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Cultural Revolution Model Opera Films and the Realist Tradition in Chinese Cinema

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A Western journalist traveling in China in 1967 gave the following description of a performance of revolutionary skits in Shanghai's Great World entertainment complex (formerly the epicenter of semicolonial decadence during the Republican era):

> I have never seen in China an audience as totally engrossed as this one. They did not applaud much, but it seemed as if they thought they shouldn't interrupt. They stared fixedly at the stage with faces completely rapt; each new scene creased their brows, wiped them smooth, furrowed them again more deeply, all in unison. Heads stretched forward so that not a single detail would escape their eyes.[1]

Coming as it does from a reporter in lockstep with Cold War-era Western ideology, it is not surprising that this account provides a stereotypical representation of the Maoist masses as brainwashed automatons. In this description the "unison" with which spectators' brows furrowed is clearly intended to indicate a seamless transmission of political ideology, a case of almost unprecedentedly successful propaganda (though it goes without saying that similarly rapt and uniform attention might well be apparent in the audience of a Hollywood blockbuster at the local multiplex).

It is easy enough to critique the ideological bias of the reporter himself as evidenced in this description, which is not necessarily any more reliable than a contemporaneous account in the Chinese press would have been. In fact, both would have emphasized the extent to which the revolutionary stage performance engaged the Chinese masses and inculcated Communist revolutionary values in them, and certainly we can safely presume that the theatrical productions of the Cultural Revolution—in particular the *yangbanxi* or "model performances" and the films that were made from them—were indeed effective vehicles for revolutionary indoctrination. However, it is interesting to contrast the above description with some anecdotal accounts of men who consumed *yangbanxi* as youngsters and then recalled their experiences years later. In the documentary *Yang Ban Xi:*

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The 8 Model Works (dir. Yan Ting Yuen, 2005), a thirty-nine-year-old artist recalls that his first sexual feelings were aroused by the revolutionary ballet *Red Detachment of Women* (*Hongse niangzijun*) because the dancing women wore skin-revealing military shorts: "At last we'd discovered something real in the Revolution." Similarly, reform-era actor/director Jiang Wen has claimed that a viewing of *Red Detachment of Women* "was the first time I ever experienced sexual feelings."[2]

Whether such accounts of erotic awakening were unique to these men or perhaps merely demonstrate something universal about the mindset of teenage boys, we can for the sake of argument position the sexual arousal of these *yangbanxi* viewers as an opposite extreme to the rapt, brainwashed attention of the audience described by the Western reporter cited above.[3] Indeed, one is tempted to speculate that the reporter in fact had no idea what thoughts might lie behind the furrowed brows of the spectators he observed or what sorts of "details" would not have "escaped their eyes." On the other hand, we could also conjecture that viewers of the *yangbanxi* films—as well as all the other spinoffs, from regional opera adaptations to posters and magazine illustrations—by the early to mid-1970s might have experienced these things much differently than had the original theater audiences of the mid-1960s. Considering the repetition involved in multiple viewings, as well as countless "cross-genre product tie-ins" for the model operas, the works' ideological messages might well have become so banal that sheer boredom would have led viewers to concentrate on seemingly inconsequential details such as the revealed skin on actors' limbs. Paul Clark refers to an "ideological commodification of culture in the Cultural Revolution" that in fact paved the way for the market commodification of the post-Mao reform era.[4]

This essay will make a related argument regarding the ideological implications of the form of the *yangbanxi* films of the early 1970s. Considered within the context of the tradition of Chinese revolutionary cinema going back to the left-wing cinema movement of the 1930s, the *yangbanxi* films culminate what I label a "formalist drift" in cinema aesthetics that already had been well under way before the Cultural Revolution. Besides providing an accessible "national form"[5] through their adaptation of traditional Chinese performance practices, the *yangbanxi* films, by means of their replacement of mimesis and cinematic realism with stylization and cinematic formalism, brought to an extreme an aesthetic shift that had begun during the earlier "seventeen years" (1949–66) of the People's Republic. The irony of this culmination, I will suggest, is that it is precisely at the point when political determination of artistic form appears to be at its height that ideology might suddenly fall victim to form itself. The culture of the Cultural Revolution thus may have sown the seeds of its own ideological collapse.

From Revolutionary Realism to Revolutionary Romanticism

In calling the *yangbanxi* films the culmination of the tradition of Chinese revolutionary cinema, I should clarify what I mean by that classification. Chinese revolutionary cinema was not a genre; rather, it encompassed many genres—including the war movie, the bildungsroman, the melodrama, the spy thriller, the musical, the comedy—often combining two or more of these in one film. It also was not what David Bordwell calls more broadly a "mode of narration," which is defined not according to genre, theme, or subject matter but rather by the ways in which various film techniques are deployed to cue a viewer to construct a narrative while watching the film.[6] At its peak from the mid-1950s to the mid-1960s, Chinese revolutionary cinema mostly followed the classical Hollywood narrative mode, emphasizing fictional realism, diegetic immersion, and the seamless use of film style to efficiently and clearly convey story information. Only at certain moments of maximum emotional and ideological impact did Chinese revolutionary cinema of this period occasionally recall Soviet revolutionary cinema of the 1920s, which Bordwell calls "historical materialist narration" to distinguish it from the classical Hollywood style.

Being neither a single genre nor a distinctive narrative mode, then, Chinese revolutionary cinema was a body of filmmaking defined by its historical connection to the Chinese Communist movement. In fact, when one delves into the particulars of its various moments over the decades, Chinese revolutionary cinema turns out to have been an extremely diverse and even contradictory body of work. The tradition is widely taken to date back to the critical or social realism of the left-wing cinema movement in Shanghai during the 1930s. This critical realism, which revealed the suffering of the masses under colonial and capitalist exploitation, was retroactively viewed as a precursor to the Communist filmmaking that would dominate mainland Chinese cinema from the 1950s to the early 1980s. As many scholars have noted, the left-wing films of the 1930s are quite a bit more complex than summary appellations such as "critical realist" or "left-wing" would indicate, and we should be wary of following the official film historiography of the Chinese Communist Party, which for many years situated these films at the beginning of a teleological progression leading to the full-fledged revolutionary cinema under Mao.[7] Nonetheless, it is a fact that many of the classics of the 1930s, and again in the brief postwar Republican period of the late 1940s, showed a clear concern for depicting the suffering of the underclass and, in many cases, an implicit sympathy for the Communist revolution.

The standard Communist historiography of Chinese revolutionary cinema places these films in relation to the later Mao-era films in the same way that literary works of critical realism in the Republican era are positioned in relation to subsequent works of socialist realism—that is, as progressive for their time, but

fundamentally flawed by bourgeois ideology and in need of replacement by genuinely proletarian artworks. In a classic essay from 1936, the Communist literary theorist and future minister of culture Zhou Yang followed Maxim Gorky in calling nineteenth-century realism "critical realism" and contrasting this "old-style realism" with a "new realism" that in fact finds a deeper, truer "reality." Zhou Yang called on this new realism to avoid "sinking intoxicated into the minutiae of 'microscopic realism'"—that is, pursuing a bourgeois naturalism that merely empirically observes the present reality. Instead, artists should be "remolding themselves" and "moving towards reality's future."[8] This key diachronic move, of course, gives artists possessed of the "correct" knowledge of the objective laws of history—meaning the inexorable progress toward a Communist utopia—authorization to supplement in their artworks the objective reality of the present with the projected reality of the future. Second, in a synchronic sense, Zhou Yang argued that artists must penetrate the surface of reality to uncover its underlying truths: "On the surface, all objective phenomena appear jumbled and difficult to fathom. Only by penetrating their outer layer and probing to the very heart of objective reality can we temper and substantiate our subjectivity, and only then will we acquire the ability to grasp the ordered nature of objectivity."[9] In sum, artists must not just reflect the objective world around them but grasp both "reality's essence" and "its direction and future prospects."[10]

Mao would later endorse this view in his "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art" in 1942, which came to be known as the definitive statement that would guide Communist cultural production for nearly four decades.[11] In his original "Talks," Mao referred to the "new realism" as "proletarian realism," but it clearly amounted to the Chinese version of socialist realism—the model of artistic production that had been promulgated as the official line in the Soviet Union beginning in 1933. When a new edition of Mao's talks at Yan'an was published in 1953 after the establishment of the People's Republic, the term "proletarian realism" was in fact changed to "socialist realism."

Whatever it is called, how did the new realism advocated by the Chinese Communist Party differ on a textual level (rather than a merely prescriptive level) from the critical realism of the left-wing films of the Republican era? As a quick example of the new aesthetic, let us consider a sequence in the 1950 film *The White-Haired Girl* (*Bai mao nü*), based on the popular revolutionary play about oppressed peasants who eventually rise up against their landlord with the aid of the Communist army. In this sequence, the young peasant Wang Dachun, his fiancée having been enslaved and raped by their evil landlord, flees across the Yellow River to the Communist-controlled region of Shanxi with the intention of joining the Red Army. While there are elements of realism in a general sense in this film—from on-location footage along the Yellow River to a number of what would later be called "middle characters" (characters who are not depicted

Figure 1 The White-Haired Girl: *Revolutionary soldiers.*

unfavorably but also are not heroic—that is, believably ordinary people)—there is nonetheless much evidence of what separates the new socialist realism from the preceding aesthetic of critical realism. The Communist guerrilla soldiers that Wang Dachun finds at the top of the river bluff are dressed in what appear to be brand-new, sparkling clean uniforms, and they are shot in a low-angle composition in which they loom heroically against the sky in the manner of Soviet cinema of the time (fig. 1). Most notable of all in terms of film style is the insertion of an extradiegetic shot of the Communist flag to drive home the ideological import of Wang Dachun's union, and by implication that of the Chinese peasantry in general, with the Red Army (fig. 2). With this flag montage the film veers briefly but obviously from any semblance of realism toward something more like formalism, in which the viewer's diegetic immersion is at least partially disrupted by the self-consciousness of the film's political rhetoric as manifested in a nondiegetic, ideologically encumbered insertion.

Finally, in the last shot of the sequence (fig. 3), we apparently leap into the future to see that Wang Dachun himself has joined the ranks of the heroic Red Army soldiers. He is now also framed valiantly against the sky, and in his look to the horizon we can even detect an early form of what Stephanie Donald has defined as the "socialist realist gaze." Tracing the history of this gaze to the

Figure 2 The White-Haired Girl: *Extradiegetic Communist flag.*

countless images in Soviet cinema of "faces staring exultantly off screen," Donald argues that "in these shots the romanticism of socialist realism is very clear. The gaze off screen is a fixed stare out to a horizon, beyond the diegetic world, and apparently also beyond the world of the audience." She describes this gaze as "quintessentially anti-individual," belonging rather either to great leaders or to "representatives of collective action"—as Wang Dachun becomes in this film when, for example, he finally returns to his home village and helps to administer Communist rent reforms and struggle sessions against the landlord class.[12]

Zhou Yang and Mao Zedong would not have quibbled with Donald's discovery of a romanticist element in socialist realism. Even in its original Soviet formulation in the early 1930s, Gorky had inscribed what he called "revolutionary romanticism" in the socialist realist formula.[13] Three years later, in the essay already mentioned, Zhou Yang would argue that "in the history of literature, realism has generally been understood as the opposite of romanticism. This distinction is rigid and inaccurate. In fact, these two currents often intertwine, permeate each other, even fuse together."[14] As for the Chinese-style socialist realism he was now attempting to formulate, Zhou Yang wrote that "the new realism not only does not reject romanticism but in fact requires it as one of its intrinsic elements."[15]

Figure 3 The White-Haired Girl: *Wang Dachun empowered with the socialist realist gaze.*

The embrace of romanticism within proletarian or socialist realism was inseparable from the call for the new realism both to project the present into the revolutionary future and to penetrate the surface of reality to reveal its underlying essence. As Mao put it in his talks at Yan'an, people need art in addition to their everyday lives precisely because "although both are beautiful, life as reflected in works of literature and art can and ought to be on a higher plane, more intense, more concentrated, more typical, nearer the ideal, and therefore more universal than actual everyday life."[16] Sixteen years later, in 1958, Mao would initiate a further shift in official terminology, when what had started as "proletarian realism" and then had been renamed "socialist realism" for a few years in the 1950s (following the Soviet Union) would henceforth be called a combination of "revolutionary realism plus revolutionary romanticism."

In practice revolutionary romanticism contained a strong element of melodrama. This is not at all surprising when one considers how closely the role of melodrama in the West had in fact anticipated the truth function of socialist art as defined by Mao. In his classic study of Western melodrama, Peter Brooks described its subject as "the true wrested from the real." That is, the melodramatic work tries "to go beyond the surface of the real to the truer, hidden reality."[17] What Brooks labeled the "moral occult"—or "the domain of operative

spiritual values which is both indicated within and masked by the surface of reality" and which melodrama serves to locate and articulate—is a place taken in Mao-era art by the moral universe of class struggle, including both the horrible suffering of the masses and their eventual, inevitable victory over the forces of oppression through identification with the Communist Party.[18]

If revolutionary romanticism, and the melodrama that it employs, sought to wrest the true from the real, it is not surprising that, in terms of film aesthetics, socialist realism in general could veer periodically from what we normally think of as cinematic realism into something more like formalism, particularly in its most ideologically loaded moments. Two often repeated instances of this are what we have already seen in the sequence from *The White-Haired Girl*: montage insertions of extradiegetic ideological symbols as well as the socialist realist gaze itself, the representation of which became increasingly stylized during the cinematic history of the Mao era.

For more examples of these, we can turn to one of the cinematic masterpieces of revolutionary romanticism, the epic three-hour film *The Song of Youth* (*Qingchun zhi ge*), adapted in 1959 from the wildly popular novel by Yang Mo. The well-known story is a bildungsroman set in the Republican era, in which the female protagonist, Lin Daojing, goes from being a lonely and suicidally depressed intellectual to eventually joining the Communist Party and helping to lead mass protest rallies against the Japanese incursion into Manchuria. The plot follows closely the narrative curve that Katerina Clark has described in the case of Soviet fiction, in which the protagonist typically progresses from a state of "spontaneity" to that of "consciousness" as he or she is guided by paternalistic elders within the Communist Party.[19] In the early stages of this progression, the protagonist may instinctively identify with the struggles of the proletariat or peasant, but he or she must learn the truths of Marxism–Leninism before these tendencies come to fruition in full awareness of the laws of historical materialism. In *The Song of Youth*, this gradual coming to consciousness of the heroine is evident, for example, in the film's penultimate sequence, in which Lin Daojing—having undergone such trials as working for Communist sleeper cells in Beijing, helping to organize peasants in the countryside, and being imprisoned and tortured by the Nationalists for her activities—has, through her personal sacrifice and her tireless learning from her Communist mentors, finally applied and been admitted as a party member, meriting an initiation ceremony filmed as a moment of near rapture. Here, among other things, we find a much more developed and refined version of the socialist realist gaze, an intense look she directs offscreen immediately after her party swearing-in ceremony. In fact, Lin's induction into the party apparently *empowers* her with this gaze, indicating to the audience her ability to perceive sublime ideological truths to which they have only secondary access through imaginary identification with her character. With this

moment that relays our gaze through her own, attaching our desire to her visual possession of an apparently ideologically resplendent offscreen space, the narrative pauses to allow for maximum emotional and rhetorical impact. As Donald puts it, "the socialist-realist gaze freezes the narrative while producing for the narration a sublime and completely bogus moment of completion. Present, past, and future lock together on screen and off in a moment of ecstatic communion."[20]

This shot in *The Song of Youth* cues us to sense an almost spiritual object of Lin's gaze by beginning as a look almost directly to the camera, which, through the editing pattern already set up, we take to be a look directed at the cadre performing the ceremony. As the shot progresses, Lin slowly and steadily turns her head and redirects her gaze to the transcendent offscreen space (fig. 4). In fact, it is not completely true that we as spectators lack access to this offscreen ideological space, to which Lin is now privy as a party member endowed with the socialist realist gaze. An object of her gaze is provided in the form of a cutaway, again to a Communist flag (fig. 5), which is sutured into the narrative by a cut back to Lin's frozen gaze, now in extreme close-up (fig. 6). This flag can be read as diegetic, insofar as it would normally be present in a party swearing-in ceremony, yet the

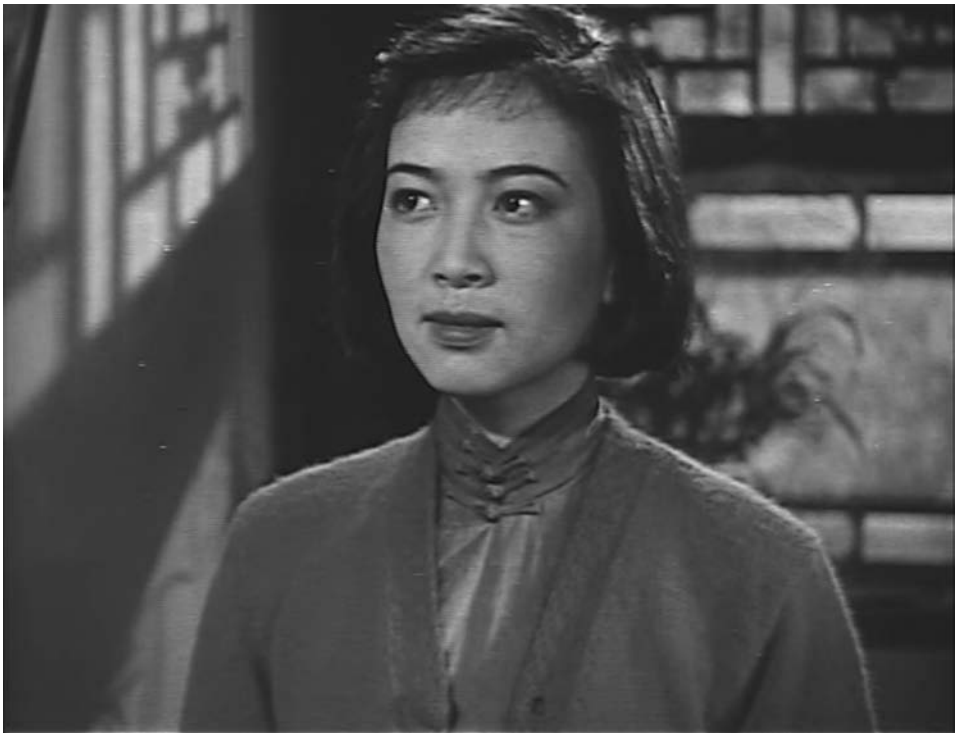

Figure 4 The Song of Youth: *Lin Daojing looks offscreen.*

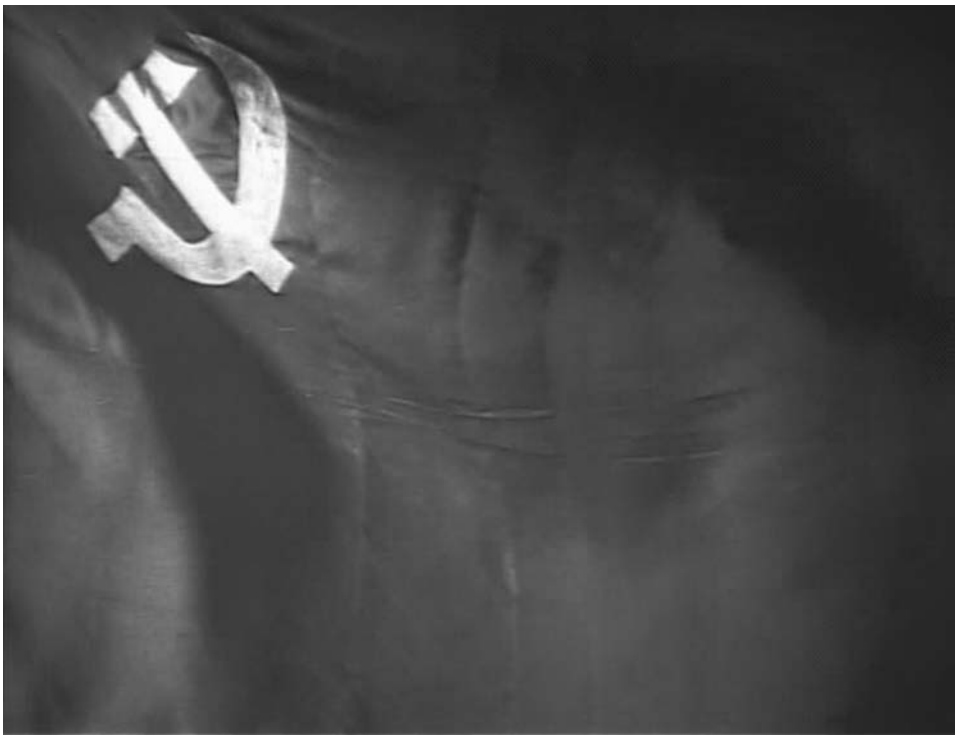

Figure 5 The Song of Youth: *Cut to semi-diegetic flag.*

way it is unfurled and flapping dramatically in a breeze that could not exist in the room where Lin is standing also gives it a clear extradiegetic quality similar to the flag cutaway in *The White-Haired Girl*, making it as much a rhetorical insert as an actual prop in the story.

The flag thus functions as an ideological "quilting point" (a *point de capiton* in Lacanian terminology)—a signifier that appears to the subject as an absolute horizon of meaning, an anchoring point that helps to hold the entire symbolic structure together and maintains the illusion of stability (even if its real purpose is, as Slavoj Žižek would emphasize, to conceal the fact that the "big Other" of ideology does not really exist). That is, while the flag perhaps gives us nothing, it appears to give us everything, and the formalist device of its insertion into *The Song of Youth* narrative functions as a moment of maximum rhetorical impact by positioning us as close as we can get to the sublime Other of ideology.

It is thus through this kind of formalist moment in the film language of revolutionary romanticism that we see how this cinema aims at an underlying, absolute Truth that an aesthetic of critical realism could not achieve. Ordinary cinematic realism can show us various truths of people's lives and sufferings, even implicitly calling us to some kind of social or political action to solve the

Figure 6 The Song of Youth: *Close-up of Lin Daojing's socialist realist gaze.*

problems that it reveals, but it cannot suggest the sort of transcendent ideal to which Mao alluded in advocating the romantic element in socialist art.

In its melodramatic excesses as well as its formalist flourishes, such art serves not only to teach Communist ideology to the masses but also to mask a certain aporia of its own theoretical dispensation. Here we can relate Donald's concept of the socialist realist gaze to "Lefort's paradox," as Alexei Yurchak has described and applied to the state of ideology in the Stalinist Soviet Union:

> One of the central contradictions of socialism is a version of what Claude Lefort called a general paradox within the ideology of modernity: the split between *ideological enunciation* (which reflects the theoretical ideals of the Enlightenment) and *ideological rule* (manifest in the practical concerns of the modern state's political authority). The paradox, that we will call "Lefort's paradox," lies in the fact that ideological rule must be "abstracted from any question concerning its origins," thus remaining outside of ideological enunciation and, as a result, rendering that enunciation deficient. In other words, to fulfill its political function of reproducing power, the ideological discourse must claim to represent an "objective truth" that exists outside of it; however, the external nature of this "objective truth" renders the ideological discourse inherently lacking in the means to describe it in total,

> which can ultimately undermine this discourse's legitimacy and the power that it supports. This inherent contradiction of any version of modern ideology, argues Lefort, can be concealed only by the figure of the "master," who, by being presented as standing *outside* ideological discourse and possessing *external* knowledge of the objective truth, temporarily conceals the contradiction by allowing it "to appear through himself" (1986, 211–12). In other words, modern ideological discourse, based on the utopian ideals of the Enlightenment, gains its legitimacy from an imaginary position that is external to it and will experience a crisis of legitimacy if that imaginary external position is questioned or destroyed.[21]

In the socialist realist gaze into offscreen ideological space, do we not have the perfect illustration of this paradox? The discourse must claim to represent an "objective truth" outside of it, but the very external nature of this truth renders it unrepresentable within the discourse—which is thus forced to resort to an array of rhetorical sleights of hand. On the one hand, the unrepresentable ideological totality is suggested as an offscreen sublime presence that, if not available to the direct gaze of the audience, is at least secondarily accessed by the relay of the socialist realist gaze of the heroic character who, it is suggested, has gained access to it by becoming a true Communist. On the other hand, the objective Truth of ideology can yet be symbolized by the substitute image of an ideological quilting point such as the flag, an ultimately empty signifier that nonetheless seems to anchor the entire symbolic field by attaching itself directly to the unrepresentable Other through the viewer's imaginary.

Yurchak's suggestion that the imaginary external position which renders ideological discourse stable is in fact embodied by the figure of the leader is, of course, also quite relevant to revolutionary culture in China. Just as that position was held by Stalin in the Soviet Union, it was undoubtedly held by Mao in China. Furthermore, in revolutionary films and other narratives, fictional Communist protagonists often served as Mao surrogates, representing the party's access to the Truth through their own heroism and their possession of the socialist realist gaze. This imaginary link from the revolutionary romanticist hero to the party as a whole and ultimately to Mao himself became most obvious during the Cultural Revolution. The most blatant example was the sensational model opera and 1970 film *The Red Lantern* (*Hong deng ji*), in which the hero, Li Yuhe, was played by lead actor Qian Haoliang, who was said to have been picked in part because of a physical resemblance to Mao himself (or at least a larger-than-life, younger, buffer, and better-looking Mao). So strong was the imaginary link between fictional heroes and the Great Helmsman that Qian was richly rewarded by Mao's wife Jiang Qing and eventually became deputy minister of culture toward the end of the Cultural Revolution (only to be persecuted soon thereafter following the fall of the Gang of Four).

Yangbanxi as a break with verisimilar cinematic performance

The period from the late 1950s to the mid-1960s marked the height of Chinese revolutionary cinema in the transnational socialist realist tradition, one shared in some sense by much of the Communist world. The *yangbanxi* films of the Cultural Revolution that followed, in contrast, asserted a much stronger cultural nationalism in their modernized adaptation of traditional Chinese operatic forms, particularly Peking opera (*jingju*). At the same time—and, crucially for my argument, by essentially the same means—they massively upped the ante in their embrace of what had been described earlier as the seemingly antirealist aspects of revolutionary romanticism, including a strongly melodramatic mode of narration as well as a now almost completely formalist film style. In this sense, the formalist drift that had begun with the transition from critical realism to revolutionary romanticism found its most extreme expression in the adaptation of the aesthetics of traditional opera to modern revolutionary opera and then feature films.

It is worth analyzing in some detail the profound challenge the *yangbanxi* films presented to realist or mimetic conventions in light of the history of film as an aspect of global vernacular modernism throughout the early to mid-twentieth century. The following list of some of the characteristics of traditional Chinese opera that were adapted to the model opera films shows the extent to which they defied the norms of mimetic fictional realism adopted by mainstream cinema elsewhere:

Gestural language/pantomime. Both traditional and Cultural Revolution opera sought not so much to realistically perform emotion but to *codify* it through standardized gestures that were as much symbolic signs as mimetic representations. The most obvious example of this is the use of *liangxiang* (striking a pose), a convention of traditional opera, to signify important narrative moments and emotional states.

Role types as characters. Rather than individualized protagonists and antagonists with realistic idiosyncrasies and psychological depth, characters would conform to a limited number of role types that determined all their behavior. The stereotyped roles of traditional Chinese opera (the young scholar, the beauty, the warrior, and so on) were replaced with those of revolutionary mythology (the virtuous worker, peasant, or soldier; the villainous landlord or Japanese occupier).[22]

Exaggerated makeup and stylized costumes. While not as extreme as in traditional operas, characters in the model opera films nonetheless generally have makeup that exceeds lifelike verisimilitude and costumes that appear highly schematized rather than realistic. This also includes color codification of costume and

makeup for different character types, such as wan-faced villains wearing black or green and ruby-cheeked heroes wearing red or white.

Artificial/minimal sets. While not nearly as spare as those of traditional theater, the Cultural Revolution model dramas had sets and props that, when set to film, defied the supposed naturalism of the cinematic medium (a property that had helped allow it to edge out stage melodrama among Western audiences by the end of the 1910s).[23] Cultural Revolution model opera films took place on blatantly artificial sets and, like their Peking opera predecessors, used props more as abstract signifiers than as direct links to the ordinary material world.

Style of speech and song. In the interest of being understandable while still adhering to theatrical conventions, the creators of the *yangbanxi* settled on a mode of speech in dialogue that was highly stylized without being as different from regular speech as in traditional opera. The frequent arias also break sharply from any semblance of mimesis of reality (just as the Hollywood musical was among the most formalist of genres and thus the most apt to break with classical Hollywood norms), though the language and singing style are generally more easy to comprehend than those of traditional Peking opera.

Repetition. Particularly by the time the *yangbanxi* films were distributed, most audiences already were familiar with the narratives through stage performances and all their other product tie-ins, and in any case the films were viewed repeatedly owing to the lack of other options in movie projection. Consequently, as with traditional opera, audiences already knew the entire story by previous repetition and thus were not aiming to process plot revelations so much as to enjoy the staging as a spectacle depicting a story already well-known.

Attractions and narrative distension. For that reason, as a cinematic mode *yangbanxi*, like their precedents in traditional theater, are much more focused on presenting attractions than on efficiently conveying cause-and-effect chains of narrative events.[24] They frequently linger extensively on each narrative moment far beyond the length necessary to transmit it as information, instead offering prolonged visual spectacle and commentary relating to each event, particularly through arias.

To illustrate the challenge these conventions presented to the realist tradition in fictional film, let us focus on the question of acting style. This also will allow us to return to the issues raised earlier regarding romanticism, melodrama, the socialist realist gaze, and finally the consequences of the formalist drift in film aesthetics for the operation of ideology in the public sphere.

By "realist tradition in fictional film," I mean not specifically the Chinese critical realism of the 1930s–1940s or the socialist/proletarian/revolutionary realism that followed, but rather much more broadly the set of conventions of mimetic

fictional realism that took hold during the rise of classical Hollywood narration in the 1910s and quickly became the global standard for mainstream fictional filmmaking. These conventions included the use of continuity editing to smoothly organize time and space, the optical positioning of the spectator as an "invisible observer" rather than an acknowledged addressee, and generally the deployment of cinematic techniques to encourage diegetic immersion in a plausible, mimetic fictional world, rather than to self-consciously draw attention to the act of cinematic narration itself (with a number of exceptions, such as beginning and ending credits, intertitles, nondiegetic musical scores, and so on). As studies by Tom Gunning and other scholars of early film have explicated, the fictional realism that classical Hollywood narration strived for was fundamentally different from the mode of appearance of early cinema (particularly before about 1908), which tended to directly address itself to the spectator and present exhibitionist attractions rather than giving priority to a self-contained narrative.

Specifically in the realm of acting, Roberta A. Pearson has demonstrated how the transition from early cinema to classical Hollywood cinema involved a change from a "histrionic" acting style to a "verisimilar" style, a transformation she illustrates in detail through the study of D. W. Griffith's Biograph films from 1908 to 1913.[25] What she calls the histrionic performance style was rooted in nineteenth-century stage melodrama, which continued in the form of lower-class popular drama in the early twentieth century. Her description of the histrionic acting code is worth citing in detail:

> The histrionic code is, in a sense, reflexive, referring always to the theatrical event rather than to the outside world. Until the second half of the nineteenth century, most English and American actors in most theatres performed in a self-consciously theatrical fashion, ostentatiously playing a role rather than pretending to be another person. Disdaining to mask technique in the modern fashion, actors proudly displayed their skills, always striving to create a particular effect. Performers, audiences, and critics all knew that a theatrical presentation was an artificial construct meant to bear little resemblance to any off-stage reality. Audiences and critics condemned as inadequate those who did not demonstrably act: the pleasure derived not from participating in an illusion but from witnessing a virtuoso performance.[26]

While we must of course be wary of finding sameness in dramatic traditions with such different histories and cultural contexts, I would nonetheless suggest that much of this description of the histrionic performance style would apply equally well to the conventions of traditional Chinese drama. In particular, the notion of acting as a foregrounded skill in a spectacle that never pretends to merely present the illusion of everyday reality—and, most important, the difference between this approach and what would become the standard performance code of mainstream

fictional film—seems to apply as much to the Chinese dramatic tradition as to the Western stage melodramas of the nineteenth century.

The verisimilar performance code that had replaced the histrionic in fictional filmmaking by the early 1910s is an acting style devoted to mimesis and owing much to the nineteenth-century realist novel. Pearson chooses to avoid value-laden labels such as "realist" and "naturalistic," and she emphasizes the culturally constructed nature of any representation coded as "realist."[27] Nonetheless, the purpose of verisimilar acting, and of fictional realism in general, is in a basic sense to mask its own constructedness and present itself as "natural." As the early film critic and Biograph scriptwriter Frank Woods succinctly put it, what the verisimilar performer aims at is "the kind of acting that appears not to be acting."[28] This formula points to the essential dissimulation implied by the very term "fictional realism": the more "realistic" a fiction is, the more it must efface the traces of its own fictionality.

Verisimilar performance largely replaced histrionic performance in Chinese fictional film during the silent era just as it had in the West, though with important exceptions—including, most notably, the Chinese opera film. From its inception, Chinese cinema had to negotiate the enormous aesthetic differences between modern Hollywood films and traditional Chinese performance arts, and the latter never completely disappeared as an element of Chinese filmmaking. As Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar have argued, Chinese dramatic forms have helped to inform a distinctively Chinese "operatic" mode of cinematic narration that includes not only opera films but also the martial arts genre.[29] Many of the "firsts" of Chinese cinema (first film, first sound film, first color film) were adaptations of traditional operas, and opera films were often wildly popular among audiences.

Nevertheless, a tension between the aesthetics of traditional opera performance and modern cinema performance was a source of anxiety going well back into the silent-film era, and verisimilar performance and Hollywood-style mimesis became the norm for what Berry and Farquhar call the "realist mode" that came to dominate mainland Chinese cinema. In the 1910s, when filmmaking first became a somewhat regular activity if not yet a full-fledged industry in China, many actors in film came from theater companies that practiced what was variously called *xinju* (new drama) or *wenmingxi* (civilized plays), an early transitional form that attempted to modernize Chinese theater and move away from the conventions of traditional opera. This movement introduced elements of realism to performance but still employed an acting style that was histrionic by Hollywood standards. Partly as a result of the perceived inferiority of Chinese films to foreign ones, by the 1920s Chinese filmmakers mostly rejected the *xinju* performance style, and "*xinju*-ized acting" was frequently hurled as a critical epithet. For example, Zheng Zhengqiu, sometimes called "the father of Chinese cinema" and himself a former

xinju actor and critic, argued that *xinju* acting appeared too exaggerated (*tai guohuo*) and too unnatural (*tai bu ziran*) onscreen and that "if *xinju* actors want to act in film, they absolutely have to sacrifice their original postures and replace them with gestures that are appropriate to film," in particular by not "moving too much."[30] Instead of communicating by exaggerated gestures, film actors were urged to adopt what can safely be called a verisimilar style in nearly the sense meant by Pearson in the case of Griffith. The performer must transform the "fakeness" (*jia*) of performance into the "real" (*zhen*) by "interior performance" (*neixin biaoyan*), in particular by generating a genuine inner experience of the intended emotion and then communicating it through facial expression.[31] During the 1920s, film studios used fewer *xinju* actors but instead began to draw actors from the *huaju* (spoken drama) movement, which essentially tried to create a Chinese version of fully modernized Western spoken drama. By the early 1930s, however, a similar anxiety arose that *huaju* acting was also overly exaggerated when transferred to film, particularly for closer shots.[32] In sum, by the time of the "golden age" of Shanghai silent cinema in the early 1930s, a discourse of acting had developed that firmly distinguished film acting from stage acting (even modern stage acting), and insisted on a verisimilar performance style in keeping with the norms of classical Hollywood (and indeed by the standards of "interior performance" an artist such as Ruan Lingyu could measure up to the finest Hollywood precedents from Lillian Gish to Janet Gaynor).

These classical Hollywood norms of narration and performance held steady for the most part from the critical realism of the 1930–1940s through the socialist or proletarian realism of the early People's Republic and even into the combination of "revolutionary realism and revolutionary romanticism" of the late 1950s to early 1960s. However, as discussed earlier, in the case of the latter, a more strongly melodramatic element and an occasional intrusion of didactic montage editing was pushing Chinese cinema from a realist mode to a relatively formalist mode in the name of a more explicit assertion of ideological Truth rather than merely diegetic verisimilitude. Finally, with the adaptation of the Cultural Revolution *yangbanxi* to film beginning in 1970, Hollywood-style realism was more or less completely abandoned, and this development was inseparable from the fact that, with *yangbanxi* being the only form of feature filmmaking allowed during this period, the "realist mode" of Chinese filmmaking identified by Berry and Farquhar was fully eclipsed by the "operatic mode." That is, the application of the conventions of traditional opera (in particular the ones listed earlier) to revolutionary cinema represented a thoroughgoing rupture with Hollywood-style fictional realism.

This break was particularly evident in the performance style of the actors, which, to return to Pearson's terms of analysis, asserted a new privileging of the histrionic mode over the verisimilar mode. Pearson notes that in the histrionic

mode of stage melodrama and early cinema, meaning often was communicated through discrete gestures or poses that acted as semantic units rather than inseparable parts of a continuous flow of performance (she uses the analogy of digital versus analog communication): "Actors deliberately struck attitudes, holding each gesture and abstracting it from the flow of motion until the audience had 'read it.'"[33] Similarly, in traditional Chinese *jingju*, the poses or *liangxiang*, in which the actors periodically come to a momentary rest, are an essential part of the performance and a principal means by which the performance is made legible and enjoyable to the audience. These ritualized, frozen postures punctuate passages of movement, dialogue, or song and become semantic units in the narrative. As in the histrionic stage style of acting analyzed by Pearson, they strive not for mimetic resemblance to real human behavior but rather for a codification of emotion that the audience can read through their familiarity with dramatic conventions. In the Cultural Revolution *yangbanxi*, these codes became standardized to the point of cliché, so that one could tell with a glance at the posture of a character, for example, whether he or she was a hero.

Even in comparison with the increasingly formalist films of the "seventeen years" period preceding the Cultural Revolution, the stylization of the *yangbanxi* films represented the final extreme of the formalist drift in Chinese revolutionary cinema. To see this progression in revolutionary romanticist aesthetics, we can compare equivalent sequences from the original 1961 film and the later Cultural Revolution filmed ballet and opera versions of *Red Detachment of Women*. One key scene of this narrative has the captured Communist hero, Hong Changqing, first refuse to sign a confession in surrender to the wicked landlord who has imprisoned him, and then be burned alive staked to a tree in a public execution. The confession refusal scene in the 1961 fiction film by Xie Jin is lifted to a heroic, romanticized plane by the now familiar pattern of a character's gaze into an offscreen space of ideological Truth. In this case, however, eyeline matches provide the hero's gaze with diegetic objects in the form of, first, pro-Communist graffiti left on the landlord's wall during an earlier Communist occupation of his village, and then a small Communist flag pasted to the wall next to the graffiti. This flag, though clearly located in the space of the diegesis, is elevated to a more abstract level of meaning through editing. In the series of eyeline matches, the shot distances get progressively shorter, from shots of Hong Changqing from the shoulders up when he first notices the graffiti (figs. 7 and 8) to an extreme close-up of his rapturous face when he focuses on the Communist flag (fig. 9). In between, the shots of the wall progress from a longer shot showing enlightened messages such as *nannü pingdeng* (gender equality) (fig. 10), to a closer shot panning from right to left across the slogan *Gongchandang wansui* (Long live the Communist Party) with the small flag pasted next to it (fig. 11), and finally to an extreme close-up of the flag itself, on which, after a moment, is superimposed

Figure 7 Red Detachment of Women: *Hong Changqing at beginning of confession scene.*

Figure 8 Red Detachment of Women: *Hong Changqing reading Communist graffiti.*

Figure 9 Red Detachment of Women: *Dawning ideological realization.*

Figure 10 Red Detachment of Women: *Graffiti reading "gender equality."*

Figure 11 Red Detachment of Women: *Small flag next to "Long live the Communist Party!" graffiti.*

the final extreme close-up of the hero's face (fig. 12), at an even closer distance than before.

Thus, while the flag here is diegetic rather than a purely rhetorical insert, the montage ending with the superimposed extreme close-ups of hero and flag, with nothing else visible in the frame, functions much like the instances of extradiegetic flags in *The White-Haired Girl* and *The Song of Youth* mentioned earlier. Rather than a mere piece of colored paper stuck to a wall, the flag becomes a master signifier of the hero's (and the film's) entire system of meaning, and the denotative meaning of the sequence of shots—Changqing sees the flag on the wall—pales in comparison with its connotative meaning: Changqing's consciousness and the Communist movement represented by the flag have become unified in a singular will destined for final victory (and you, the spectator, should aspire to similar sublime ecstasies of devotion). Thus, having started the scene as an injured prisoner weakened by torture, Changqing ends the scene as a heroic figure who gladly accepts death in the name of a revolution through which he will continue to live, insofar as his very subjectivity is now collective rather than individual. Meanwhile, the scene itself enacts the tension between realism and romanticism and serves as a microcosm of the formalist drift in revolutionary

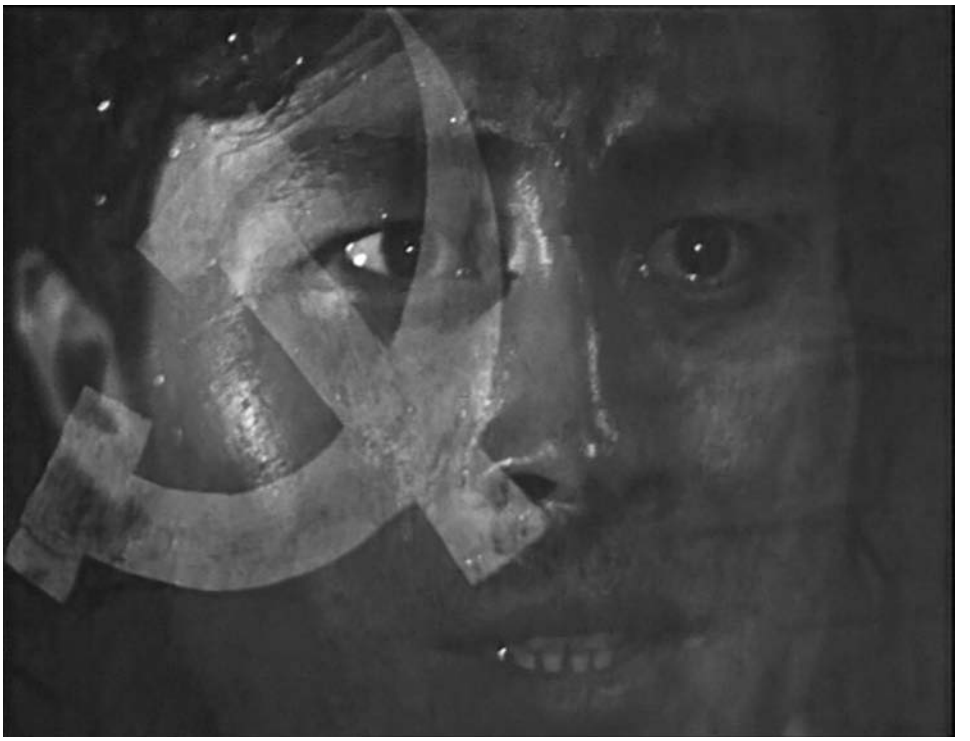

Figure 12 Red Detachment of Women: *flag superimposed on extreme close-up of Hong Changqing.*

film aesthetics. In the early shots in the realistic diegetic space of a landlord's house that has recently changed hands in armed struggle, Changqing appears believably sweaty, dirty, and clearly injured, with a stooped posture and a look of doubt or even defeat on his face, but through the sequence of shots analyzed above, this mimetic realism gives way to a didactic and emotional montage reminiscent of what Bordwell calls the "socialist formalism" of Soviet filmmakers of the 1920s (before socialist realism would be formulated as the hegemonic model for Soviet art).[34]

In the *yangbanxi* films, the formalist drift in revolutionary cinema reaches an entirely new level, with formalist aesthetics determining not just a few scenes that deliver the most ideological impact, but rather virtually every moment of the film. In both the filmed ballet version of *Red Detachment of Women* from 1971 and the opera film version released a year later, the same scenes of Changqing's confession refusal and subsequent execution are given highly stylized and elaborate treatment. Through gestures, dance, and poses, the landlord villain offers Changqing a paper on which to write his confession, and Changqing rejects his cowering captor in heroic fashion (figs. 13 and 14). In the subsequent execution (here part of a continuous scene with the confession offer, rather than a separate

one as in the 1961 film), no attempt is made to make the fire look realistic, and Changqing bounds to his execution bonfire under his own power, finally striking a defiant *liangxiang* pose that suggests immortality even as the fake flames surge around him (figs. 15 and 16). The 1961 film, in contrast, shows Changqing tied firmly to the tree (fig. 17), the pain of his engulfment by flames (fig. 18) accentuated by an extreme close-up reaction shot of the heroine Wu Qionghua looking on in anguish from a distance (fig. 19).

Obviously the highly stylized artistic form of ballet as well as that of the modernized Peking opera both jettison a level of mimetic realism that is retained by the earlier film even in its most "romantic" moments. From costuming and set design to performance style and *liangxiang* poses, the *yangbanxi* pursue instead what Haiping Yan has called the "distinct kind of theatricality" of traditional Chinese drama:

> Rather than striving for naturalized representation, Chinese music-drama is premised upon an aesthetic notion that might be translated into English as "suppositionality" (*xuyixing* [*sic*]): it actualizes itself through acting that is suppositional in its overall mode of signification and extraordinarily stylized in its specific

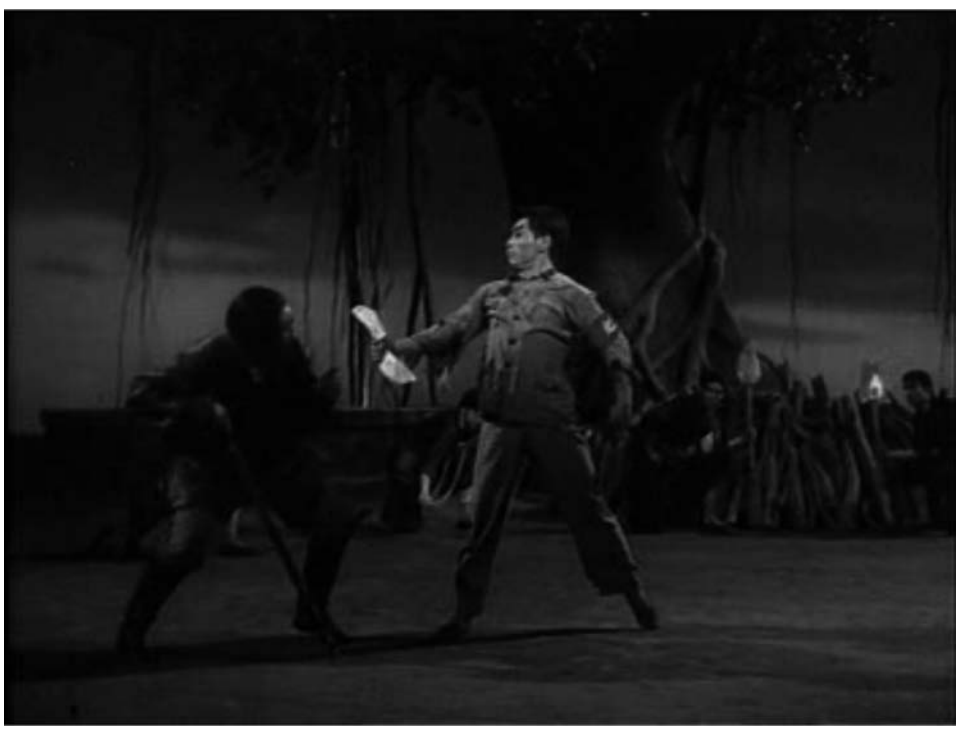

Figure 13 Red Detachment of Women, *ballet: Confession scene.*

Figure 14 Red Detachment of Women, *opera: Confession scene.*

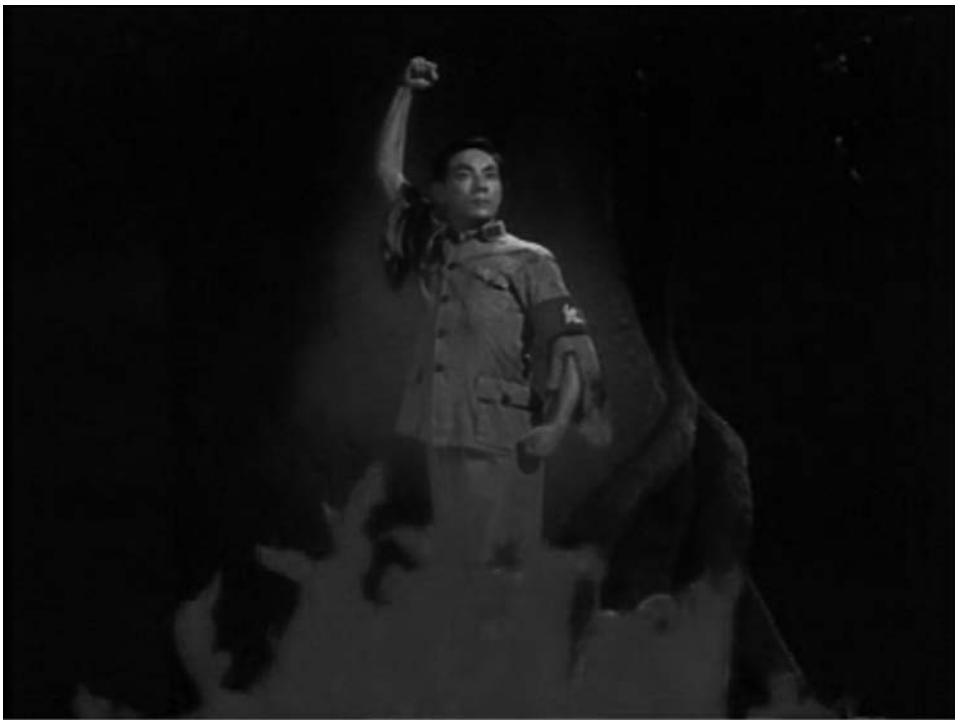

Figure 15 Red Detachment of Women, *ballet: Execution scene.*

Figure 16 Red Detachment of Women, *opera: Execution scene.*

Figure 17 Red Detachment of Women, *narrative film: Execution scene.*

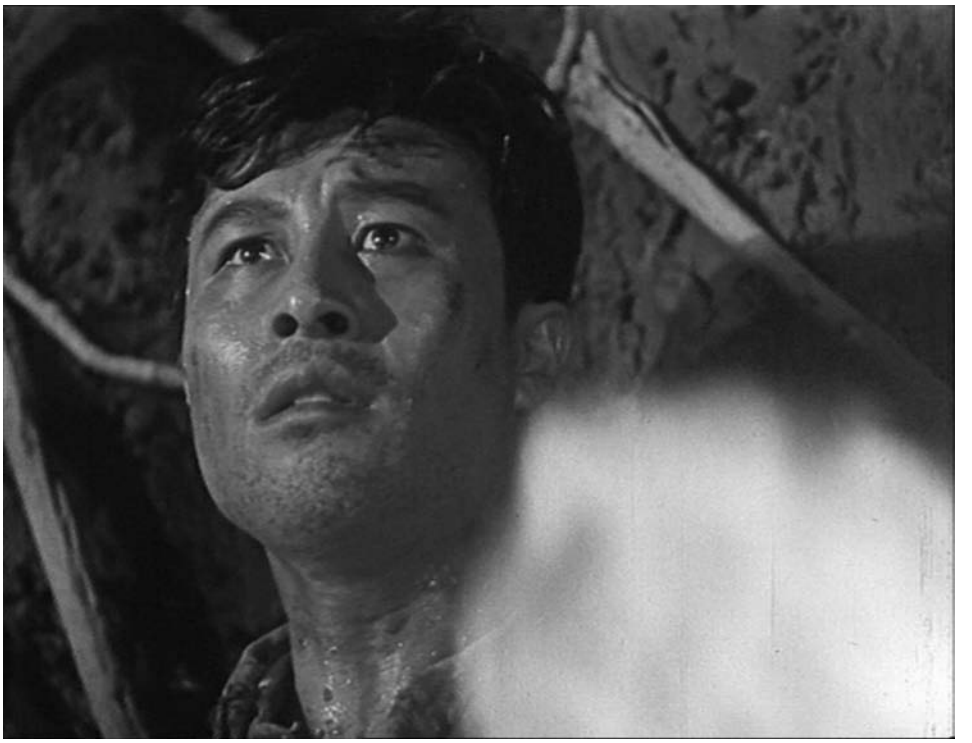

Figure 18 Red Detachment of Women, *narrative film: Hong Changqing engulfed by flames.*

> executions. . . . Its workings prevent both the performers and audiences from forgetting that what they enact and behold is consciously *made*.[35]

Through "suppositional gestures," argues Yan, acting in classical drama sought to "point to what there is to know" rather than simply to show it realistically.[36]

Ideology, form, and history

Here we begin to get to the question of *why* revolutionary cinema displayed a formalist drift culminating in the extreme formalism of the *yangbanxi*. As mentioned earlier, the moves within revolutionary aesthetics from critical realism to proletarian or socialist realism to "revolutionary realism plus revolutionary romanticism," with its strong elements of melodrama and moments of formalist montage in the case of cinema, all were related to the insistence by Communist theorists such as Zhou Yang and Mao himself that art must depart from reality in order to more clearly reflect the true, the ideal, and the universal. This requirement recalls Brooks's formula for melodrama in general, which seeks "the true wrested from the real." Given these priorities, it is hardly accidental that the

Figure 19 Red Detachment of Women, *narrative film: Wu Qionghua reaction shot.*

aesthetics of traditional opera would entirely replace those of mimetic realism in cinema by the early 1970s. As Yan argues in her discussion of theatricality in classical Chinese opera, "Chinese music-drama aims not only to pull audiences out of their regular state of mind but also move them to another sphere where surprises and wonders are registers of another kind of 'truth,' deeply mediated by or buried in what is real."[37] In "suppositionally" pointing to this Truth—now one about the teleology of Communist history and the power of its ideals—the *yangbanxi* essentially attempted through the totality of their presentation to do what the moments of the "socialist realist gaze" had done in the earlier revolutionary romanticist films of the "seventeen years" period: they sought to imbue spectators with a powerful sense of being in the presence of an absolute and sublime ideological Truth and thus to motivate them with the heroic spirit of the age.

Such extreme formalization at this particular moment in cultural history had several unforeseen implications and consequences that arguably made revolutionary culture become unwittingly self-defeating. First, in the case of cinema, the rejection of mimetic realism meant a loss of the particular ideological force of that aesthetic, especially insofar as the representation of history is concerned. Since the earliest days of filmmaking (e.g., the films that reenacted recent

executions or assassinations), the realism of the film medium has been put in the service of providing powerful images of history, images that potentially deny their own fictionality by means of their beguiling representational verisimilitude. I believe this is implied by D. N. Rodowick's assertion that "photographs do not just picture the already-happened; in making existential claims on our act of viewing, they picture *history*."[38] The captured history of the profilmic event, even if a performance, lends itself easily to historical verisimilitude of a more illusory nature, in which we feel we have witnessed not just a filmed representation but the historical event itself. With no personal memories of, say, World War II or the Vietnam War, I may nonetheless have a subconscious conviction that I know what they looked like in some detail because I have watched *Saving Private Ryan* or *Platoon*, and those films' mimetic realism no doubt increased my susceptibility to their ideological assumptions. In contrast, with the stylized aesthetic of traditional opera or ballet, the *yangbanxi* films may have presented images of history so blatantly imbued with artifice that they lessened the persuasiveness of their own representation; people may not have felt the connection with material historical reality that they get, however falsely, from a verisimilar historical film. Returning to Lefort's paradox, this formalization would seem to go hand in hand with the necessity "that ideological rule must be 'abstracted from any question concerning its origins.'"[39] In order to appear as a permanent, absolute authority, the Communist Party in a sense had to deny its own historicity, insofar as it would promulgate the latter only in the form of myth.[40]

Thus, in *yangbanxi* cinema, with the entire film attempting to establish the suppositional indication of ideological transcendence (in which the earlier revolutionary films had only indulged during particularly dramatic moments), the overdetermination of every detail by ideology paradoxically goes hand in hand with an unmooring of form from reality. The stylized performance becomes such pure spectacle that the ideological content, precisely by being so rigorously formalized, threatens to become a mere surface itself, a superficial appearance that in fact reveals nothing. Thus, for example, the *liangxiang* poses of traditional drama, as adapted to *yangbanxi*, offer an obvious opportunity to turn the socialist realist gaze into something rigorously standardized as a discrete unit of meaning, in the same way that the histrionic poses of nineteenth-century Western melodrama were abstracted from the flow of the performance to be read as semantic units by the audience, as described by Pearson. Indeed, many of the *liangxiang* struck by *yangbanxi* heroes appear to be gazes to some offscreen horizon that could indicate the superior ideological vision of the socialist romanticist hero. However, in the sheer repetitiveness of the poses as well as the artificiality of the sets, the sense that the hero is in fact looking *at* something can be lost. Instead, particularly on repeated viewings, such looks could have struck audiences as being purely formulaic, possibly even vacant (fig. 20). In this sense, the adaptation of body language,

Figure 20 Red Detachment of Women, *opera: The socialist realist gaze as* liangxiang.

particularly that of the eyes, of *liangxiang* poses from traditional opera to revolutionary *yangbanxi* may have unintentionally clashed with the precedent set by the socialist realist gazes in films of the mimetic revolutionary realist tradition preceding the Cultural Revolution. Whereas the latter may more plausibly have convinced the viewer that the Communist hero actually *did* see the Truth of correct ideology, the *yangbanxi* hero may too plainly have been looking at nothing.

In using the term "formalist drift" to describe historical change in Chinese revolutionary film aesthetics, I am in part echoing Yurchak's description of a "performative shift" in ideological rhetoric in the Soviet Union. As mentioned earlier, Yurchak describes Stalin as the external master to whom Soviet ideological rhetoric would appeal in order to conceal Lefort's paradox. According to Yurchak, after the death of Stalin "the performative dimension of ritualized and speech acts rises in importance (it is important to participate in the reproduction of these acts at the level of form), while the constative dimension of these acts become [*sic*] open-ended, indeterminate, or simply irrelevant."[41] Or, as Yurchak puts it elsewhere, "It became increasingly more important to participate in the reproduction of the *form* of these ritualized acts of authoritative discourse than to engage with their constative meanings."[42] In other words, the ideological discourse, while losing none of its omnipresence as form, became oddly detached

from reality, in that Soviet citizens started to experience it precisely as performative rather than constative, as keeping up an appearance rather than as connected to an external reality or meaning.

The formalist drift in Chinese revolutionary cinema aesthetics may ultimately have led to the same instability of ideological meaning that Yurchak finds in Soviet rhetoric following the performative shift. In the gradual drift from critical realism to socialist realism to so-called revolutionary romanticism and finally *yangbanxi* formalism, Chinese revolutionary cinema increasingly claimed a privileged relationship between the text and an external Truth rather than a lived reality. That is, the ideological reality that Zhou Yang and Mao Zedong advocated as the true concern of the socialist artist became more of an epistemological or even metaphysical category than an ontological or existential one. Due to Lefort's paradox, in practice such an ideological Truth could be secured only by appeal to an external authority—precisely the sublime revolutionary collectivity embodied in Mao himself as a godlike symbol, or in these films represented by fictional heroes in ecstatic communion with this Truth as indicated by the socialist realist gazes, the nondiegetic flag inserts, and the surging of the "Internationale" on the soundtrack. Such a sublime ideological reality paradoxically was best expressed through an ever-increasing cinematic formalism rather than an aesthetic of realism; the viewer was not asked to believe in the characters, situations, or events on the screen as real, but more importantly as true—that is, as manifesting precisely the externally guaranteed "objective truth" (of the master, of the revolution) that was unavailable in what the viewer experienced as everyday reality.

This formalization of ideological rhetoric may have set the stage for the collapse of Maoist ideology in the same way that the performative shift in Soviet rhetoric set the stage for the collapse of Communism there. With Mao's death in 1976, of course, we have the loss of the ideological "master" function that Stalin had served in the Soviet Union as well. At the same time, however, the extreme stylization of ideological messaging during the Cultural Revolution—the ever increasing distance between ideological formalization and reality—must have contributed to the sudden collapse of the ideological authority of Maoism by the end of the 1970s. In particular, the fact that the complete vacuum in feature filmmaking in the latter half of the 1960s was filled only by the highly formalized *yangbanxi* films in the early 1970s may have provided a veritable visual illustration of a performative shift in ideological discourse that potentially destabilized the symbolic field. In Lefort's words, ideological discourse becomes "haunted by tautology" when ideological rule becomes abstracted from its own historicity and instead is "represented as a convention."[43] The more that ideology insists on an abstract certainty, the more it risks revealing its actual contingency: "totalitarian discourse . . . has no room to manoeuvre"; its attempt to "abolish the historical in

History" could suddenly "appear as a logic of the absurd," "as a generalized lie, as discourse in the service of power, the mere mask of oppression."[44]

In his recent book on the cultural aspects of the Cultural Revolution, Paul Clark makes several observations that would support this claim. According to Clark, while Cultural Revolution formulas such as the "three prominences"[45] might easily be applied to arts such as stage drama, fiction, and painting, "in film, an art that lent itself to a more naturalistic approach to representing life, the opera-inspired aesthetic was an ill-fit." Clark argues that the mass distribution of films "exposed the limits of Cultural Revolution aesthetics to popular grumblings and private derision" and that film thus hastened the demise of the Cultural Revolution.[46] He returns to this idea in his conclusion, asserting that "style took over from content, as the banality of much of this cultural production became obvious after years of unrelenting posturing," in which the repetition of heroic figures' images "rendered them into kitsch icons" that were "empty of real substance."[47] Having lived in China as the Cultural Revolution wound to a close in 1974–75, Clark notes that many people frequently expressed "frustration with the empty rhetoric and meaningless idealism" of the times, though they would only do so in private among trusted family and friends. He also notes the rise of irony inspired by the formalization of political discourse (irony also being a phenomenon detailed by Yurchak as part of the performative shift in the Soviet Union): "A certain tone in singing an aria from one of the model operas, a certain flick of the head in exaggerated parody of one of the central heroes, a clever rewording of a well-known verse could provide an outlet for a largely unspoken but shared sense of the ridiculous."[48] Thus, in the same way that the performative shift subtly prepared Soviet citizens for sudden systemic collapse, the formalist drift in cinema aesthetics that accompanied the formalization of political rhetoric in the Cultural Revolution may unwittingly have prepared the way for the ultimate rejection of the period's radicalism even by the party itself—which coped with the recognition of ideological discourse as the "mere mask of oppression" (recalling Lefort) by ascribing it to the deviancy of the Gang of Four. What followed in cinema was the very different aesthetics of the reform era—in which, notably, a call for Bazinian-style realism in film language came almost as soon as Deng Xiaoping had consolidated the new direction in Chinese Communist policy.

On the other hand, this accounting possibly too closely plays along, albeit in an apparently contradictory fashion, with the same sort of reduction of these films to functions within ideological discourse that we saw with the example of the audience of the Great World drama performance as described by the Western reporter. Such a reduction happens whether we view the performances as disturbingly effective brainwashing (as that journalist did), as triumphant expressions of Communist ideals (as the Chinese Communist Party cultural authorities at the time would have it), or as manifestations of the creeping vacuity and separation

from lived experience of ideological rhetoric (as to some extent both Clark and I have done). What this kind of reduction will inevitably miss is precisely the power of formalism itself as a style. From the vantage point of close to a half-century after the early stage runs of the *yangbanxi*, what is striking is how remarkably unique the *yangbanxi* films still appear within the context of the first century or so of global cinema. The most successful ones, such as *The Red Lantern*, *Taking Tiger Mountain by Strategy* (*Zhi qu Weihu Shan*, 1970), and the 1971 version of *Red Detachment of Women*, in their marriage of more traditional forms including Peking opera and Western ballet to a rigorous cinematic formalism almost without precedent, presented one of the few sustained alternatives to the mimetic realism of classical Hollywood narration in mass-consumed feature filmmaking of the twentieth century. From this aesthetic rather than political perspective, the lasting legacy of the *yangbanxi* may well continue, somewhat ironically, to be the triumph of their formal innovation over their political agenda.

NOTES

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1. Louis Barcata, *China in the Throes of the Cultural Revolution* (New York: Hart Publishing, 1968), 159. The reporter does not give a title for the play but describes it as a series of shouted quotations from Chairman Mao, illustrated by brief skits showing triumphant revolutionary struggles. Such plays are mentioned by Paul Clark as examples of the "range of agitprop works" performed in addition to the model works in the early stages of the Cultural Revolution. See Paul Clark, *The Chinese Cultural Revolution: A History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 90.

2. Quoted in Jerome Silbergeld, *Body in Question: Image and Illusion in Two Chinese Films by Director Jiang Wen* (Princeton, NJ: P. Y. and Kinmay W. Tang Center for East Asian Art, 2008), 33.

3. Of course, one might question the premise that seeing sexuality in these works would necessarily have subverted their original intention. As Xiaomei Chen points out, a certain sensuousness and even eroticism were essential to the "voluptuous appeal" of the *yangbanxi* and associated visual culture, and this aspect could well have increased their political appeal rather than subverting it. See Xiaomei Chen, *Acting the Right Part: Political Theater and Popular Drama in Contemporary China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai`i Press, 2002), 37.

4. Clark, *Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 4.

5. Beginning in the 1930s, Communist cultural policymakers often emphasized using traditional cultural forms such as opera and folk songs to convey revolutionary messages, rather than encouraging modern Westernized forms such as the realist novel.

6. David Bordwell, *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

7. The most prominent example is Zhang Zhen, *An Amorous History of the Silver Screen: Shanghai Cinema, 1896–1937* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

8. Zhou Yang, "Thoughts on Realism," in *Modern Chinese Literary Thought: Writings on Literature, 1893–1945*, ed. Kirk A. Denton (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1996), 338.

9. Ibid., 337.

10. Ibid., 339.

11. Mao Zedong, "Talks at the Yan'an Forum on Literature and Art," in Denton, *Modern Chinese Literary Thought*, 458–84. The later

yangbanxi were explicitly connected to these historic "Talks" by frequently being premiered or performed on their anniversary.

12. Stephanie Hemelryk Donald, *Public Secrets, Public Spaces: Cinema and Civility in China* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2000), 62.

13. Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1992), 14.

14. Zhou Yang, "Thoughts," 336.

15. Ibid., 343.

16. Mao, "Talks," 470.

17. Peter Brooks, *The Melodramatic Imagination* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 2.

18. Ibid., 5.

19. Katerina Clark, "Socialist Realism *with* Shores: The Conventions for the Positive Hero," in *Socialist Realism without Shores*, ed. Thomas Lahusen and Evgeny Dobrenko (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), 27–50.

20. Donald, "National Publicness," in *Public Secrets*, 59–60.

21. Alexei Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever, Until It Was No More: The Last Soviet Generation* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006), 10.

22. As Kirk Denton has shown, there were intriguing continuities between the traditional and the *yangbanxi* role types, such as the similarity of *yangbanxi* villain roles to the clowns (*chou*) of traditional Peking opera. See Kirk A. Denton, "Model Drama as Myth: A Semiotic Analysis of *Taking Tiger Mountain By Strategy*," in *Drama in the People's Republic of China*, ed. Constantine Tung and Colin Mackerras (Albany: SUNY Press, 1987), 127.

23. Ben Singer, *Melodrama and Modernity: Early Sensational Cinema and Its Contexts* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2001), 149–88.

24. Tom Gunning, "The Cinema of Attraction: Early Film, Its Spectator and the Avant-Garde," *Wide Angle* 8 (1986): 64.

25. Lest I seem to be overgeneralizing from her particular case study, I should note that Pearson herself intends her thesis to be extended not just to Hollywood in general but to the entire globe: "By focusing on Griffith's Biograph films made during the transitional years, I hope to trace the emergence of a performance style that came to dominate the classical Hollywood cinema and, by extension, world cinema." See Roberta A. Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures: The Transformation of Performance Style in the Griffith Biograph Films* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 5.

26. Ibid., 21.

27. Ibid., 28.

28. Quoted in ibid., 138.

29. Chris Berry and Mary Farquhar, *China on Screen: Cinema and Nation* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), 47–75.

30. Zheng Zhengqiu, "Xinjujia bu neng yanxi ma?" [Can't xinju actors act in film?], in *Zhongguo wusheng dianying* [Chinese silent cinema], ed. Dai Xiaolan (Beijing: Zhonguo dianying chubanshe, 1996), 906–7. Originally published in 1925.

31. See, for example, Feng Xizui, "Tan neixin biaoyan" [On interior performance], in Dai Xiaolan, *Zhongguo wusheng dianying,* 914–15. Originally published in 1925.

32. See, for example, Hong Shen, "Biaoyan dianying yu biaoyan huaju" [Film acting and *huaju* acting], in Dai Xiaolan, *Zhongguo wusheng dianying*, 949. Originally published in 1933.

33. Pearson, *Eloquent Gestures*, 25.

34. Bordwell, "Historical-Materialist Narration: The Soviet Example," in *Narration in the Fiction Film*, 271.

35. Haiping Yan, "Theatricality in Classical Chinese Drama," in *Theatricality*, ed. Tracy C. Davis and Thomas Postlewait (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 66–67.

36. Ibid., 84.

37. Ibid., 76.

38. D. N. Rodowick, *The Virtual Life of Film* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007), 65.

39. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 10.

40. The mythical nature of the *yangbanxi* narratives is one of their characteristics emphasized by Denton in "Model Drama as Myth."

41. Yurchak, *Everything Was Forever*, 26.

42. Ibid., 25.

43. Claude Lefort, "Outline of the Genesis of Ideology in Modern Societies," in *The Political Forms of Modern Society: Bureaucracy, Democracy, Totalitarianism*, ed. John B. Thompson (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), 211, 213.

44. Ibid., 220–24.

45. This refers to the Maoist formula that, in a fictional drama, the positive characters should stand out from among all the characters, a group of heroic characters should stand out from among the positive characters, and a single great hero should stand out from among the heroic characters.

46. Clark, *Chinese Cultural Revolution*, 111.

47. Ibid., 257.

48. Ibid., 259.

Glossary

Bai mao nü	白毛女
Gongchandang wansui	共产党万岁
Hong Changqing	洪常青
Hong deng ji	红灯记
Hongse niangzijun	红色娘子军
huaju	话剧
jia	假
Jiang Qing	江青
Jiang Wen	姜文
jingju	京剧
Li Yuhe	李玉和
liangxiang	亮相
Lin Daojing	林道静
Mao Zedong	毛泽东
nannü pingdeng	男女平等
neixin biaoyan	内心表演
Qian Haoliang	钱浩亮
Qingchun zhi ge	青春之歌
Ruan Lingyu	阮玲玉
tai bu ziran	太不自然
tai guohuo	太过火
Wang Dachun	王大春
Wu Qionghua	吴琼花
Xie Jin	谢晋
xinju	新剧
xunixing	虚拟性
wenmingxi	文明戏
Yan'an	延安
yangbanxi	样板戏
Yang Mo	杨沫
zhen	真
Zheng Zhengqiu	郑正秋
Zhi qu Weihu Shan	智取威虎山
Zhou Yang	周扬