

Lust, Caution

On Ang Lee and Diaspora Cinema

Ang Lee's last two films – *Brokeback Mountain*, which takes place in the United States; and *Lust, Caution*, which takes place in China – demonstrate his power as a diaspora director. In contrast to films by exile or immigrant directors, diaspora films express dual identification and profound affinity to both the directors' native and adopted lands. In the case of Ang Lee, who came from Taiwan to the United States in 1978, this means being attached both to Taiwan (and immigrant Taiwanese communities around the globe) and to the United States.

The cinema of exile, which examines the past, is frequently limited by traumatic nostalgia. In contrast, diaspora cinema allows a variety of subject positions, orientations, and emotions. *Brokeback Mountain* (2005) told the story of an impossible love between two cowboys in homophobic America. During one of their years of forced separation, Jack (Jake Gyllenhaal) is shot in a Mexican border town. The city is dirty, chaotic, and claustrophobic. Its narrow alleyways are filmed in shadow. The man who calls him "señor" is swallowed up into the shadows with him. The tragedy of the love story between Jack and Ennis (Heath Ledger) is underscored by the contrast between the photography of Mexico and that of Wyoming's open spaces where the two met and their love came to fruition.

The camera of Mexican-born Rodrigo Prieto films the mythical Wyoming space of westerns in all its magnitude: open, bright, sparkling. The disparity in photographic language transforms Mexico into the "other space," one that is sexual and racist, enslaved to capitalistic relationships, where passion can be bought with cash.

What is the other space of *Lust, Caution*? More specifically, what is the other space of the diaspora director who trains his gaze on his homeland? The problematic love story in *Lust, Caution* takes place in Shanghai and in Hong Kong. That is, not in Taiwan. During the 1940s' Japanese occupation of China, a young Chinese woman named Wong seduces a Chinese government minister, Mr. Yee. He is a collaborator and her

task is to set the stage for his assassination by the anti-Japanese underground. The seduction, at first sadomasochist, gradually becomes a relationship of love.

It appears that Chinese treachery is the “other space” used by the Taiwanese director to reflect on contemporary treasonous prospects of Taiwan reuniting with China. Lee is thus, cinematically, joining the lively debate taking place in Taiwan regarding whether to declare formal independence, against the backdrop of China’s warning that it will attack if Taiwan does so.

Chinese-Japanese collaboration during the 1940s mimics current Chinese-Taiwanese relations. This is a complex reflection in that that, on one hand *Lust, Caution* is told from point of view of Wong, who becomes the emotional and physical victim of all the involved parties – the underground; her controllers; her torturer-lover, Mr. Yee, and Wong herself. On the other hand, Ang Lee avoids depicting Minister Yee’s abhorrent actions until close to the end of the film, so that our ability as spectators to hate him is disrupted. As a consequence, the final shots of the film reveal the cruel collaborator as an almost tragic figure who sacrificed his love with his own hands, and all that is left to him – and us – is to experience his terrible solitude in her room.

The last shot, a close-up on the depression left in her mattress, depicts what had been by way of what is missing. The complexity of treason and the use of sexuality to reproduce the historical and especially the political, act on an additional textual plane. The first part of the film is a flashback that shows Wong as an actress in a student theater; her then director one of her present controllers. The actress who plays Wong, Wei Tang, must play a woman who gradually goes from pretending to be in love to a woman who so succumbs to lust that she ends in total ruin. Thus, *Lust, Caution* depicts not only the relationship between Wong and Mr. Yee, but the meaning of actors playing their characters, especially the complexity of the gamut of possible relationships between an actress and her director.

Two directors – Ang Lee and his alter-ego in the film, the young man who becomes Wong’s controller – reveal the possible extremes of the director-actress relationship. What happens is not less cruel than relationships between Josef Von-Sternberg and Marlene Dietrich, Alfred Hitchcock and Tippi Hedren, or maybe even Ang Lee and

Tony Leung (Mr. Yee) or Jake Gyllenhaal and Heath Ledger, who were required to play homosexual sex scenes in *Brokeback Mountain*.

In any case, it is clear that *Lust, Caution* is not a film of self-orientalism. It is not just another exotic vision of the East for the pleasure of the West. This is a diaspora film that develops slowly and becomes a multi-faceted declaration: about the traps of sex and death, of historical and political treason, and of the making of cinema itself.

Caution, Lust.