axiom that mainland cinema abdicates social critique. A stealth genre, signposted by allusions, enables Chen to excoriate a social ill. Not that this is the film's only act of ideological critique. As we have noted, *Battle of Memories* – whatever its strategies of

disavowal – directly spotlights a crooked cop; even more daringly, it coaxes the viewer into allegiance with him. Situating the action in the near future, moreover, ushers social allegory close to the present. Indeed, as mentioned above, the plot throws stress on the narrative past, thrusting the story events still closer to the time of the film's production. In such ways, Chen implies that his social critique is pertinent not only to the film's imagined Chinese future, but also to its contemporaneous real-world counterpart. Just as *The Great Hypnotist* mounts a trenchant social critique – personifying CCP ideology in the figure of a dissembling, demented figure of authority – so *Battle of Memories* smuggles subversive commentary into its ostensibly apolitical genre story.

Both *Battle of Memories* and *The Great Hypnotist* received a tepid critical response, largely, as noted above, owing to misplaced assumptions of derivativeness; consequently, critics neglected Chen's embedded social commentary. But both films achieved a modest commercial success in mainland China, indicating a level of effectiveness at least as genre exercises.[27] I would surmise that the popularity of both films derived if not from their subversive social criticism then at least from their overt efforts toward novelty and complexity, their remixing of rarefied genres, and their more or less explicit uptake of state-proscribed subject matter.

Conclusion: Certainties disappear

China's film industry stifles free expression, vanquishes innovative storytelling, and limits filmmakers to a handful of available genres. Prevalent though these axioms are, none of them withstands scrutiny. Nor is the charge of derivativeness viz-à-viz Chen justified. *The Great Hypnotist* and *Battle of Memories*, I have tried to show, effect an intricate interplay of discrete genres and intertexts. They generate not only tension but novelty by imbricating

[27] *The Great Hypnotist* ranked 38th in the PRC's box office chart of 2014, grossing US $44 million, while *Battle of Memories* reached 51st in the 2017 chart, with domestic revenues of US $43 million.

genres, both tacit and overt, in ways that elicit cognitive effort and exhilarated pleasure. Both films exemplify what Todd Berliner calls genre bending (as opposed to genre breaking); that is, they deform and defamiliarize popular genres, reshaping them "without breaking them apart" (Berliner 2017, 170). Together the films form a symmetrical diptych. *The Great Hypnotist* enlists detective noir to scaffold an overt ghost-horror tale, while *Battle of Memories* submerges horror beneath an explicit tech-noir *policier*. Both films mediate "problematic" genre elements, at once dodging Beijing censors and crafting complex plots by means of equivocation, allusion, and stealth. And both films signal auteurist concerns. A fascination with complex narrative form; an experimental approach to genre; a palpable cinephilia; abiding themes of grief, regret, and redemption – all these signature traits lend Chen's oeuvre a robust coherence.

All the same, and without downplaying his distinctiveness, Chen can be seen to epitomize other contemporary directors working in mainland China. Inasmuch as he treats censorship strictures not as impediments to creativity but as artistically enabling parameters, he typifies the methods of China's most innovative and daring filmmakers. But why stop there? I would argue that the genre cinema of Chen and kindred directors amounts to a political act of resistance. These directors not only probe the parameters of Beijing's content controls; they transgress these parameters, flouting official taboos while continuing to operate within the system. In sum, China's genre cinema is neither politically nor artistically moribund. To the contrary, it survives, indeed thrives, on the resourceful ingenuity of its filmmakers.

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