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ROCHESTER INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

A Thesis Submitted to the Faculty of
The College of Imaging Arts and Sciences
In Candidacy for the Degree of
MASTER of FINE ARTS

**At the Dark End of Eros: The Dark Side of
Love and Desire**

by

Chia-Wen Hsieh

2003

Approvals

The following members of my Thesis Board Committee accept this written portion of my thesis as the completion of the Master of Fine Arts Degree.

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Rochester Institute of Technology

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Thank You

Tina Lent, Tom Lightfoot, Stephanie Maxwell

...for the genuine advice and endless support

Mom & Dad

...for loving me, and encouraging me to pursue my dreams

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...for their valuable company and inspirations

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Preface

Making art is like mapping a big puzzle, a puzzle called “life.”

A mystery, like Rosebud in Citizen Kane, is thus made visible.

When the artist asks, the sound of questioning becomes

Louder and louder.

She is led by the echo of her own voice into a journey in search of love.

The echoes never end.

Whenever she opens her eyes, there will be a rosebud in front of her.

Only when she closes her eyes, and sees through the darkness inside,

Does she find the joy of presence.

*Chia-Wen Hsieh
San Jose, California
September 2003*

At the Dark End of Eros: The Dark Side of Love and Desire

I. Background

I was born in 1977, and grew up in the 90s. The modern Women's Movement in Taiwan started in the early 70s when the current Taiwan Vice President Annette Lu suggested the idea of "new feminism." But the Women's Movement in Taiwan was marginalized until the end of the 80s due to the conservative political environment and harsh restrictions on civil liberties.

The dropping of martial law in 1987 opened the door to a new era of the Women's Movement. By forming groups with focus on specific gender issues (child prostitution, abortion rights, women worker's rights, support for divorced women, unity of housewives) and participating in politics and the change of law, women were able to challenge the old social system and ideologies. Although men were still dominant in many social and political fields, women were able to talk about the social injustices surrounding the sexes. Women had a lot more power to organize groups and activities to make their concerns public issues. Women were more encouraged and supported to develop their professional careers instead of being housewives and other caretaking roles. Furthermore, women were able to develop different opinions, and to form various communities.

In the 90s, besides challenging the inequality between the sexes in the public realm, power relationships between the sexes in private realms were also examined. These included the study of gender identities, romantic love, and the exploration of the body and sexuality. The Women's Movement became more radical and diverse.

Having different beliefs about sexuality and sexual liberation, feminists were divided into two groups. One group tended to believe that sexual liberation would make women more vulnerable in the realm of romantic love, and that women would not be able to avoid exploitation by showing their bodies in a male dominant sex industry. They often possessed a more conservative opinion about pornography, prostitution, the gay and lesbian movement, and sexual liberation. The other group of feminists found sexual liberation as a way to empower women and affirm their independence. They believed that sexual pleasure is a source of empowerment, and that women have the right to control their bodies. They often worked hand in hand with gay and lesbian activists, sex workers, and other sexually diverse people, together questioning the heterosexual dominance of society.

In college, I attended the Women Studies Club where female members shared their ideals, ideas, and emotions. Though I thought the beliefs of the two groups of feminists could be combined, I was more involved with the younger generation of feminists who thought sexuality and the revolution of psyche is the key towards personal and social liberation. I participated in the gay and lesbian movement, protesting the repression of society upon sexually diverse people. Emotionally and intellectually, we explored sexuality fully with our minds and bodies, generating novels, poetry, academic writing, and art works.

Issues surrounding gender and sexuality are never simple, and they can't be resolved by one theory or one law. It is often through social and personal reflection and practices that we find the complexity of the inter-relationship between society and the individual. And only when each individual is able to honestly address his or her feelings and thoughts without being afraid of being wrong can we say freedom is possible.

There were always conflicts between political belief and personal lives; and there were always battles between passion and reason. It was through a close scrutiny of oneself - a gaze that almost makes one feel embarrassedly naked - that we discovered the secret desire inside ourselves. It was through these experiences that we found out how one's nature could be exposed and altered under an extreme condition. Furthermore, we realized how one's personality and demons affect his or her life as much as social forces. This is stated well in a description in the novel *Notes of a Desolate Man*: "He had always thought that the demonic black hole appeared as a result of pressure from society, relatives, and parents, and he sought his answer in suicide. He told me, the demon is part of you, so welcome it and talk with it when it comes. You'll get used to it eventually."¹ This realization enabled us to differentiate our needs on various levels, and to pay close attention to the true voice of our hearts.

Today, when I look back at the romantic love and the sexual explorations I have experienced, I can still feel the intensity and the great impact they have upon me. Although many experiences were painful, and I've lost some innocence and trust in human beings I once had, I am still thankful for the past. It is through that difficult and somewhat exciting period of my life that I comprehend so much more about both the bright and dark side of human nature and the strength and weakness of the mind of the human.

Some people didn't survive the destructive force of their passion or social repression, and they chose death as a way out. The rest survived with a remapped perception and a different attitude towards life. The gay and lesbian community became larger and

¹ Chu T'ien-Wen, *Notes of a Desolate Man*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999): 40.

stronger, and information was more widely spread. When it comes to sexuality, although younger generations may still suffer from the same emotional confusion when they grow up, it is much easier for them to find a community and meaningful personal identities.

A big part of the material I use for creating art comes from my life experience. I believe by writing and observing “I,” a human being existing at this time in this world, I will find some truth about the uniqueness of our generation as well as the human nature that hardly changes through time.

II. Introduction

Eros, the fairest of the deathless gods;
he unstrings the limbs and subdues both mind
and sensible thought in the breasts of all gods and men.²

Eros was the god of love and desire in Greek mythology. His counterpart in Roman mythology was known as Cupid. Eros inspired desire in countless Greek gods, goddesses, heroes, and heroines. No one could resist his enchantment.

Perhaps nothing can tell more about a person than one's love and desire. Nothing could make a person more vulnerable than depriving him of his love. Nothing can drive one crazier than being betrayed by the loved one. Nothing could damage a person more than breaking his or her heart. And nothing could make one more vibrant than instilling him with love and passion.

I intended to explore the dark side of human intimacy and sexuality in my art work. I am intrigued not only by desire itself, but how love and desire, in an extreme condition, alter and control human beings' minds and behavior. We always wonder how so-called love and devotion could lead to hatred and destruction, and sometimes we can't control envy and longing by rationalizing the situation.

Sex, as a strong force for prolonging the human species, always tempts man to exceed social norms. We pray for the love of a poet who slashes his two lovers, and kills himself, but we condemn the evil people in Court TV who beat their wives or shoot their husbands. Passionate feelings always exist side by side with a sense of horror, as the female mantis who snaps off the male mantis' head and consumes his body while they are still coupling. At the dark end of Eros, the hero and heroine can no longer distinguish pleasure from suffering, desire from horror, and joy from sorrow.

² Hesiod, *Theogony*, quoted in Loggia.com, *Mythography*, <http://www.loggia.com/myth/myth.html>. 1997.

In one of the last scenes of *Mulholland Drive*, a film filled with intense feelings of desire, hatred, loss and desperation, the protagonist masturbates, and then shoots herself to death. At the dark end of Eros, man finally attains peace by totally descending into darkness.

III. Introduction to Paintings and other Fine Art Pieces

My artistic expression evolved through time as my perception of life and states of mind changed. Themes and styles of art work are like personal memories: some stay long through life; others are buried or simply fade away.

I believe that all forms of art are related to each other, and one can adopt different kinds of artistic practice to best convey his or her ideas and feelings. One can write poetry, paint, make films, cook, and grow plants without the identity of “being an artist.”

I started to paint since I believed that through visual language I could convey my thoughts and emotions better than through verbal communications. Images are the outcome of the complex cooperation of both consciousness and unconsciousness. Some images are created with much thinking and rational control; others come from fantasies and the unconscious. Symbols, strange figures and objects, lines and shapes took place on paper. Those paintings and drawings were composed of both abstract and representational images.

Abstract, Representational, and Narrative

There is no abstract art. You must always start with something. Afterward you can remove all traces of reality. There is no danger then, anyway, because the idea of the object will have an indelible mark. It is what started the artist off, excited his ideas, and stirred up his emotions.³

--Pablo Picasso

Few of the paintings I created during the first two quarters at RIT were planned beforehand. I simply poured out whatever was inside me, and let my hand and body move with intuition and momentary feelings. The structure of the painting would gradually take place. It was like improvising a song or a dance. They were composed with both abstract and representational elements.

³ Dore Ashton, ed. *Picasso on Art*, 64; quoted in Sylvan Barnet. *A Short Guide to Writing about Art* (Longman, 2000):31.

Early Morning Nightmare (fig.1) is the documentation of a nightmare. I dreamed of somebody who had caused me pain and sorrow, with whom at that moment I had ceased communications. I used only black and white to depict the heaviness and sadness of this relationship. The lack of colors also suggests loss in the past that was being mourned at the present.

In the Church (fig.2) depicts the exhilarating and damaging power of raw emotion. This semi-abstract painting is based on an affair taking place in a church. Two desolate souls share their drunken desire. Passion bursts out, and dies away from one side. The other is left alone to deal with longing and pain. Against the dark background, we see some obscure figures. The intensity of the event is shown through blurry boundaries between the figures and the raw muscle-like texture that constructs them. The use of red in the background suggests a sense of violence.

Color, Shape, Symbol and Meanings

Kristeva notes the linking of colour with the maternal reference of 'going back to the source' and...she adds that Marcelin Pleyne has shown, in the case of Matisse, the connection between chromatic experience, relation to the mother, and the oral phase of infant eroticism.⁴

-- Joan Key

Besides voicing out feelings of sorrow and pain, my paintings also reveal the desire to regain warmth and love from "Mother", to embrace ocean feelings, and to regain contact with the very origin of the world. Breast-shape images and themes of birth and nursing repeatedly appear in these paintings.

Birth (fig.3) is a warm and organic painting. The two large round objects remind the spectator of female breasts. Between them there is red fluid coming out like menstrual

⁴ Joan Key, "Models of Painting Practice," *New Feminist Art Criticism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995):161.

blood. It symbolizes the female's ability to give birth. The fetus is just taking shape to become human. The whole picture is like a womb. Inside the dark harmony lives and hopes are generated.

The Old Baby (fig.4) is an attempt at a more representational approach to present ideas. The baby and the feeding breast are easily recognizable as subjects. The baby is unusually old. When I created this painting, I felt that I was like that baby. No matter how old and damaged I felt inside, I still longed for "unconditional love." But I also realized that "unconditional love" could hardly exist in real life when I am not a child anymore. I created "the breast" without showing the "mother's face" in the picture since the source of love and warmth is still pretty remote and unperceivable. The baby shows her desire and alertness through her eyes. She is afraid that once she closes her eyes, the nourishing source will fade away.

Naked, Explicit, and Transcendent

1.

More so than men who are coaxed toward social success, toward sublimation, women are body.⁵
--Hélène Cixous

Not long ago, few female philosophers, writers and spiritual masters were publicly recognized. Women were associated with spirits only when they were viewed as an inspirational muse or a natural earth mother. Women seldom had the chance to express their thoughts and ideas about morality, social values, and living philosophy. On the other hand, they were often forced to become "the other", to play a role that suited male

⁵ Hélène Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa," *New French Feminism*, 257; quoted in Mary Anne Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Erens. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990): 46.

philosophers' ideal society and ethics. In a more extreme condition, women were objectified as simply bodies over which men had control.

I had difficulty consolidating the idea of sublimation with the fact that women had not had full control over their bodies and souls. I felt a contradiction between the ideas of transcendence, "becoming a complete and peaceful person" and a woman's suffering resulting from social injustice, physical abuse, and mistreatment. I felt that sometimes the talk of truth and "the right path of life" could become oppressive to people who have different beliefs and sensitivities. When I grew up, boys were encouraged to explore the outside world and expand their territories while girls were expected to stay at the 'safe places' of home and school. Most of the differences between men and women are socially constructed. Even though, some qualities labeled as 'feminine characteristics' are less valued in society, and are considered a symptom of weakness. This results from a single-valued patriarchal society.

I created a series of paintings with Chinese brushes and ink. In these paintings, I explored the combination of image and text. Both are equally important for constructing these works. I tried to address my ideas and emotions about society with explicit images and strong words. Some of them are short phrases, some are poems, and others are political statements with a certain level of irony and anger in them. Neither texts nor images are simply supplements for each other. These two elements are combined to create a new meaning.

In *A Full Moon in the Middle of the Sky* (fig.5), I tried to mimic the style of Zen paintings. Artist and Monk Master Hongyi wrote a poem for his close friend before he died. The last sentence of the poem reads, "In the middle of the sky there shines a full moon,"

symbolizing the completeness and purity of one's soul. I used this phrase in my painting. But instead of drawing a flower, a monk, or an abstract line as shown in many Zen paintings next to the poem, I drew an injured woman lying there already dead. This woman symbolized the unwanted and excluded female existence in society. It is through this abjection that men attain their transcendence and purity. By showing the ideal state of being by the text and the disturbing image of a female body, I questioned the idea of transcendence and religious authorities.

2.

But blood, as a vital element, also refers to women, fertility, and the assurance of fecundation. It thus becomes a fascinating semantic crossroads, the propitious place for abjection, where death and femininity, murder and procreation, cessation of life and vitality all come together.⁶

In the painting *B.e.d* (fig.6), I intended to use a still image to tell a story or to suggest an event. The objects, visual elements and their composition were all designed to convey certain meanings. An event was introduced through the gesture and the position of the man, and the red blood stain on the bed.

In cinema, the design of mise-en-scene is often used for suggesting the background of characters, their relationships, and the events. Good directors design every shot carefully, so that the framing, composition, poses, and positions of characters help convey his or her ideas in a visual way. Instead of making an explicit statement: "this is what has happened," the painter and the filmmaker let the audience speculate about the character and the event by putting together all the visual elements - obvious and subtle ones.

The blood stain left on the bed suggests both the existence and the absence of the woman. What has happened? Is the blood menstrual or a result of loss of virginity? Does the

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror*, 96; quoted in Barbara Creed, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. (London: Routledge, 1993): 62.

blood come from a wound? Does it suggest violence? Where is the woman? Has she already left? Is she in another room? Will she come back again? The man, facing to the opposite direction of this vacancy, seems not to care. Has he fulfilled his sexual desire? Was he disappointed about the woman who was experiencing her period? Is he upset that the bed is dirtied? In fact, whose bed is this? Is this bed in a house or in a cheap motel? The spectator is asked to construct his or her own narrative.



Figure 1: *Nightmare*



Figure 2: *In the Church*



Figure 3: *Birth*



Figure 4: *the Old Baby*



Figure 5: *A Full Moon In the Middle of the Sky*



Figure 6: *B.e.d*

IV. Painting and Film

Most of my early paintings were close to the historical movement - abstract expressionism. At that time I worked intuitively. Feelings and emotions were my direct source for creating art. Although the subjects were unrecognizable, there was always a sense of narration in those paintings. The desire to tell a story was hidden beneath colors and shapes.

At that time, I had difficulties connecting my right brain (feelings - emotions) with my left brain (reason - concept). On one side, I enjoyed the direct and sometimes violent physical contact with the canvas. Emotions and intuition were the sources of motion painting. The act of painting itself was more important than the outcome - the appearance of the final works. On the other hand, I often felt the desire to explore philosophical concepts and certain social and cultural issues through art making.

Critiques in the Fine Arts Studio program tend to be formalistic. But besides shape, color, and the composition of art works, the motivation and the concept behind them are what I mostly care about. I started to do some more narrative and conceptual works, using different materials and techniques including collage, combining text and images, mixed media, and installation. At that time, my instructor was an artist who started to practice art when modernism and formalism strongly dominated the art world. He favored abstract modes of expression over narrative, historical, or political content in art⁷. He believed that to have a political statement in a work of art is to “shout loud in front of the spectator,” which he felt uncomfortable with.

⁷ Terry Barrett, *Criticizing Art: Understanding the Contemporary*. (Mountain View: Mayfield Publishing Company, 1994). 38.

During winter quarter of my first year, I took a video production class where I made *A Catgirl*. I became very interested in motion pictures, which allowed me to powerfully use images and time to tell stories. I felt that video might be a good medium for me to explore complex concepts and “situations.” During the summer between first year and second year, I attended a film and video production summer workshop at University of Southern California. It was during that time that I decided to explore more about film and video language and techniques for the rest of my graduate school years.

Painting vs. Film

To switch focus from fine arts painting to film and video production, I was asked to find connections between these two art forms. Although I personally believe an artist should be free to use any form of artistic expression to deliver his or her messages, I did find some similarities and differences between filmmaking and painting through the process of studying these two media.

Robert Rosen analyzed the relationship of film to painting, and suggested that “popular narrative cinema and modern painting are necessarily intertwined, both historically and aesthetically.”⁸ He suggests that film and painting share expressive challenges and aesthetic strategies in these respects:⁹

1. Representing depth on a two-dimensional plane

Painters convey an illusion of depth by the rules of perspective, and filmmakers select different lenses to help create realistic or distorted representations of dimensionality.

2. Working within the limitations of a frame

⁸ Robert Rosen, “Notes on Film and Painting.” *Art and Film since 1945: Hall of Mirrors*. (Los Angeles: Museum of Contemporary Art; New York: Monacelli Press, 1996): p.247.

⁹ *Ibid.*, pp.247-260.

“Painters are more likely to experiment with different shapes of ‘canvas,’ whereas filmmakers are more limited to show works on a conventional rectangular screen.” Both painters and filmmakers frequently try to create a dialectical interaction between what is inside and outside its boundaries.

3. The narrative tradition

Although painting has a long and rich narrative tradition, “the major currents of artistic modernism have tended to marginalize the importance of storytelling.” On the other hand, narrative practices have always been dominant in the film industry.

4. Point of View

“Both painting and film strive to define and control a spectator’s point of view.” Since time adds another dimension to film, filmmakers exercise absolute control over “the duration of a spectator’s involvement with a work and over the sequencing of the spectator’s involvement with the images.”

5. Self-reflectivity

“Contemporary painting has called into question virtually every aspect of past practices.” On the other hand, mainstream cinema still tends to practice “Hollywood’s illusionist cinema” -- to establish the credibility of on-screening images as the equivalent of real life.” However, some experimental and auteur filmmakers have challenged the dominant film formula by applying multiple screens (e.g. Andy Warhol, *Chelsea Girls* (1966)), combining real footage and faked material to create a parodic documentary (e.g. Luis Buñuel, *Las Hurdes* (1933)), as well as revealing the illusiveness of projected film (e.g. Chris Marker, *La Jetée* (1962))

6. The use of color, texture, light, and shadow

Color is an essential element in creating emotions and meanings in both film and painting. For painters, light and shadow help sculpture the depth and space of an image. “For filmmakers it is the element without which the medium would quite literally not exist.” When it comes to texture, “film, as a projection of light and shadows on a flat screen, must use visual style to evoke texture inferentially” whereas the physicality of brush strokes instantly shapes a viewer’s emotional responses.

Many filmmakers are also painters. In their creative life they sometimes go back and forth between painting and filmmaking. Leading avant-garde British artist Derek Jarman was a poet, painter, filmmaker, gardener, and gay activist. His last film “Blue,” one hour and seventeen minutes of luminous blue 35mm glow, is an image that reveals “the pray to be freed from image,”¹⁰ and the process of becoming “nothingness(death).” Gridley Minima comments on the film of which the ancestors might be the monochromes of Yves Klein: “Freed from self-conception as artists, queers, or anything else, we are free to become what only death can make us, human, and hence free to realize the true potential of our estate.”¹¹

Why did I make videos instead of painting as a fine art student? I think at that time of my creative process, I simply felt that the motion picture was a better means to extend my interest and desire to tell stories. Therefore, I carried the issues and ideas of relationships, identity, and sexuality explored previously in paintings and other fine art pieces into the making of film and video works.

¹⁰ Gridley Minima, “Blue: film by Derek Jarman,” *h2so4*, Desert Moon Periodicals & Last Gasp, <http://www.h2so4.net/reviews/blue.html>.

¹¹ Ibid..

V. Film and Video Works

A CATGIRL

Synopsis: *A girl develops an intimate relationship with a catgirl, not knowing the killing nature of the half animal and half human creature. At the end, the catgirl poisons the girl, and then lives in her body.*

When I was still a little girl, I often read a story about a catgirl in a color magazine. The summary of the story was: The catgirl didn't have any family. She often wandered on the street alone. On a cold winter night, if there was a stranger knocking on your door, she might be a catgirl.....

I looked at the illustration of the catgirl. She was very young and beautiful, but her big eyes were full of sorrow. There was a shade of coldness on her face, which belonged to another species, mild but noticeable. This lonely and pitiful figure had two cute cat ears. When I looked at the catgirl, I sensed something mysterious and a little evil. Two opposite feelings appeared at the same time when I looked at her, enchanted: I was glad that I am not a catgirl, but a normal girl who has food and family, but I also felt my desire to become a catgirl.

I never saw a movie about catgirls or cat women before writing the story. I didn't try to analyze the characters and why I chose them. A teacher said that *A Catgirl* (fig.7) is "heavily sex loaded." One male classmate suggested that I send the video to a gay and lesbian film festival. Not until then did I start to look closer at the references to lesbianism in the movie.

While I was doing research, I read about Jacques Tourneur's film *Cat People* (1942). The story of *Cat People* is: Irena believes herself related to cat women, a group of women led

by evil invaders to witchcraft and devil worship. Irena is pursued by two men: Oliver Reed and Dr. Judd. Contrast to Oliver's passive reaction to Irena's sexual attraction, Dr. Judd attempts to "cure" and gain control over her. They fall in love, and Irena transforms into a panther. After an intense battle, Dr. Judd is killed by the panther.

Within the context of the film, the meaning that cat women suggests intrigued me: 'As Dr. Judd relates Irena's description of the cat women, they are "women who in jealousy or passion or out of their own corrupt passions can turn into great catlike panthers. And if one of these women were to fall in love and if her lover were to kiss her, take her into his embrace, she would be driven by her own evil to kill.'" The man, Dr. Judd, who tries to control Irena's power ends up being killed by Irena's panther form. As most monsters and evil powers are male, feminist critics developed an interest in studying female monsters in horror films. According to Karen Hollinger, Tourneur attempts to "utilize the traditional monster film's methods of disavowing the female sexual threat, but they are exposed here as pitifully inadequate to control the horror of the female monster."¹²

In my video *A Catgirl*, the catgirl can also be interpreted as the carrier of destructive power of female passion and sexuality. Different from the film *Cat People*, the victim and the target of the catgirl's passion is a woman instead of a man. The catgirl kills the girl who falls in love with her, and then lives in her body. Lesbianism is therefore implied in this thriller piece.

Lesbian vampires are another icon representing the horrific power of women sexuality and the extreme closeness of lesbian relationships. The act of a woman biting another woman's neck and sucking her blood is violent, but at the same time extremely intimate.

¹² Karen Hollinger. "The Monster as Woman: Two Generations of Cat People," *The Dread of Difference*. Ed. Grant, Barry Keith. (Austin: University of Texas Press. 1996): 301.

The female vampire is abject because she disrupts identity and order. Driven by her lust for blood, she does not respect the dictates of the law, which set down the rules of proper sexual conduct.¹³

Barbara Creed interprets the female vampire film *The Hunger* by saying that there is a sense in which blood is equivalent to the mother's milk. In *A Catgirl*, the catgirl poisons her roommate by giving her milk. Similar to the boundary-crossings in lesbian vampire films, *A Catgirl* also touches these taboos: a symbolic mixing of blood and milk, a collapse of boundaries between self and other, a possible retreat into narcissism, and the representation of lesbian desire.¹⁴

Some feminist critics challenge degrading images of women, including lesbian vampires, by suggesting that lesbian vampires represent stereotypes of lesbian relationships - morbid and sterile.¹⁵ As Bonnie Zimmerman states:

By showing the lesbian as a vampire-rapist who violates and destroys her victim, men alleviate their fears that lesbian love could create an alternate model, that two women, without coercion or morbidity, might prefer one another to a man.¹⁶

From my point of view, I think political factors should inspire rather than limit our imagination while examining films about or made by women. We should try to listen to the diversity and different experiences of women. Passion and the dark side of human desire have as strong impacts upon women as men, upon homosexual as heterosexual relationships. To live by the law of desire can be dangerous and destructive. Each human being chooses his or her own attitude towards love and life, and thus to some extent

¹³ Barbara Creed, "Woman as Vampire: the Hunger," *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. (London: Routledge, 1993): 61.

¹⁴ Ibid., 69.

¹⁵ Barry Keith Grant, ed. *The Dread of Difference*. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996): 381.

¹⁶ Ibid., 402.

chooses one's destiny. Plato believed passion can only bring untruth, pain, and destruction while Nietzsche adored the Greek god Dionysus for the "great and terrible passions" he could permit himself.¹⁷

¹⁷ Ibid., 402.



Figure 7: (Still Photo from *A Catgirl*)

The extreme intimacy and destructive force between the girl and the catgirl implies the intensity of lesbian passion and desire.

LAMP LOVE

Womanliness is a mask which can be worn and removed.¹⁸

Synopsis: *A woman wearing a lamp head decides to leave the relationship she has with a lamp. One night, after putting her lamp lover to sleep, she takes off her lamp head, and then flushes herself into a toilet.*

In the beginning of the film, we are introduced with a lamp and a person wearing a lamp head sitting on the sofa. The person who wears a lamp head starts to touch the lamp, and play with it (fig.8a). Not getting much response from the lamp, the person, who wears a lamp head as well as a long women's pajama takes the lamp to the bedroom, and puts it to sleep.

The next scene is in the bathroom. The person with a lamp head looks in the mirror, and takes off the lamp head. At this moment, we see a woman's image reflected on the mirror, her face out of focus (fig.8b). The woman looks at herself in the mirror, and gently touches her face. Then she steps into the toilet, and flushes herself away.

In this symbolist film, realism is disturbed for the sake of revealing the underlying truth. The pajama is a symbol of femininity and domesticity, often worn by housewives and pregnant women. The woman is wearing a mask - a lamp head, which implies that her voice is silenced in the relationship. The lamp head, as a veil, also suggests that femininity is but a masquerade. In her 1929 essay "Womanliness as a Masquerade," Joan Riviere proposed femininity is psycho-socially constructed. Riviere argued in a frequently cited passage:

¹⁸ Mary Anne Doane, "Film and the Masquerade: Theorizing the Female Spectator." *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*. Ed. Patricia Erens. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press. 1990). 49.

Womanliness therefore could be assumed and worn as a mask, both to hide the possession of masculinity and to avert the reprisals expected if she was found out to possess it.¹⁹

Although the concept of masquerade “may be disheartening for a feminist seeking to shed outmoded stereotypes of the feminine mystique,...the masquerade offers a liberatory avenue leading away from biological essentialism: woman can play the woman or not as she so pleases.”²⁰ In *Lamp Love*, the heroine chooses to leave a relationship where she is designated to be “a lamp woman,” and has to hide other identities. In the scene where she takes off the lamp head, her face appears in the mirror. She then finally is able to reconstruct her identities that have been negated for so long.

Structure, Visual Language, and Techniques

Through the stop motion technique, a lamp is transformed into a lamp figure that has life, and needs sleep as well as a partnership. On the other hand, a woman wearing a lamp head implies her objectified and still existence. The reliance on the interaction between the actor and props, simple settings, and improvisational acting echoes the convention of performance art.

¹⁹ Joan Riviere, “Womanliness as a masquerade.” *Formations of Fantasy*, ed. Victor Burgin, James Donald and Cora Kaplan. (London and New York: Methuen, 1986): 38; quoted in “masquerade”, Elizabeth Wright, ed. *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: a Critical Dictionary*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1992): 243.

²⁰ Ibid, 243.



Figure 8a (Photo Still from *Lamp Love*)

How if I had a lamp lover...



Figure 8b (Photo Still from *Lamp Love*)

The woman takes off the lamp head, and sees her own face.

PEPPER

Food, however, only becomes abject if it signifies a border “between two distinct entities or territories.”²¹

-- Julia Kristeva

Synopsis: *A girl visits her friend whose husband just died. During the time they have lunch together, the widow stops the girl from using the pepper in a black pepper can. In truth, the “pepper” in the can is the ashes of the widow’s husband, which she consumes with daily meals.*

Extreme intimacy and sexual desire summon the final unifying and devouring act. The very end of unification often means death. Similar to *A Catgirl*, *Pepper* shows extreme intimacy through the unification of bodies. In *A Catgirl*, the catgirl kills her roommate and lives inside her body. In *Pepper*, a widow tries to reunite with her late husband by eating ashes of his body. Bathed in strong passion, we all have the desire to devour the beloved one.

Structure, Visual Language, and Techniques

Pepper is composed of two scenes. The first scene is of a friend visiting the young widow. They have lunch together. The young widow keeps adding pepper to her dish. But when the female friend tries to reach for the pepper can, the young widow grabs the can quickly, and keeps the can beside her (fig.9). Here a mystery is suggested through the interaction between the two characters. The audience wants to know the intentions behind the widow’s action.

²¹ Julia Kristeva, *Powers of Horror* (Columbia University Press, 1982), 75; quoted in Barbara Creed, “Kristeva, Femininity, Abjection”, *The Monstrous-Feminine: Film, Feminism, Psychoanalysis*. (London: Routledge, 1993): 9.

The second part of the film offers a disturbing and somewhat thrilling explanation. We see the young widow visit a cemetery. She digs out a pot with ashes inside. With much gentleness, she carefully takes out some ashes from the pot, and pours them into a black pepper can.

Pepper and *A Catgirl* would be categorized as suspense movies in traditional genres. Hidden facts and objects are essential for most suspense films. By not revealing characters, their intentions, and background immediately, and by only showing shadows, a hand, or strange sounds behind a wall, the filmmaker triggers the audience's curiosity and fears.



Figure 9 (Photo Still from *Pepper*)

A pepper can bears a dark mystery in the mundane life.

FOREVER

Synopsis: *Two kids had a fight over some thing they buried under the ground. One kid wanted the other to dig the thing out, but the other insisted to have it buried. They argued so seriously that they stopped talking to each other, and eventually one of them went far away. Years and years later, when they both became old women, the one who went away came back. As soon as she reached her hometown, she fell down to the ground, and died. The other woman who stayed in the same place saw the dead person, and buried her.*

The script of this short film is adapted from a story written by one of my favorite writers, Lu Ciao, who passed away in 2002. There are several intriguing points about this story. First, nobody knows what “the thing” was buried under the ground which indirectly caused the two best friends to stop talking to each other. Years later, even they themselves forgot what they had been fighting over. Second, the title “forever” is applied in an ironic way. According to the story, “forever” actually means “never” - “I will never talk to you again.” Because of this small quarrel that happened in childhood, the two people carried the pain forever, and ironically, by keeping up this painful and silent war, they remembered each other forever. As luck would have it, when people care too much about each other, it is difficult for them to treat each other right without also hurting each other. When one pursues eternity too hard, one damages the root of life with one’s weariness.

Structure, Visual Language, and Techniques

Forever was filmed with a strong sense of “stage effect.” The characters acted out the event in the center of the film frame (fig.10a & fig.10b). I reduced the frequency of

camera movement and repositioning. Instead, deep-focus cinematography is used to let events take place in both the foreground and the background (fig.10c).²²

²² A deep focus shot is a shot in which both the foreground and the background are in focus. In other words, it is a shot with exceptional depth of field.



Figure 10a (Photo Still from *Forever*)



Figure 10b (Photo Still from *Forever*)

The usage of the simple setting, limited props and characters is meant to convey a sense of “stage effect.” The change of the costume and the position of the character and the chair are the main elements used to inform the viewer that there is a time change from the top scene to the bottom scene.



Figure 10c (Photo Still from *Forever*)

Deep-focus cinematography allows events take place in both the foreground and the background. In this shot, the girl in the foreground sits on the chair without turning her head while her friend walks further and further away in the background (top left). By her facial expression, the audience is able to tell that she knows her friend is leaving, but she decides to let her go.

FIRST NIGHT

Each newcomer to the world confronts an adult world it does not understand. A fundamental consequence is that sexual identity itself is produced through the agency of fantasy.²³

--Unknown

Synopsis: *A girl who is experiencing sexual awakening tries to release anxiety caused by an oppressive father by masturbation. She fantasizes about having physical contact with her new female roommate. But on the first night she stays in the dorm with her new roommate, she is shocked to see her roommate having sex with another man...*

I grew up in a family where sex was taboo. School didn't help much when it came to sex education. I still remember the female teacher's face turned red when she talked about sex organs. I felt her urgency to skip those two chapters. When I was in high school, sex to me was related to male classmates' dirty jokes. When guys would tell dirty jokes with salacious smiles on their faces, girls were supposed to act mad as their innocence was insulted.

When I was in senior high school, I learned from a book that I was taught by the society to repress my sexual desire so that I could transfer the energies to something "more productive." I started to believe that my parents were using the control of my sexual behaviors to affirm their parental authorities.

As a girl, I was constantly reminded to act properly and abide by the social standards of beauty. I was always warned by other people not to walk alone at night, and to be cautious about middle aged males.

First Night comes from the experience of being a confused and sensitive adolescent growing up in a sexually repressed society.

²³ Elizabeth Wright, ed. *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: a Critical Dictionary*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., (1992), 87.

Masturbation

Masturbation has been viewed as a “solitary vice” for hundreds of years. It was primarily during 1700s and 1800s when masturbation was first associated with mental and physical deficiencies.²⁴ In western societies, physicians and scientists believed that the act of masturbation caused reproductive harm, which would lead to personal and national declines. Policing masturbation was also seen to be important for controlling female sexuality that threatened rational masculinity.

In *First Night*, the protagonist grows up with little knowledge about what sex really is and the belief that masturbation is bad. Strongly influenced by her father’s teaching but not being able to control her behavior, she feels guilty about her habit of sexually pleasing herself. In her dream, she reveals the fear that her father would chop off her hand as punishment for her failure to abide by social norms.

Weaving between identification and desire

In most of my video and film works, there is an important relationship between two women. In the article “Desperately Seeking Difference,” Jackie Stacey explores the possible visual pleasures of female spectators by examining two films about a woman’s obsession with another woman: *All About Eve* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*. Stacey affirms women audience’s spectatorship while pointing out the importance of recognizing differences among women spectators. Stacey suggests that the rigid distinction of genders (male/female) and sexualities (heterosexual/homosexual), of desire and identification leaves little space for either the question of the feminine subject in the narrative, or the

²⁴Gregory James Smits, “A Brief Account of Masturbation as a Medical/Moral Disease in Western Europe & the U. S., 18th-Early 20th Centuries as an Aid in Understanding a Similar Obsession with Masturbation in East Asia During the Late 19th and Early 20th Centuries”, Department of History and Religious Studies . Pennsylvania State University. <http://www.personal.psu.edu/faculty/g/j/gjs4/mj/mj-sup.htm>.

pleasures of desire and identification of women spectators.²⁵ In *All About Eve* and *Desperately Seeking Susan*, the Pleasures of spectatorship for the female viewer are constructed with both desire and identification through Eve and Roberta's eyes.

Stacey argues that the narrative desire in *Desperately Seeking Susan* is not produced by sexual difference but the difference between two women:

In contrast to Susan's supreme public confidence, Roberta is only capable in her own middle-class privacy.²⁶

Roberta's sexuality works partly in relation to Susan, who is represented as the epitome of opposition to acceptable bourgeois feminine sexuality. Roberta's desire towards Susan is thus closely tied to her identification with Susan's character and life style.

When it comes to *First Night*, Anne's desire towards Tanya is also tied to her identification with Tanya's attitude. Tanya attracts Anne at first sight when Anne happens to see her dance in the room. Different from Anne who constantly feels the surveillance of the patriarchal father upon her body and desire, Tanya seems to have full control over her body. Tanya's confidence, her daring manner and her sexual energy attract Anne, and trigger Anne's sensual fantasies.

Anne desires and identifies with Tanya at the same time (fig.11a). But Anne's projection on Tanya is frustrated by the fact that although Tanya might desire her (Tanya told Anne that she is a cute girl when they first met), she is also attracted to a man. Not yet knowing how to live out her desires and sexuality, Anne reacts to reality by becoming more absorbed in her personal sexual fantasies and ritual masturbation.

Incest Taboo

²⁵ Jackie Stacey, "Desperately Seeking Difference," *Issues in Feminist Film Criticism*, Ed. Patricia Erens. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 371.

²⁶ Ibid. p.377.

The closing scene of this movie ironically touches the taboo of an incest relationship between father and daughter. The daughter continues masturbation while talking to her father (fig.11c). What has happened coincidentally implies a “phone sex scene” between the father and the daughter. The act, although not consciously conducted, ultimately transgresses the Law of the Father.

Fantasy

Fantasy, then, is not simply a matter of summoning imaginary objects, it is a matter of staging, of mise-en-scene....The subject may play more than one part in the staging of desire...²⁷

-- Unknown

Since the realm of fantasy is where one can have active control over reality, prohibitions can themselves become objects of eroticization.²⁸ For Anne, the censure of law that is imposed upon her is, in some way triply eroticized: She fantasizes what she shouldn't fantasize about (lesbianism); she sees what she shouldn't see (voyeurism); she does what she shouldn't do (masturbation). All these prohibited practices are the sources of erotic enterprises.

Space

Space is an important element in this movie. I am intrigued by the idea that human beings' lifestyle and ways of communication are affected by the definition of public and private space. In college, I used to share a small dorm room with five other people. After living like that for a while, one almost had to learn to forget the existence of other people. Unofficial rules about privacy are formed gradually so that people can live with each other without constant conflicts. Not only physical but also mental space is to be explored.

²⁷ Elizabeth Wright, ed, *Feminism and Psychoanalysis: a Critical Dictionary*. (Oxford: Basil Blackwell Ltd., 1992): 85.

²⁸ Judith Butler, *Bodies that Matter*. (New York: Routledge, 1993): 110.

Anne's mental space is very inward, which makes her less social. She is more drawn into a fantasized and subjective world. On the other hand, Tanya is outgoing, and she dares to utilize public space, or even intrude into other people's private space. This is shown in the scene where Tanya uses Anne's chair to practice dancing. Afterwards, she returns the chair without much explanation. Tanya also intrudes into Anne's mental space unintentionally, but violently, by having sex with another man while Anne is in the same room.

Structure, Visual Language, and Techniques

I use montage to construct the fantasy and the dream sequences, creating a more fragmented and emotional mental state. I intercut the caress between two women and the interplay of hands so as to strengthen the beauty of intimacy and unbounded sensation of the fantasy world.

There are several metaphors appearing throughout the movie. One is water, signifying desire. Anne is not able to tighten the tap, and the water keeps dripping. She is so annoyed by the sound of the water that she has difficulty falling asleep (she feels uneasy about her desire.) In her dream state where her unconscious is revealed, the water keeps flowing, and finally flows over the sink. The overflow of water suggests how repressed desire bursts out in the protagonist's dreams.

The second metaphor is a hand. Since the hand is an important implement for masturbation, as well as an essential body part for lesbian sex, the hand becomes an object that the authorities inflict penalties upon. In the film *Piano* by Jane Campion, the husband chops off one of the protagonist's fingers as a penalty for her unfaithfulness.

The last metaphor is the closet (fig.11b). The closet is a term used to describe how gay people hide their sexual orientation from others. People who are not familiar with this usage might not be able to read the underlying meaning of the usage of a closet.



Figure 11a (Photo Still from *First Night*)

The relationship between Anne and Tanya is constructed with both desire and identification.



Figure 11b (Photo Still from *First Night*)

The usage of the closet implies the situation that gay people hide their sexual orientation from others owing to social discriminations against gay and lesbian people.



Figure 11c (Photo Still from *First Night*)

Anne masturbates while talking to her dad on the phone.

Thesis Project-PARALLAX

When you do not see these flowers, they and your mind both become quiescent. When you see them, their color at once becomes clear. From this fact you know that these flowers are not external to your mind.²⁹

-- Wang Yang-Ming

Synopsis: *A girl, who feels insecure about herself and her romantic relationships, hallucinates about an affair between her partner and her neighbor – a young and beautiful woman. After several attacks on her neighbor, she gradually realizes that the beautiful woman is but an imaginary figure, and it is her mind that creates everything.*

Parallax reflects a trapped soul striving to stride beyond pain and darkness. This project is an attempt to explore the sources of suffering, and how one's life is tied to his or her perceptions of reality.

Parallax continues the exploration of the strong power of one's mind. By presenting both the protagonist's hallucinations and realities, I try to depict how an uneasy mind plays tricks on a person. Most people can't live without forming subjective views of the world and perceptions of the self. Cognitive Behavior therapists believe that helping people to think accurately and rationally helps reduce their negative feelings and self-hurting habitual reactions to certain events. As the philosopher Epictetus said almost 2,000 years ago: "The thing that upsets people is not what happens but what they think it means."³⁰

Dissatisfactions and self-esteem

Where do dissatisfactions come from? Dissatisfactions come from the feelings of need and lack. Dissatisfactions are related to the construction of self. It summons the spirit of one to take action so that one can become closer to the ideal self. The shape of one's

²⁹ Yu-Lan Feng, *A Short History of Chinese Philosophy* (New York: McMillan Co., 1948): 309.

³⁰ Epictetus; quoted in John Winston Bush, *Cognitive Behavior Therapy*, <http://www.cognitivetherapy.com/index.html>, 1996-2003.

dissatisfactions is tied to one's experience and personality. Sometimes the strong feeling of desire and need summons hope and ambition; sometimes it brings disappointments. Sometimes dissatisfactions make a person richer and stronger; sometimes they simply consume one's energy, and cause pain and sadness. Anna expects to be different—she doesn't want to depend on alcohol and her boyfriend, but she “simply can't help it.” She constantly pictures an ideal self – a more delightful and free spirit. The gap between the real self and the ideal self causes shameful feelings and dissatisfactions, which leads Anna to a journey mixed with envy, identification, an inner battle, and finally self-acceptance.

Annabelle: Anna's divided self

The neighbor, Annabelle, is the divided self of Anna. Anna creates this “ideal figure”, and fights against her. Young, beautiful, and carefree, Annabelle becomes an imaginative enemy who takes Anna's boyfriend Ryan away from her (fig. 12a & fig. 12c). Ironically, Annabelle never exists in reality, but is generated from Anna's inner insecurity and inferiority. Annabelle is an incarnation of Anna's ideal self, a projection formed by an uneasy mind, which eventually becomes harmful and threatening.

It is through Ryan that Anna affirms her beauty and values. Ryan's temporary leaving triggers Anna's doubt about herself. Anna has difficulties accepting her emotional dependency and depression. Unable to support the heaviness of self, her only solution is to drink (fig. 12b). But her ideal self keeps haunting her. Every waking moment, therefore, becomes painful.

Anna's attack on Annabelle symbolizes Anna's struggle with her self-judgment, which might originate from the imaginary Other's gaze (social norms). Anna shouts to Ryan:

“How can you judge me?” She struggles with a strong sense of guilt and inadequacy. She is fighting with the negative image of her identity.

Others

French philosopher Jean Paul Sartre’s concept about relationship with others and personal freedom can be used to interpret Anna’s perception of self. “Hell is other people,” said by the character Garcin in Sartre’s existential play *No Exit*, implies that human beings constantly torture each other by objectifying each other. In Sartre’s *Being and Nothingness*, he suggests that “human beings, as animate beings, are comprised of two forms of being: the ‘in-itself’ and the ‘for-itself.’” The ‘in-itself’ is the object-like part of a person. It is being without self-reflective consciousness. The ‘for-itself’, on the other hand, possesses a reflective consciousness that distinguishes humans from other forms of life.” “The freedom of the ‘for-itself’ is expressed through its choices and acts.”³¹

“Sartre believes that the ‘for-itself’ is envious of the ‘unambiguous reality of being-in-itself and is thus always tempted to try to become thing-like.’ The attempt of one to be oneself or to capture oneself is driven by the ‘for-itself.’”³²

Sartre believes that one cannot see oneself objectively. In order to see oneself objectively, one has to rely on others to define oneself. Others are an influential factor in how human beings construct themselves and their realities. The problem is when we rely so much on

³¹ Jean Paul Sartre, *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, 1998 ed.; quoted in Stephanie Lein. “Sartrean Existentialism in ‘No Exit’,” *Honors Review*. Augsburg College. Minneapolis MN. <http://honors.org/AHR/AHR00/sartre2.html>. 2000.

³² Ibid..

the Other's 'look' to affirm our very beings, we "do not have to own up to the reality of our choices, actions and life"³³ as long as the looker sees what we want her to see.

For Anna, the 'for-itself' part of her is aware that her substance abusing behavior is not accepted by Others, which causes her shameful feelings. She relies on Ryan to objectify her as an attractive woman, but Ryan rejects her endless need for affirmation.

The 'look' of the Other gets hold of Anna, and attempts to objectify Anna as an alcoholic and an unattractive woman. Annabelle is therefore the illusive existence of the Other constantly looking down upon Anna. Anna has difficulty constructing a positive being of 'in-itself.' She tries to escape and fight against the look of Annabelle that can freeze her into unappealing images. Without the Other to affirm her worthiness, she is forced to confront the "painful elusiveness of self-examination."³⁴

Confronting the self

Seeing the shadow of two people being intimate at her neighbor's house, whom she suspects to be Ryan and Annabelle (fig.12d), Anna decides to take action to stop this affair. Upon entering her neighbor's house (fig.12e), she is first scared by her own image reflected in the mirror. This act implies that the cause of suffering is closely related to oneself. Anna approaches the bedroom. She sees Ryan caress the other woman. She tries to separate them. But as soon as she turns the woman around, she sees that the woman has exactly the same face and body as Anna herself. Anna's envy towards this woman - herself suddenly becomes contradictory. How can somebody be jealous of one's self? It is the 'for-itself' part of Anna that constantly desires to become an object (with

³³ Ibid..

³⁴ Dorothy McCall, *The Theatre of Jean-Paul Sartre* (New York: Columbia UP, 1967): 113; quoted in Stephanie Lein, "Sartrean Existentialism in 'No Exit'," *Honors Review*, Augsburg College, Minneapolis MN, <http://honors.org/AHR/AHR00/sartre2.html>, 2000.

Annabelle's quality and image), to become the 'Being-in-itself' which it pursues. It is not until this point that Anna realizes that torture comes from her unrealistic desire to be objectified as Annabelle, her dissatisfaction about the image of herself, and the internalization of Other's looks.

Ryan doesn't really have an affair (at least not indicated in the story). At the end, Ryan comes home, and he brings a gift – a bongo for Anna. The bongo symbolizes the positive and upbeat energy, brought to Anna by Ryan. In the final scene, Anna wakes up on the grass. She seems to be awakened by the bongo sounds that Ryan plays. There is an implication that Anna has woken up from her disturbed inner world after confronting herself. Perhaps after Anna is no longer trapped inside her insecurity, she will be able to recognize and accept Ryan's comfort and affections.

Structure, Visual Language and Techniques

Divided self is an important motif in *Parallax*. Since the audience tends to believe whatever is shown on the screen, the filmmaker is able to play tricks with the spectator's mind. By showing the neighbor of Anna as a young and pretty girl at the beginning, I intended to bring the audience into Anna's subjective view. As the story goes on, relationships among characters become more complex and bizarre. At the end, a surprise is presented by overturning the genuineness of previous events: Annabelle doesn't really exist. In fact, Annabelle is actually Anna's divided self (fig. 12f). This change makes the spectator wonder which part of the movie is reality and which part is but the heroine's illusion. Films like *Fight Club* and *A Beautiful Mind* both use this technique to present the hero's hallucinations. In *A Beautiful Mind*, hallucinations are the symptom of the main character's schizophrenia. In *Fight Club*, the hero meets a stranger who introduces

to him a new way of life when he feels most lost in his life. At the end, we find out that the stranger doesn't exist. He is but the incarnation of the hero's desire to subvert the existing system. In these movies, mind plays an important role upon how "realities" are formed- both to the heroes and the audience.

VI. Evaluation

Parallax is a more conceptual and philosophical piece compared to my other works. Its structure is more complex, and the points of view and scenes switch more frequently. It was certainly a challenge for me to complete this work without much technical support. The process of ideation, writing, designing the visual composition, shooting, and editing was time consuming, but also a very rewarding experience. Furthermore, I am glad that I was able to deal with issues that really concerned me at this moment of my life through filmmaking.

Although I spent much time and concentration on this project, there is still a gap between my original concepts and the final piece. The idea is not clearly addressed, and many parts of the production can still be improved. In this section I want to discuss some aspects of producing *Parallax*, how the work evolved, and what I could do differently to make it a better piece.

Ideation

My original concept was that happiness comes from one's perception of oneself, from others and from the surrounding world. It is almost impossible to form a self-image without comparing oneself with others. Every individual is a social being at certain levels. But the others that one often refers to can sometimes become too much of a threat that causes envy. This is how I interpret Sartre's saying: "Hell is other people."

However, how the others appear to the individual depends on the individual's mindset and how the others intend to be seen. Everybody can, and sometimes has to, put on masks on different occasions. The irony is therefore generated when one's envy comes from one's false perception or the other's false presentation. Imagine this situation: two men,

both without much wealth, have to keep showing off their Rolex and nice cars to each other. Finally they run out of money. Not able to bear the other's "gaze," (Look, I have what you don't have) they kill each other out of resentment. We help others to create a hell for ourselves without much contemplation. We try to create hells for others so that we won't feel so miserable to live in our own hells. But, does hell really exist?

Scripting

I revised the script eight or nine times. There are four very different stories appearing in the revision process, and each was meant to carry similar concepts. The first story was about Anna and her neighbor Annabelle. Since Anna is living an unhappy life, she constantly feels jealousy towards her neighbor, a woman she never directly encountered. Anna imagines that Annabelle has a happy life since Annabelle wakes up every morning singing melodic songs. One day Annabelle jumps from the 17th floor, and the audience realizes that Annabelle looks just like Anna, and she is living a parallel life with Anna.....

It was suggested to me that since this was to be a visual work, it would be better to present the story in a visual way, rather than depending so much on the sounds that Annabelle makes. I was also encouraged to explore Anna's inner world, and her background. The other point is to clarify the relationship between Anna and Annabelle. Is Annabelle a real human being or is she simply an ideal projection of Anna? How was I going to show the "difference" between Anna and Annabelle on the surface and the essential similarities between these two?

The difficulty I encountered at this moment resulted from my directing the focus on Anna's past and trying to find a reason for the formation of her inner turmoil. I became more engaged with psychoanalytical theory, and tried to bring "traumas" to Anna. This

led to a second version of the story, which was more dramatic and psychologically complex. This version of the story was: Anna carries the memory of her father caressing her sexually every time she played the piano, and the pain of her mother's resentment of that relationship. Anna lives with these dark shadows inside. Her neighbor, often playing music, seems to have a good life and many guys that adore her. Anna tries to harass her neighbor in any way that she can. One day the woman commits suicide and Anna finds out that everybody carries their own pain deep inside. In this version I made the woman a real and completely different woman from Anna since I couldn't find a logical reason for two Annas living in parallel.

For the third story, the relationship between Anna and Annabelle stayed the same. But I changed Anna's past to: Anna adored her father, but her best friend Mea "stole" Anna's father from her since Mea and Anna's father share the same interest in music. Anna therefore develops resentment towards music, especially the piano, that her neighbor plays everyday.

I didn't quite like the third story since the script became too melodramatic, and the focus fell on Anna's pain, her incestuous fantasy, and the triangular relationship between Anna, her father and Mea. The woman as "the other" becomes more secondary, and therefore her suicide becomes pretty abrupt and not as powerful.

In the last version of the script, which became the final piece, instead of introducing Anna's past, I used the present situation to reveal her emotional states. I narrowed Anna's problem to her long time alcoholism and her insecurity in intimate relationships. I also changed the neighbor to an old woman, which Anna hallucinates as a young and

attractive girl. By showing an affair between the neighbor and Anna's boyfriend, I gave the background support for Anna's animosity to the illusive woman.

The final story was eventually carried out into a video work with little change. However, when I examined the finished piece, I found that there were several points about the story that weakened the original concept. First, I intended to present how "the Other" and perception affected people's view of life in a more general and universal way. Focusing too much on Anna's "personal traumas" and alcoholism makes Anna an unusual and problematic case. Therefore the audience has more difficulty identifying with the character. The other thing that prevents the spectator from empathizing with the main character is that I introduce Anna as an emotionally unsatisfied woman at the first scene without giving enough information about her interaction with her boyfriend ("the important Other") in daily life and her personality.

How could I revise the story to make it better? This is related to which psychological theory I apply to the mind and which level of personality I am examining. I have to come back to my original concept which is based upon two assumptions. First, one's perception affects one's happiness, and second, it is possible for a person to change his or her perceptions of reality. For the first assumption, I am leaning more towards the level of the immediate and habitual perception of reality rather than a specific psychological complex or biological causes for mental illness. I believe all these factors - psychological, biological, and perceptual, affect a person's perception on different levels. For different people, there are different ways to help change their perceptions (if the change is desired). For the second assumption, I am leaning towards the belief that although it might be difficult to change the points of view about life, it is not impossible. Being aware of the

reality that one believes and being aware of others and society that helps shape one's perception of self helps us gain deeper realization of the world and the ability to "lead one's life."

In the final version, Annabelle doesn't really exist. This strengthens the fact that Anna ironically is fighting with her self - an ideal self that she creates. But by making Annabelle an illusion, a projection of Anna, I give up an important idea originally existing in the first version of the story, the connection with others and the possible empathy for others. In the first version of the script, Annabelle, towards whom Anna feels animosity, commits suicide. This act forces Anna to re-perceive reality (maybe not everybody is as happy as they seem to be), and reveals the disconnection and alienation between Anna and her neighbor. In the final version, the problem between "self" and "the Other" is not made so obvious.

Visual Design

Concerning the visual design of *Parallax*, I think I would experiment more with distorted sounds and images if I could redo the movie. I would like to explore my initial idea of having Anna imagine Annabelle's life and existence by simply hearing the sounds coming from next door. Also, I would like to make Annabelle more mysterious by showing her shadows or portions of her body. I like the idea of making Annabelle a more elegant and gorgeous woman instead of a young and pretty girl. I might not clearly reveal in the story if Annabelle is a real woman or if she is a projection of Anna. In fact, I would like this movie to have the spirit of surrealism or magic realism.

Production

Owing to the limitation of time and crew, I couldn't make the sound and all the shots technically perfect. I had to dub conversations into several scenes since there was static in the original recording because of a bad connection to the microphone. The lighting is not very natural in several scenes. Sometimes two clips shot on different days are cut together, resulting in slight changes of brightness and color in the same scene. I had limited crew; and few of the crew members were professionally trained. Sometimes I had to be the director, the cameraman, the gaffer, and the soundperson at the same time. The final production is not perfect.... But, well, I have done my best!

Editing

The first half of the video contains too many short scenes. Constantly changing locations makes the time and events appear to be jumpy. In one scene, Anna is drinking at home, looking at Annabelle watering flowers. Then it cuts to another scene with Anna at work, still drinking, and also seeing Annabelle. The appearance of Annabelle at work laughing at Anna seems to be abrupt and confusing to the audience. And then the next scene, Anna is at home, drinking again. This home-workplace-home cut happens too fast, which makes the flow of time unnatural. There are too many drinking alone moments in the first half of the movie, which makes the movie slow and less exciting. I can still keep the moments of drinking by instead of presenting Anna drinking alone in a realistic way, imposing some distorted sounds, images or even some fragmented memories, hallucinations into those scenes. This will make Anna's mindset more intriguing.



Figure 12a (Photo Still from *Parallax*)

Young, beautiful, and carefree, Annabelle becomes an imaginative enemy who takes Ryan away from Anna.



Figure 12b (Photo Still from *Parallax*)

Anna's dependence on alcohol strengthens her low self – esteem.



Figure 12c (Photo Still from *Parallax*)



Figure 12d (Photo Still from *Parallax*)

"Hell is other people." Anna constantly feels jealousy of, and threatened by her imagination of other people's happiness.



Figure 12e (Photo Still from *Parallax*)

Entering "Annabelle's Apartment" symbolizes that Anna confronts the dark side of her mind.



Figure 12f (Photo Still from *Parallax*)

Anna sees her divided self make fun of her.

VII. Conclusion

I remember a philosopher's thought about the act of suicide: People who choose suicide are, like most people in this world, pursuing happiness. They just feel that no other paths they can take are more comforting than abandoning their lives. In *The Unbearable Lightness of Being*, Milan Kundera interprets Beethoven's last quartet *Fate* as a representation of valuing the heaviness of life: "The weighty resolution is at one with the voice of *Fate* ('Es muss sein!')[It must be so.]); necessity, weight, and value are three concepts inextricably bound: only necessity is heavy, and only what is heavy has value."³⁵

Must it be so? Is one's life pre-destined? Or does one simply choose to believe "it must be so," since making decisions is just too difficult? Is one's crime excused if one doesn't choose his or her destiny, but instead is chosen by destiny?

Perhaps the dark side of human nature isn't really all that dark and negative, but bright and positive in some way. Don't we see people try to carry out certain values that they believe and cherish through their sometimes incomprehensible behaviors? Isn't self defense and self preservation understandable? Isn't pursuit of love and pleasure a good thing? Aren't passion and ambition what strengthen the will to live? Doesn't envy, disappointment, and suffering represent that somebody truly cares about something? Doesn't any flammable desire start out as pure love for beauty? Ironically, people who choose not to continue to live might be those who take life more seriously than others. People who feel unfulfilled might be those who try hardest to pursue pleasure and happiness. Those who chase away their love might be those who love most deeply and

³⁵ Milan Kundera, *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* (New York: Harper& Row, Publishers, Inc., 1984): 33.

sincerely. It is terrifying to realize the irreversibility of life and history, to suddenly realize “this isn’t where we intended to be!” It is sad to see how our souls gradually take shape, and become hard and rigid as time goes on.

But, must it be so?

Perhaps one day I can locate myself on this spectrum of lightness and weight.

Who knows, perhaps I will keep swinging until the pendulum decides to strike.

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