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**Jerome Silbergeld: Body in Question**

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## INTRODUCTION: BODY TALK

Jiang Wen, star actor in such films as *Hibiscus Town* and *Red Sorghum*, has written and directed his own screenplays for two films, *In the Heat of the Sun* (1994) and *Devils on the Doorstep* (2000). The former was China's box-office leader in its first year and swept Taiwan's 1996 Golden Horse awards, including best film of the year, best direction (Jiang Wen<sup>1</sup>), best original screenplay (Jiang Wen), best cinematography (Gu Changwei<sup>2</sup>), best actor (Xia Yu<sup>3</sup>), and best sound recording (Gu Changning, the cinematographer's brother<sup>4</sup>). Despite this popularity, *In the Heat of the Sun* remains virtually unseen in America and has become virtually unavailable here in both film and DVD formats, as if banned in accordance with some kind of afterthought. The latter film, *Devils on the Doorstep*, won the Jury Grand Prix at Cannes in 2000, subsequent to which the film was banned from distribution and Jiang Wen was banned personally from film directing in China for an indefinite period (which turned out to be five years).<sup>5</sup> The film has never been approved for distribution in China and has not been distributed commercially in Western theaters; it was belatedly released on Japanese DVD in 2002 and American DVD in 2005.

What leads me to write about these two films is threefold: that they are good (so aesthetically well-crafted), that they are interesting (even if they weren't so "good," they are so stimulating), and that they have so much more than first meets the eye (they reward the task of repeated viewing and encourage the writer's intermediation, turning viewers into readers). As an occasional teacher of Chinese cinema (more regularly of Chinese painting history) whose demanding standards for "class-worthy" new films are satisfied only once every few years, I found Jiang Wen's two films irresistible and I hope other writers will also, for there is surely much more to be said about them than I have set down here.

Film scholar Jason McGrath, in serving as one of my readers, commented: "No source that I'm aware of has so far read the two films together, even though they were made by the same director/cinematographer team... probably because the films are very different in both cinematic style and narrative content." At first sight, these two films seem almost to have come from

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different directors, from a different team of filmmakers. Although both are set in the past (unlike most recent Chinese films, which have eschewed this historical mode as old-fashioned “Fifth Generation” stuff<sup>6</sup>), one takes place in the pre-Revolutionary era, one in the Cultural Revolution; one is set among rural peasants, the other is set among an urban elite; one is filmed primarily in black-and-white and one primarily in color; one is cynical and dismissive, one is totally sincere and truly passionate. There are other similarities as well, less obvious perhaps: both combine an exceptional sense of humor with an experience in full measure of loss, tragedy, and even horror; the color film concludes in black-and-white and *vice-versa*; both are the work of dedicated filmmakers (director, cinematographer, and film editors) whose attentiveness to the finest level of detail can hardly even be seen by a movie house audience and seems to be there mostly to satisfy their own sense of perfected artistry. And yet, what draws them together more than similarity is complementarity. Together, as we will see in the end, they complete an agenda.

There is much to look for in a film, and I have chosen one thing to focus on, put simply: body talk. The concept of “embodiment” embodies a range of allegorical and ironic possibilities, from the theoretical to the purely literal. In providing concrete form to the metaphoric process, anything from an inanimate building to a fashionable hat to the particularized details of a human face or body will do. A recent edited volume on the subject includes scholarly studies of “bodily” forms ranging from Buddhist relics to painted flowers, from calligraphic traces to ghosts, embodying all things from “the flow of *qi*” to sexual desire, and from imperial authority to the “spirit of a passing age.”<sup>7</sup> Much of contemporary artist Gu Wenda’s work is based on transformations of body parts, disembodied and re-embodied in artistic form — for example, human hair gathered from all around the world, woven into words and characters (*United Nations Series*, 1993 onward), or powdered, boiled, and molded into “biological ink sticks” (*Ink Alchemy*, 1999–2001), the basic elements and media of literature, writing and painting, made literally from the people who use them. This comes with an ironic twist: the ink is not made for use, the words and characters are unreadable.

However, what we might see as metaphor, allegory, and analogy, many or most in China might see as a form of real identity, not of two things merely

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juxtaposed and similar by way of coincidence but as a shared, if varied, identity of things by virtue of deriving from a common set of generative principles. A coherent system of principles, for example, closely relates the Chinese practices of traditional medicine, which features the body as earth, and of architectural siting or *fengshui*, in which one sees the metaphoric earth-as-body.<sup>8</sup> Thus, a recent article by Cary Liu describes how

Architecture can then be seen as manifesting imperishable words and potent patterns — *embodied images*. In architecture, embodiment can take the form of numerology, geomancy, cosmology, building rites and deities, sumptuary regulations, and symbology.

To this list of things embodied in architectural form one might add, among others: regional identity and local pride; the present and future health and well-being of a resident family (or the lack of it); and in a word, taste (or in two words, which remind us just how much a word or two *won't* do, “bad” taste). Liu continues,

... but it is also important to take into consideration the way embodied words and patterns are transmitted. With the distance of geography or the passage of time, new meanings are often superimposed, dressed in new forms, functions, and materials.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, the embodiment of something in concrete form does not mean that the meaning of the embodiment is fixed, for the significance of embodied forms fluctuates with authorial intent and audience interpretation.

In this volume, “body talk” means both the body doing the equivalent of talking (significant postures, gestures, stances, actions) and, conversely, talk about bodies. Bodies “talking” involves both acculturated and universal languages, and most images embody both. Liu Jun’s 1985 photograph (fig. 1) is a classic of both composition and content, and its body talk is the basis of both. Among my students, those from China are quicker than their American counterparts to judge, from his clothing and his aloof pose, that the tall standing figure is the local Party leader, the village cadre, caught up in a minidrama that illustrates his alienation from the masses he is supposed to serve. The single-frame photograph lacks the information provided by an ongoing cinematic

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narrative: namely, that the horizontal counterpart to this towering figure, his intense emotion the counterpart to the standing figure's aloofness, is the victim of the cadre's physical assault. But once this information is shared, the body language is no longer a local dialect but one that can be read by all. The look on the victim's face tells the story: prevented by status from defending himself, though he may be suffering from a punch to the stomach or a kick to the crotch, the open-mouthed expression of agony is no more one of physical pain than it is of boundless frustration. How much humiliation can one — must one — endure? His eyes squeezed tightly shut, he is beyond sympathy and comfort. Yet two villagers, one older, one young, attend to the victim's physical distress. Focusing their attention downward, the villagers' sympathies are evident. None dares to look at the cadre, just as he looks at none of them. Their disgust, their disdain, is manifest without words. Do they also fear him? What is it that maintains his singular authority and restrains the hostility of all those who surround him? Folding his arms and refusing visual contact, is he really as confident as this invincible pose suggests, or does his arrogant posture mask some insecurity beneath? What, one wonders, is the future of this relationship between the masses and the people? The theme of the photograph and the language that it uses are those of *In the Heat of the Sun*.<sup>10</sup>



**Figure 1** Liu Jun, *The Village Cadre Knocking the Old Villager Down to the Ground*, black-and-white photograph, 1985. Guangdong Museum of Art. From Wang Huangsheng and Hu Wugong, eds., *Zhongguo renben, jishi zai dangdai: Humanism in China, A Contemporary Record of Photography*, 195.

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The substitution of body image for verbal communication is especially important in a film culture “where the censorship of film scripts in their textual formulation shifts the filmmakers’ primary negotiable space to the realm of unspoken images, a richly encoded visual realm where textual pursuit alone may falter but where the art historian travels most comfortably.”<sup>11</sup> This includes the metaphoric substitution of individual bodies for something larger than themselves, ideas or institutions, which is the basis of the interpretation of *In the Heat of the Sun* set forth in this volume, as well as the human body–animal body exchange, both anthropomorphism and zoomorphism, so important in *Devils on the Doorstep*.<sup>12</sup> Body talk places an emphasis on film as a visual art form. Talk about bodies, on the other hand, exhibits a marked lack of fixity. Time and again in these films, one can watch closely as the same body, unchanged, evokes remarkably diverse or rapidly changing perceptions, less responsive to the body itself than to the inner, psychological world of the respondent.<sup>13</sup> This depends surprisingly little on cinematographic image. On the other hand, as we will see, the filmmakers themselves can do the “talking,” in a purely visual way, through the knowing juxtaposition of people and animal counterparts in telling situations. It is within this responsive fluidity that these two films’ bodily discourse takes place, highlighting the twin pairings of nostalgia/misremembrance and fraternization/bestialization.

Advancing theory is not the aim of this book. But for a culture like China’s, in which, what we (from a somewhat different perspective than theirs) call “allegory” and the “analogical mode” reign supreme in rhetorical expression as the circumspect means of negotiating with censorship, a careful bit of body watching — the figure taken figuratively — can be a very useful tool in trying to understand the unstated or understated. The careful observation of form can take one beyond the obvious in textual narrative, to a level in which the significance of the narrative, made subtle for the sake of both artistry and political subversion, is itself embodied. This observational process is essentially the same for all art-historical disciplines, whether traditional or modern, two-dimensional or three-, static or kinetic. ■